

N. SLATER



*Embracing*  
**DARKNESS**

*SINFUL SURRENDER BOOK ONE*

# **Embracing Darkness**

N. Slater

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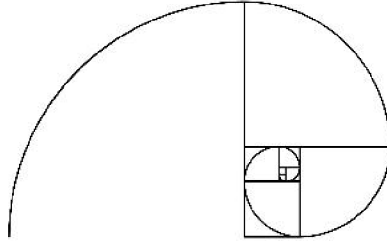
Embracing Darkness – Sinful Surrender Book One

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To my mother who told me I should write more of my  
profession into my stories.

I'm not sure a dark romance involving a statistician was  
what she was talking about but... uh, here it is.

# Contents

. Chapter

1. Chapter 1

2. Chapter 2

3. Chapter 3

4. Chapter 4

5. Chapter 5

6. Chapter 6

7. Chapter 7

8. Chapter 8

9. Chapter 9

10. Chapter 10

11. Chapter 11

12. Chapter 12

13. Chapter 13

14. Chapter 14

15. Chapter 15
16. Chapter 16
17. Chapter 17
18. Chapter 18
19. Chapter 19
20. Chapter 20
21. Chapter 21
22. Chapter 22
23. Chapter 23
24. Chapter 24
25. Chapter 25
26. Chapter 26
27. Chapter 27
28. Chapter 28
29. Chapter 29
30. Chapter 30
31. Chapter 31
32. Chapter 32
33. Chapter 33
34. Chapter 34
35. Chapter 35
36. Chapter 36
37. Chapter 37

38. Chapter 38

39. Chapter 39

40. Chapter 40

41. Chapter 41

42. Chapter 42

43. Chapter 43

44. Chapter 44

45. Chapter 45

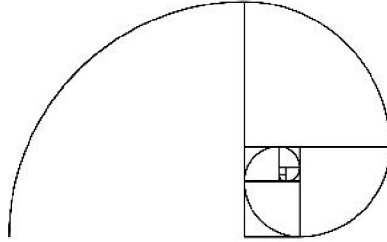
46. Chapter 46

47. Chapter 47

48. Chapter 48

49. Chapter 49

50. Chapter 50



### **Author's Note**

The romance in this novella is categorized as insta-romance which means that the sexual tension and relationship moves very fast. It is established very early on in the book and all love interests become involved with the MC very quickly. Please be aware that there are several triggers that play out in this novel. Triggers and content warnings have been listed below that may have a minor or major part throughout. There is absolutely no child harm, sexual assault, or miscommunication tropes between the main characters.

*Onscreen and Offscreen Emotional/Physical Abuse and Mild Domestic Violence*

*DAP (double ass penetration)*

*Sex used as a healing tactic*

*Scenes involving panic attacks and trauma responses*

*Depression*



*Mild Obsession (with aspects of stalking ~ not by the love interests)*

*Insta-Attraction/Romance/Lust*

*Gaslighting*

*Open Relationship (before the MC becomes officially part of the relationship with the others)*



I let out a panicked breath, trying to push past the reason why I hadn't left the safety of my car for the last fifteen minutes. Leaning forward, I pressed my head to the steering wheel as I continued fingering the inlay of swirls, running through the numbers one at a time until my heartbeat slowed and breathing became easier. 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5-

A blaring horn in the distance ripped me out of my peaceful little bubble, a tired sigh falling from my lips. Even after an hour-long therapy session and sitting here in my driveway, I still hadn't managed to fully deal with my feelings concerning a certain ex of mine. Owen, as wonderful as he had been at the beginning of our relationship, became a fucking nightmare in recent months.

An average Biochemistry professor that I met at a routine STEM conference in France should have been the end of the story but somehow the shaggy-haired, off-the-wall, personable professor had captured my heart. Between working on my dissertation involving a government program and a top security clearance and dealing with a shitty as fuck fiancé, my life had spiraled.

Whatever sanity I still had was slowly dwindling away every time he stuck his head into my fucking business.

And it wasn't just because he was a cocksucking mentally and physically abusive bastard. Well, he wasn't sucking much of anything. Touch became stagnant between us and I had been suffering because the only thing I loved as much as numbers was *touch*. That and sugar. I was a slut for all three,

but the physical and emotional intimacy that came with relationships? That is what I craved. My entire existence was built on it, like a crazed obsession but Owen's idea of love involved a lot more yelling and a dose of gaslighting.

I took a deep breath and slid from the safety of my car after stuffing Fibo back into my pocket, my gaze locked on my front door. It was a terrible shade of brownish-green, reminding me of a mixture of puke and leaves masquerading as an evergreen. It didn't make a lick of sense but all I knew was that I hated it, however, my painting skills were shit and any task that involved perfection would throw me down a rabbit hole.

Repainting that goddamn door would have me somehow taking on a project of fixing up the entire exterior and I didn't have time for that shit.

I was also mentally and physically drained from not dealing with problems, the only thing I wanted to do involved pillows, covers, and staring at the algorithms on my wall. Add in a few warmed-up chocolate chip cookies leftover from the local bakery and life would be perfect.

The shrill ring of my phone destroyed that option.

"I thought I turned that shit off," I mumbled to myself because who in their right mind still had their ringer on these days? I wasn't important enough for people to be calling me and anything I had to respond to could wait for me to remember I had a phone. Still, I answered it. "Yes?"

"How you holding up?"

I immediately relaxed at my brother, Liam's, voice as his words softly came through the earpiece. Him and his husband, Joey, were the only two in this world that even remotely understood what was going on in my life. Not the super-secret government project that I was working on, but everything else—including how Owen wasn't the perfect man, no matter how much I tried to parade around that everything was fine.

There had been another person in my life who cared just as much, a neighbor that I used to visit at times when I needed someone to pull me out of my head. Gianni moved away just weeks after I threw Owen out, not that I would have expected him to pick up where we had left off. We hadn't made anything official. I kind of wished we had.

"Rhys? Talk to me," Liam pleaded.

I realized I was still standing in the doorway, my entire private life privy to anyone who passed by my driveway. I closed the door and slipped off my shoes before double-checking that it was locked. Could never be too careful with someone like Owen waltzing around. "I'm okay," I finally responded.

My ex had a habit of finding his way in here despite the restraining order. Liam and Joey, our family lawyers, had been the ones to help me file but I was terrified to ever actually make sure it was enforced. Not only could the order not be criminally enforced, but calling the police to deal with Owen always seemed to make the situation worse. It made *Owen* worse.

One of the first rules of my program had been to stay out of trouble with the law. I knew that it wasn't my fault that Owen was an obsessive piece of shit but this dissertation was my entire life's work. One wrong move and everything I had worked for would go up in flames.

Liam had mentioned filing for a protective order but if my program found out about the trouble that was surrounding me, they could drop me altogether and I just couldn't have that.

No, I'd just handle him.

He wasn't *that* bad. Most of the time.

I shuddered at the last time I had found him in my house, not-so-subtly asking questions about my project as if he truly cared. The visit had ended in an altercation, leaving me with a large purple bruise on my shoulder. That had been a week ago, an incident I hadn't mentioned to anyone, and purposely started wearing collared shirts like a prep kid to avoid questions.

See? Healthy adulting. I was killing it.

"Bullshit," Liam responded to my lame statement. "Is Owen there?"

My hackles raised as I did a 360, sniffing at the air to see if his pungent cologne lingered in my house. While he could be lurking in a corner, Owen was a show-off. He would have come to greet me. "No, I don't think so."

"And I wasn't asking because I thought he snuck in. Rhys," Liam trailed off and I knew he was trying to help but now all

of the hard work I had done to calm down was gone. My breathing quickened as I ran through another sequence of numbers, mentally taking a deep breath. “Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

Liam knew how fragile my mind could be despite my academic intelligence. Sometimes, we joked that my sanity had been switched out for smarts. The constant stress of everything in my life was starting to take a toll on my mental health, not that I would ever ask for help.

“It’s fine,” I pushed out through clenched teeth. Changing the sequence, I mumbled through a different one as I relaxed, looking around once more for any sign of Owen. He wasn’t here and he hadn’t been. At least not since I left a few hours ago.

There were two obvious tells—his cologne and any god-awful smell coming from the kitchen due to what Owen used to call peace offerings. He couldn’t cook for shit but he believed he was a chef and that food could fix everything—even abusive outbursts.

“I’ll be fine,” I reiterated, not that I sounded convincing in the slightest.

“You’ve been going to your therapy sessions?”

“Yes.”

Yet another thing my brother had convinced me to do. I had hated him at the time but fuck, it was one of the best decisions I had ever made. Being able to relax and actually talk to

someone about my issues had made life just a little easier. Granted, we had to jump through a few hoops and find one approved by my program but I was glad that my therapist was there for those panicked sessions I always seemed to schedule at the last minute.

“Will we see you tonight? You know Mom’s been asking.” Sounds of laughter picked up in the background, telling me that Liam and Joey had probably come into town last night and stayed at the house. I was only an hour away and whenever I did visit, I refused to stay overnight. The comfort of my home was a little too enticing for me to put up with family drama longer than I had to.

I didn’t want to attend the weekly family dinner Mom had been running for the last decade, though. It was a chance to regroup with my siblings and their families but over time, it had become a chore rather than something I looked forward to.

Mom and Ada, my older sister, had never understood my brand of crazy, both of them highly vocal about how unsupportive they were of my choices. Dad and Ada’s husband, Ernest, were relatively silent but always sided with their women. Never once had any one of them defended me from a jab at my expense. Other than Liam and Joel, the only reason to attend these family dinners was my niece, Tia. The light of my life, and a whole bundle of joy despite her parents.

How Ada had *ever* created that beautiful angel would always be a mystery to me.

“Rhys?”

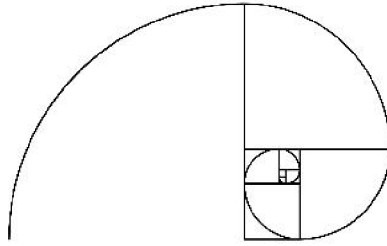


Lost in my head again. I had no idea how Liam put up with me. “Yeah, I’ll be there I guess. Just me.” I put that out into the world, reminding Liam that I was still upholding my side of the restraining order as best I could. I also hoped that Liam would help redirect any conversations regarding Owen. Mom and Ada were hung up on the guy, constantly telling me that he was the perfect partner in my life. I’m sure Mom only thought so because Ada did as if that piece of shit had been a present dropped into my lap.

He was definitely anything but.

It had been a little while since I had seen them all last, probably around the same time I kicked Owen out. However, if I didn’t show up this week, there was a strong likelihood that either Mom or Ada would show up on my doorstep to ‘check-in’. Hanging up with my brother after a quick goodbye, I headed for my office deciding to forgo my original plan of warm cookies. They’d still be here later.

Without even thinking, I grabbed a pillow and a blanket from the closet before curling up on the couch against the back wall. My gaze focused on the sequences and algorithms I had etched into the wallpaper over the years. It was a wall of madness but it was my brand of madness and it was all I needed to feel safe, wrapped up in my little cocoon of happiness. Soon enough, sleep overtook me.



## CHAPTER TWO

### **RHYS**

The putrid smell of cheese tore me out of whatever pleasant dream I'd been having. The scent scorched my nostrils and made my throat constrict, fear racing through my limbs. I used to fucking love cheese, in any form, on every dish that I indulged in, except for my sweets. Those were a beautiful gift all on their own. However, Owen made me hate the fucking thing that used to make me whole.

It was his way of apologizing. We'd fight. He'd storm out. And then he'd return, making food as a peace offering. There were several problems with his way of attacking our issues.

Our fights were never regular things that couples fought about. I had a problem with him stumbling in at all hours of the night, looking like he had gone several rounds with a meat grinder. He refused to explain where he was or what he had been doing but I knew he was caught up in something. It didn't help that on occasion strangers showed up looking for him, threatening my safety if I didn't point to his whereabouts.

He also had this unnatural interest in my dissertation—work that I wasn't allowed to speak about to anyone other than those with a top security clearance. Owen knew this and still, he asked and poked until I began changing the code on my office lockbox weekly out of pure fear that his intentions were anything but innocent.

The other lingering problem was how he returned. Gaslighting was putting it lightly as he tried to coax me back into his arms with my favorites. Instead of making me fall in love all over again, though, it made me hate the things I used to obsess over.

Like cheese.

My goddamn cheese.

Owen had *ruined* it.

A snarl formed on my lips as I sat up on the couch, trembling from sheer rage and fear that was slowly taking over my emotions. The last problem—the most important one? Owen wasn't supposed to be in my fucking house, let alone within one hundred feet of me or my property. Sure, we had once talked about renovating this house together after I stupidly accepted his engagement proposal. He had all but moved in at that point. In the end, though, it was still my name on the deed. This was *my* house.

I stayed put for several more seconds, trying to gain enough confidence to face the man in my nightmares. I used to love him or at least I thought I did but now he was the one adding to my instability. I reached into my pocket and clamped my

fingers around Fibo, taking several deep breaths before I pushed off the couch and inched into the hallway.

The cheese continued to assault my poor sense of smell, burnt by the taste now lingering in my mouth but I pushed past it as I stumbled toward the kitchen. A groan slipped from my lips as Owen peeked out, a wild smile plastered on his face. It was as if he didn't know how wrong this scene was. My gaze traveled along the room, my shoulders falling in defeat. It looked like he had exploded over my home, his coat and bag thrown on my couch, papers from his professorship spread across the coffee table. Almost as if he still lived here.

“Hey, gorgeous! Was wondering when my sleeping beauty would wake up.” He tried to purr but it came out like a feral coyote slowly being strangled.

I frowned at his overjoyed greeting, stepping out of reach when he tried to touch me. I might have welcomed it a few months ago but as of now, it felt vile and wrong. “What the fuck are you doing in my house?” I made sure to emphasize that it was *my* house and that he had no reason to be here.

“We had a little argument, just like we always do. I'm making your favorite. Go ahead and sit on the couch and-”

I swallowed down my normal timid response and cut him off. For too long I had let this man walk over me and I just couldn't do it anymore. Like fuck, the ink on the restraining order was still drying. “No, we broke up months ago. You're not supposed to be here. How the fuck did you even get in?”

A shimmer of disgust ran through his expression before that cheery smile returned. “Oh, Rhys. You gave the ring back, but I get it. You just needed some time. I understand that you were angry, but this doesn’t mean-”

“It does!” I screamed, my fists clenching at my sides. His constant dismissal of my words pissed me off. How I had ever been conned into thinking that I could marry him was beyond me. This time, I reached for him, trying to rip my rubber spoon from his hand. I missed, my fingers curling around his wrist. Cheese and grits flung from the utensil onto my cheek, my anxiety heightening out of control. It was such a stupid thing to be triggered by—fucking *cheese* but it was associated with every terrifying memory I had with Owen.

The nights when he did a little more than just scream at me.

The nights when I caught him in my office rummaging around.

The nights when he laid a hand on me and I was powerless to stop it.

He raised his free hand over his head, his palm open and angled toward my face. Out of habit, I scrambled back, rubbing hard at my cheek, tears gathering in my eyes as I glared at him. The sting of his previous beating was still fresh in my mind, my shoulder aching as I continued to put space between me and him. I even smelled like his fucking ‘peace offering’ and nothing but a thorough scrub of both my body and the kitchen would get rid of the smell.

“Get. Out. Of. My. House!” I yelled with my last bit of strength, pointing at the door. I cradled my cheek as if the food had done me some injustice, my body trembling. My strength was about to give out and collapsing in front of this man would only make him believe that he was needed here. He was fucked in the head, his obsession not making any sense in the slightest.

Owen stilled, still holding that fucking spoon, his hand moving back to his side. “Babe,” he began. “It was just a little fight. You’re my forever, remember?”

“I’m. Not. Your. Shit,” I force out. “Now, leave. *Please.*” Even the pleading was too nice for him, the fight leaving me as I slumped to the floor, trying not to completely lose it. If he took a step toward me again, I’m not sure what I’d do because the only thing I could think of was his need to relay his ‘love’ for me through physical pain.

Anger and terror twisted in my chest. The anger was a new feeling, wrapping around me like a cocoon and suffocating the other emotions. It bled through me and if I had had the strength, I was a little scared of what I might have said or done. I kept my mouth shut though, relaxing against the wall.

“All right. I’ll come back when you’ve had some time to think. Your lunch is on the counter and don’t forget that we have that reno group for the kitchen coming through soon. I’ll be around to make sure they understand the project.”

My gaze narrowed at him from my pitiful seat on the floor. “This isn’t your fucking home anymore.” As much as I wanted

to fix up a few things in the house, we had never had that kind of budget. Why he wouldn't give me the details so I could cancel it was beyond me. For some reason, it was just another thing that he was adamant about.

A small smile spread across his lips as he blew me a small kiss, one I was too tired to shy away from before he gathered some of his things and slipped out my front door. The door locked, my fear and anxiety continuing to build as I realized he had a fucking key. Owen motherfucking Hall had a key to my goddamn house. My safe place. My sanctuary.

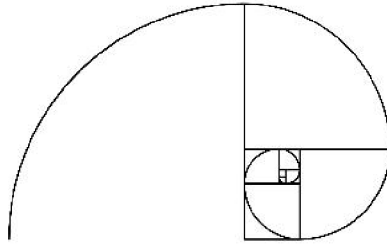
I leaned against the wall, not even sequences or Fibo saving me from this breakdown. His bitter scent was now all over my goddamn living room and kitchen, mixed with burnt cheese. I'd have to clean at some point but I didn't want to touch the remainder of his things, memories of nights when Owen's actions thoroughly terrified me running through my head.

A whimper finally slipped through as I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around myself, trying to hold it together.

*Rhys, you're a grown man. Just breathe.*

Owen did this. *Again.*

This time when the darkness overtook me, it wasn't pleasant.



## CHAPTER THREE

### **RHYS**

The click of the front door lock had my entire body on alert but when it opened, relief settled in my chest. I shouldn't have accepted those emotions though, not for the beast of a man that walked into my house. Gianni used to be my neighbor, the one I used to visit when I needed a different avenue to pull me out of my head. A few times, drained from Owen's continued assault on my emotions after we broke up, I'd find myself knocking on Gianni's door, giving myself over to the mercy of his touch.

And god, it was fucking *glorious*.

Time and time again, that man's touch and soft whispered words in my ear about how much I meant to him had given me confidence in my crazy little world.

When I needed to be touched, Gianni Stone had been there.

Just like he was now.



My gaze perused my beautiful hero, his dark skin glistening with a layer of sweat as if he had been jogging before entering my house. The black tank top and running shorts clinging to his muscled body cemented my thoughts.

“Hey beautiful, what are you doing on the floor?” His gaze darkened as he stomped into my house, kicking off his shoes as he went before crouching in front of me. His blond mane crowded his shoulders, this new shade a beautiful contrast between the rich, dark color of his skin and his light eyes. The last time I had seen him, it had been cropped close to his ears, a deep shade of red. I fucking loved the oddball-looking beast because he meant so much more than the friends-with-benefit shit that I had agreed to.

I mustered up a smile, leaning into the hand that caressed my cheek, the one that was red from me scratching at the cheese. I nuzzled against his palm, sniffing like a goddamn animal as I tried to replace everything in this house with Gianni’s strong scent of pine. It had to be the fucking body wash or aftershave but I didn’t care. *Anything* was better than smelling Owen right now. “What are you doing here?” I asked, as if I wasn’t sprawled out on the floor, my body shaking from the aftermath of a panic attack.

Even for as weird as I was, sitting on the floor wasn’t one of my usual spots unless I was actively working on a project, papers strewn in every direction. I couldn’t even find an excuse that would explain this situation away.

I’m not sure I wanted to.

It was so fucking hard pretending all the time.

Gianni had the good nature to look sheepish before he grinned down at me. “I’ll admit that I may have broken in but I swear it was only because I saw your ex-fiancé leaving. You alright?”

Anger was what I should have been feeling but it seemed as if I was okay when the people breaking in were people I actually enjoyed fucking. Go figure. Besides, had Gianni not decided to do so, I might have spent the rest of the day sitting here. Strangely, his concern was welcomed. I let out another deep breath, my limbs growing heavy, no strength to do anything but continue to sniff his hand like a goddamn weirdo.

It was not my fault that he smelled good.

He also knew that I was an oddball, the man moving his hand slightly so that he was all but covering my mouth and nose with his palm. My eyes rolled into the back of my head as his scent fully consumed me, my shoulders relaxing as it thrust me into a world where it was just me and him for a moment.

“Rhys, talk to me. Babe. Hey, *hey*, shit.” I didn’t answer him because my tongue felt heavy but that didn’t stop Gianni from hoisting me up in his arms and moving toward the bathroom. “Breathe, babe. You’re going into shock.”

I tried glaring at him because that’s not what was happening. I just couldn’t breathe. Or think. Or feel. The numbers weren’t numbering. The sequences didn’t make any sense and... *one plus one is...* I growled in frustration. My brain wasn’t

working and only Gianni's rough hands on my arms after he sat me on the closed toilet were keeping me grounded enough to stay present.

“Breathe, Rhys,” he said again. This time he moved his hand to my neck, squeezing ever so slightly. I gasped, clinging to him, my eyes wide. *Oh, I really wasn't breathing.* He ran his fingers through my hair, pressing feather-light kisses to my forehead as I gulped, my lungs thanking the sweet lord for relief. “There you go, good boy.” My body warmed at his words and even though he was a year younger than me, he could fucking swallow my entire form with a mere hug. A hug I desperately needed right now. “Now, tell me what happened.”

I fumbled for the right words, my brain clearing of the fog the longer his hands remained on me. This shit was what I had been missing. The intimacy of touch. “He came in trying to apologize and I tried throwing him out but he said he's coming back.”

Gianni grunted at that statement, his fingers stilling in my hair before continuing their soothing rotation. “I'll change the locks. And your cheek? Did he hit you?”

I shook my head, willing the tears to stay at bay. I didn't mind Gianni knowing about Owen but having people know that I was literally terrified of cheese? No thanks.

“Rhys, you don't have to be ashamed in front of me. You know that,” he soothed before kissing my forehead again. “I want you to take a shower and then crawl into bed, alright? I'll

clean up the living room and change your locks after I grab some tools.”

Gianni always knew when I needed a little extra comfort versus when I needed not to think, when I needed him to make the decisions, and for me to just follow through. Like now, I needed nothing more than to be told everything would be alright and that all I had to do was curl up under a blanket and block out the world.

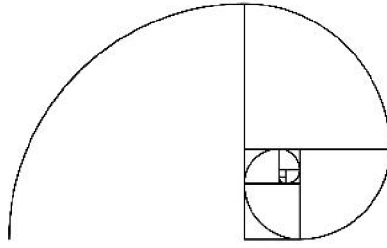
I thought about asking him to come to bed with me but the relationship we had before had been born out of convenience. He lived next door and we both had demons to bury. Why he even bothered helping me now was beyond my understanding but I didn't question it. I was grateful for the help, giving him a simple nod. I hoped for more than the gentle kisses but knowing that without a conversation, I couldn't expect anything out of Gianni.

Then again, he was here, promising to take care of me. Again.

The heat in his eyes was still there, the lust that grew hot and heavy, and the passion that burned brightly between us. It had never left and I didn't know what to do with that. There was this silent, unspoken statement but we couldn't fall back into the old ways. My therapist told me that I needed to try new things, things outside my comfort zone, and well, Gianni was safe. He always had been and always would be.

He granted me a tight smile before leaving me alone in the bathroom. My gaze followed him out into the hallway before I

gathered enough strength to strip and take a shower. Wishing he was in here with me told me that my therapist was right. I needed to stop relying on my crutches, however, I was never giving up math. Or sweets. Ever.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### GIANNI

It took everything in me not to track that motherfucker down and rip him limb from limb for messing with Rhys. Although we had never defined what we were, Rhys Knight held a special place in my heart—because he was the sweetest thing that had ever stepped foot on the face of this earth.

A job brought me to the house that rested beside his but fuck if I wasn't immediately distracted by the lean body of an intelligent soul. He hid behind his numbers but when I pushed past that? He was more than that. He was warm and funny and downright dirty. The things he let me do to him when he needed a release were things I still fantasized about.

I started hoping for him to show up on my doorstep more often, wanting more than to just touch him. I wanted to kiss him and hold him and spend nights watching movies while he devoured a box of the local bakery's fresh macadamia nut cookies or a bag of marshmallows. No one would ever know

the turmoil that sweet Rhys was constantly dealing with beneath all the sugar and numbers he surrounded himself with.

If I had been honest with myself, I might have realized I was in love with him long before it was appropriate to tell him. That love never died out and it was one reason I needed Owen to hurt. Not die, though. Death was too easy a punishment for someone like him. He had broken Rhys' lighthearted soul and I still couldn't figure out the reason why. Owen didn't seem like a man who did things 'just because'.

Guilt crept in, though, for how I had magically shown up when Rhys needed me. I truly had been in the neighborhood, on a jog, but it was more to see if Rhys had been home. I couldn't deny my feelings for him or the lingering fear that his ex still hadn't gotten it into his thick skull that things were over. I had been right and despite my destructive behavior, I wasn't going to regret picking that lock.

I moved into the living room, grimacing at the disarray. Rhys hadn't given me enough details to really know what set him off but I knew that Owen's presence in and of itself was a trigger. Something Rhys had been dealing with on his own for who knew how long. I knew he hated involving the police, which was another reason why I had picked the lock rather than calling for help. Rhys could hate me later for it.

I began fixing the pillows and gathering a few lingering pieces of paper. Rhys would never be so goddamn untidy so I knew that the mess wasn't his. To be safe though, I folded them and placed them in a trash bag of their own.

*Next is the kitchen.*

My chest rose and fell with a heavy breath as I stepped onto the tile. A cooking nightmare had happened in this bitch and it had nothing to do with the old cabinets and countertops that needed to be replaced. The putrid aroma of burnt cheese was strongest in here, my gaze snagging on the culprit. I'm sure it had at one point been some edible version of a lasagna but that disaster was going to see the inside of a trashcan today.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I slipped it out, answering with my usual. "Stone speaking."

"So formal," Dmitri purred.

I instantly relaxed, glad to hear his voice. He'd been in the hospital and then on mandated bedrest due to our last job being a shit show so it was wonderful to hear him in good enough spirits to handle a phone. Then again, Dmitri wasn't known to take breaks and the only way we had gotten him to rest was by knocking him out with sedatives. "Sorry, what's up?"

"Just checking in on you. Valentyn says you were supposed to be at the house fifteen minutes ago." His French accent thickened toward the end which told me he was worried. Unless he was fucking pissed or concerned, his accent was usually soft, just a slight twinge to his words.

I pulled the phone away from my ear to look at the clock, a slew of curses passing through my lips before I returned the device to my ear. "Yeah, shit. I got caught up."



“No shit, Sherlock. Why are you back at your old place though?”

I bit my tongue before I said something I regretted. I always forgot that my partners had my location on their phones. Valentyn might have been our boss but it was Dmitri who fucking despised lies and half-truths. He'd kill me if I tried to worm my way out of this because they weren't *just* two people I worked with.

They might have had nearly ten years on my 28-year-old self but they were my lovers and my entire world. Open relationship as it was, Valentyn and Dmitri were home base, my everything. Our only rule? To never lie to each other. Just another reason why Rhys and I could never be. I had never told him who I truly was, that I was more than just a friendly neighborhood fuck. That the hands he loved so much were lethal and that my mere presence in his house could set a target on his back.

“I'm not,” I finally said. “I'm one house over.”

I had never told them Rhys' name but they knew about him. They knew that Rhys had had a chokehold on my life and they were there when I told Rhys goodbye as I moved away to live with my 'family'. Family was code for Valentyn, Dmitri, and our beautiful son, Paval. He was Valentyn's nephew but when Paval's parents passed away, Valentyn gladly took him in.

Those three men were my world and as much as I wanted Rhys to be a permanent part of it, I refused to bring him into that kind of danger without a conversation. So, I hid behind

one-night stands and the loose label of friends with benefits to appease my need for him.

“Ah, having a little fuck before the day’s over? Valentyn will be thrilled you missed debriefing. Might even deliver a few spanks for that one.”

My cock throbbed at the thought but I ignored it. “No. His ex got in again and I found him in a heap. Just helping him clean up a bit and I’ll be right over.” My fists curled at my side as I tried not to think of all the wonderful things I could do to Owen to make him scream. Our job revolved around fixing problems, legal and those not-so-legal and I would have had no problem using Owen as target practice. Rhys just needed to say the word.

“You gonna tell him?”

“No.” I shook my head as I wiped down the counter and the microwave before grabbing Febreze from one of the cabinets and heavily dosing the kitchen and living room. *And now it smells like someone shit flowers in here...* But at least it fixed the original problem. “I won’t do that to him.” I refused to bring Rhys into a mess that he never asked for. He thought he wanted me but I didn’t come alone. I came with the evil I enjoyed as well as three other men and while my men would accept Rhys wholeheartedly, I’m not sure that beautiful mathematician would be ready for what we had to offer.

Dmitri didn’t push it. “Call Valentyn before he decides to light up your ass. Literally.” The French bastard hung up, leaving me to my own thoughts. The shower cut off a few

moments ago, a weary Rhys just now making an appearance, the man still trying to smile despite what he had gone through. His cheek was still red from irritation and while I wanted to ask, I knew he wouldn't answer.

“Rest. You need it,” I said, leaving no room for argument. Sometimes he needed a gentle push and other times he needed rules. Right now, he needed to be told what to do and I was more than willing to ensure that he got the rest he so desperately needed.

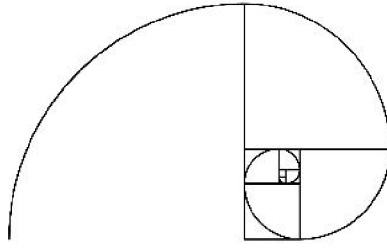
His expression pleaded for me to stay and I knew I shouldn't. I knew I needed to set a boundary between us but fucking hell, I couldn't leave him alone. My little warrior had stolen a piece of my heart and the only thing I wanted to do was wrap him up in my arms and never let him go.

He bit his bottom lip, reaching for me until his fingers curled around mine. In that moment, he was a fragile shell of the man I knew and I just couldn't walk out that door. I shot Dmitri and Valentyn a quick text before letting Rhys pull me into his office. I didn't address the room we were in but I knew that Owen's appearance must have really messed with him because Rhys didn't sleep in here otherwise.

Rhys pushed me down on the couch before curling up against my chest, the cushions barely wide enough to hold the both of us. Still, I held him tight, wrapping my arms around him to shield him from the world he was desperately trying to hide from.

No words were exchanged but I heard the sigh of relief before he let himself relax. I was his safe space.

If he only knew what I did for a living.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### **RHYS**

I woke to my face pressed into Gianni's warm chest, his arms wrapped tightly around my back as if I might disappear into the cushions otherwise. I wanted to stay in this safe cocoon but one look at the clock told me that staying any longer would mean missing family dinner. And today would be the day that Mom wandered over to my house and I refused to have her in my space.

Untangling myself from Gianni was a chore, his heavy breath fanning against my cheek one moment and the next he was standing by the couch, helping me off the cushions. I stumbled into his chest, earning me a crooked smile. "You look refreshed." His large hands moved to cup my cheeks, his fingers nearly wrapping around the back of my neck as he lowered his head to brush his lips over mine. I probably should have had a problem that he crawled onto my couch while sweaty but even that scent was better than earlier. "Family dinner, right?"

I frowned at him, pulling away slightly. “How-”

“Because I don’t forget things, babe. Thursday evenings are always family dinner. You just never go. I assume the way you jumped up means differently this time.”

I couldn’t even function right now. Despite it being nearly 6:30 p.m., I needed a cup of coffee and a donut. Actually, a raspberry danish. I could go for one of those right now. *Focus!* I took a deep breath and stared at him, wondering why I hadn’t tried to date and marry the man in front of me instead of motherfucking Owen Hall. “Yeah, I have to go,” I finally mumbled.

He didn’t protest as I scrambled around for clothes worthy of my mother’s ridicule, making sure to transfer Fibo into the pocket just in case. Gianni waited by the front door as I dressed and then nodded to me as we stepped outside. “I’ll be back later to change out the lock, alright?” I still didn’t know why he was being so considerate but if that meant Owen wasn’t getting in, I was good with it. I managed a shrug and he squeezed my hand in return. “For the record, I wish things could have continued between us. You brought a lot of joy to the darkness, Rhys. Stay safe.” He helped me into the car and waved as I drove off, his words not registering until I was halfway down the road.

*Gianni wants me.*

Present tense.

I had half a mind to turn the car around and demand answers but it wasn’t in my best interest to do so. I was still raw from

Owen's assault on my emotions and picking up another relationship was the last thing I should be focusing on despite how much I wanted that man back there.

*New things. Out of my comfort zone.*

I tried to remind myself that it was for the better and turned on my music, raising the volume to level 35. The bass thumped, rumbling through my chest so that I could barely hear myself think, the soothing rhythm interrupted by a number rolling across my car's dashboard.

*Owen.*

I clicked 'end' and returned to my song only to have it pause again with Owen's number. My brows furrowed as I grabbed my phone from my pocket, eyes dipping to the screen every few seconds so I didn't drive off the road. Pulling over would have been easier but if I did that, any resolve I had left to make it to Mom's house would die off with it.

Owen had called thirty-seven times in the last few hours. I had a few voicemails but I wouldn't be listening to any of them. A slew of texts littered my screen, most of them asking about the guy who walked into the house and what I was doing with him. Which meant Owen had been lying in wait, watching my goddamn front door after I kicked him out.

I couldn't deal with his shit right now, especially since he was *still* violating the protection order, one that I wouldn't enforce for fear of my job. Something he also knew. My only saving grace was that if he showed up to dinner, Liam and Joey would absolutely take care of the problem and Owen may

actually spend time in a cell. A grin overtook my face that for a few hours, I may experience some peace from that part of my life—only to trade it with the hell that was the Knight family.

The thumping bass continued to rock through my chest all the way up until I turned onto my family's street, the gated community making me gag. I grew up in excess and while I was thankful for it, I hated the attitudes that seemed to come with it. I turned down the volume and mentally prepared myself as I pulled into the driveway, content to waste away the next few hours in this vehicle rather than go outside.

My phone rang again but this time it was Mom and Ada gleefully screaming about me coming over and how it would be great to have the family together again. There was a mention of Owen and immediately I hung up, Liam at my car door a moment later.

“Hey, Rhys.”

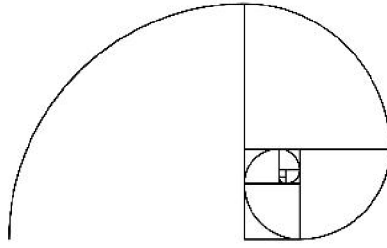
I grinned as he opened my door and undid my seatbelt before pulling me into a hug. It was great having someone in the family who truly understood and cared. Joey stole me next, pressing a delicate kiss on my tender cheek. I winced, his eyes narrowing at the redness before addressing something else. “It's been a while.”

“I'm sorry.”

Joel snorted. “Not asking for an apology. Just glad to see you in one piece. Everything alright?”



I shrugged, knowing that they would be able to see straight through a lie. I also didn't want to rehash it. "Better now. Let's go eat so I can leave." They both burst out laughing but I was serious. I came to show face, get a free plate, hopefully, swipe some time with my niece, and then get the fuck out of dodge. There was a bottle of alcohol and raspberry danishes calling my name—both of which had to be bought from the store which meant I was already planning my escape.



## CHAPTER SIX

### **RHYS**

I stared at the appetizer spread on the dining room table, not sure if I wanted to steal the last piece of salami or retire to the bedroom my parents had so graciously offered so I didn't have to return home to the dwelling they didn't approve of. Mom and Dad had been gung-ho about providing for my first place like they had with Ada but I followed in my brother's footsteps to make it on my own.

The government program I was a part of more than paid my down payment and a few extra hours in work-study made up what I lacked in rent. I lived comfortably and most other expenses were covered by the grant. Still, Mom seemed to think that I could be doing better if I just leaned into the family name as she had mentioned repeatedly over the last fifteen minutes. Dad had said nothing to support my decision but I hadn't expected him to.

*Salami or no salami?*

Instead of the normal ‘eenie meenie minie mo’, I ran through an algorithm to decide whether or not I wanted to take one more slice. I would have loved a piece of roast beef or ham but both of those were touching the cheese. When I heard the sounds of shuffling toward the dining room from the other side, I decided that the chance at the salami had passed.

“Oh, Rhys!”

And apparently, so had my freedom.

Trying to hide my scowl, I pasted on a fake smile and answered back. “Yeah, what’s up?”

Mom peeked around the corner, catching my gaze. Her freshly manicured appearance irked me, from the bouncy brunette curls down to the fake nails she wore. They were a bright pink this time, matching the regrettably pink shirt and pants outfit she had picked out for the occasion. Paired with a paisley scarf loosely tied around her neck, she looked like every white picket fence mother come to life. Unfortunately, this one was mine.

“Come help in the kitchen!” They didn’t need help; I knew that much. They just wanted me to *mingle* and that was one thing that I hated doing. Like what was the point of small talk? They’d ask questions. I’d answer them and then get berated for my answers because they weren’t what Mom and Ada thought I should have said. No, it was much safer here in the dining room with the salami.

Besides, they should have figured that my pension for small talk had been misplaced after all these years. After all, I was

going for a PhD in Theoretical Statistics—if that didn't scream antisocial behavior, I didn't know what did.

Even Liam and Joey, after the initial greeting, left me to my own devices. Ada tried to smother me with words of wisdom but after ignoring her, she returned to the kitchen with Ernest. Tia must have been playing in her room because I hadn't heard a peep from her and she usually attached herself to my side when I arrived.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I made my way to the open kitchen, the one I had grown up in for the first 25 years of my life. It was large enough to house me, my two older siblings, and my parents, and now, more than accommodated their spouses and my niece. It was a masterpiece, hand-designed by my father, one of the few things he was proud of.

Liam gave me a friendly jab as I passed him, Joey acknowledging my presence with a nod. Sometimes I wondered how Liam and I ever fit into this family—what with Liam being a lawyer and me turning out to love numbers. Everyone else in our family was in business or fine arts and while I knew Ada did something, I had no idea what it actually was.

Mom snagged my hand and pulled me to the island. “I need the vegetables chopped. You're rather good with a knife, much better than your sister who always seems to cut off a limb.” Everyone shared a laugh, Ada clapping back.

“That was *one* time and now Ernest won't let me touch sharp objects. Not that I mind. It's quite nice not having to lift much

of anything at home.” She grinned up at her husband, Ernest laying a quick kiss on her lips. It was sickening watching them together because even after meeting Ernest Fraser, the businessman from California, they were still so in love after fifteen years. The honeymoon period had never passed, even after Tia was born.

The strangest part wasn't the overdone PDA but the fact that it seemed just as practiced as my smiles when I had brought Owen over.

They were both just as well manicured as Mom, Ernest in a suit and tie, his dark hair and blank expression everything that was wrong with him in my opinion. Ada's attire was a little less subtle than mom's, her curls pulled back into a tight bun, showing off the sharp edges of her face. A simple black dress adorned her form but the heavy addition of diamonds on her neck, arms, and belt told me that she was wearing thousands if not tens of thousands of dollars.

It sickened me.

Small footsteps raced down the stairs, a little body speeding through the kitchen before stopping just short of me. At some point, there had been an understanding that while touch was my love language, there were times when it was also overstimulating. My six-year-old niece had picked that little tidbit up, something more than Mom or Ada ever had. Her fingers itched as she held out her hands and I gladly fell into her hug, picking her up and twirling around. Her squeals

pierced the air, a genuine smile spreading across my face at her happiness.

“Where have you been all this time?” I asked, poking her cheek as she giggled again.

“Homework!”

I couldn't help but chuckle at the fact that a six-year-old was willingly doing her homework. “You're only in first grade, Tia.”

“I have to be as smart as Uncle Rhys.” She leaned in and placed a kiss on my cheek before I put her down, Tia pointing to the counter. “Uncle Rhys, I want to help.” She held her hands out again, waiting for my answer. God, I fucking loved this kid.

“No!” Ada yelled, a little too loudly. “No. Sweetheart, why don't you-”

Hating the way that Ada has always controlled her kid, I stepped in. I rarely butted heads with anyone, mostly because I avoided conflict like the plague but when it came to Tia, I'd do anything for her. Ada thought homeschooling her was the way to go—even though all of us had gone through several years of private school and elite universities. So, I chose to be Tia's little piece of the world to make sure she didn't turn out to be one of those strange kids with no street smarts. Or her mother.

“She's *fine*. She can help peel the onions.” I drew out some gloves from the middle drawer and handed them to Tia, smiling as she shoved them on. They were a little too big, the

rubber tips bending over and I couldn't help but smile at how cute she was as she held up her hands and wiggled her fingers. God, she was so fucking precious. "Now, what don't we do in the kitchen?" I asked. I knew she wasn't a toddler anymore, but it was what I had done with her since she was two and probably would continue to do until she was my age.

A wild smile spread across her chubby cheeks. "No hands in our face!" Giggles peeled from her lips as she held out her gloved hands for the onions and then ran off to the trashcan to start peeling. Ada frowned at me, but I didn't care. Tia was going to be able to do the things she wanted around me, even if it was just peeling onions.

Mom came up by my side, Liam leaning against the island across from me as I grabbed a pepper, slicing into it. The crunch rang through the kitchen, the silence making me realize that everyone's focus was on me including Dad who was sitting on the chairs along the back wall of the kitchen. I wanted to chop through it, pretend that I wasn't the center of attention but that wouldn't get rid of the situation. Mentally, I picked through my favorite sequence but it just made me more aware of how uncomfortable this moment was.

"What?" I hissed.

Mom placed a hand between my shoulder blades, rubbing softly. It was supposed to be comforting but it came off as coddling, preparation for whatever rude or harmful thing she was about to say. "We're just worried about you." I looked up at her, wondering why in the hell *I* was the problem child

when I was the smartest of my siblings. Not that I had a plan after school, but I did have the highest degree. It probably had more to do with my coping tactics than my academics but I wasn't prepared to face that nugget of truth right now.

“You stopped bringing Owen, just stopped talking about him. You were so happy with him. Then you stopped coming to family dinners. What happened?”

I took several breaths, trying to distill the rising panic in my chest. I should have never brought that man into this house—Owen, a biochem professor I had met overseas at a conference in France. Returning home and finding that he lived a few cities over had seemed like a dream come true but he became anything but. What happened in France should have stayed over there. Despite all the issues I was dealing with now, there had been a pocket of time when things were good.

But the rose-colored glasses soon slipped away, and he was no longer the gorgeous man I once knew. There was a much darker side to him that had only been revealed when shady characters started gracing my doorstep and when Owen started showing up at all hours of the night. The rational thought would have been that he was cheating but the bruises and lingering fear in his eyes told me otherwise.

The fights, the screams, the fucking terror I experienced still haunted me—just like it had earlier this morning before Gianni saved me from myself. And yet, no matter what I said or did, Mom still believed that Owen was the best thing that had ever happened to me. As did Ada.



At this point, the only thing I wanted was to curl back up in my office, preferably in the safety of Gianni's arms. *Never gonna happen.*

"Rhys?" Mom was still rubbing my back, my head snapping up to realize I had zoned out. *Well, shit.*

Everyone was looking at me with different levels of concern, only Liam and Joey trying to give me comfort with their understanding smiles, silently asking if I wanted them to step in.

I shook my head and shifted away from Mom, trying to find the best way to explain the horrors I had been through the last few months and then realizing that it wasn't worth it. Mom and Ada would never understand because they had never seen that side of Owen. "We broke up." Simple and to the point.

Mom chuckled, the worry thickening in her expression, "But he was good for you. To you. You couldn't stop smiling around him."

I remembered those times and each one had been fake. I plastered on those smiles because I didn't want anyone to know what was truly going on. Owen was supposed to be perfect and I was supposed to be the kid who walked away from the family money and *still made it*. "Things didn't work out. Can we drop it?" I didn't want to rehash those unwanted memories and as fragile as my mind was right now, I might very well end up in another heap on the floor.

Ada sighed from her perch at the edge of the kitchen, Ernest still standing behind her. Tia and Joey had miraculously

disappeared in the last few seconds, probably courtesy of Liam who knew that our niece doesn't need to be part of this discussion.

My sister leaned back against her husband's chest, her gaze observing me with an acute focus. "No, we can't just drop it, Rhys. You keep making decisions that seem to harm any progress you've made. You're in a high-profile program and that's great. But you don't have any friends. You never come to family dinners unless Mom all but begs you and now, you're giving up the one relationship that was good for you? I don't understand. None of us do."

I bit my tongue because lashing out would only cement what they thought they knew. Liam moved to my side, letting me know that he was here with me but that he couldn't speak for me. His words would fall just as flat because, for some reason, Mom didn't believe either of us when it came to most things. She didn't believe Liam when he said he was getting married—not that she was against it, just that she didn't believe he had fallen for someone when she hadn't been aware. It only got worse when she wasn't invited to the wedding, although relations had since calmed down between them.

I leaned forward a little to catch Dad's take on all this but he was blissfully in his own little world as he always was. He hated the politics of the family and only put his two cents in as long as it aligned with whatever Mom had already said. There was no way out of this other than to let them have a glimpse of what was truly going on.

“None of you would understand because I haven’t told you.” I took a deep breath, fumbling for the right words until I resolved to just tell them the truth. What was the use in continuing to lie about it? Yet another thing my therapist begged me to try—honest emotions. No one could understand me if I didn’t give them a reason to. “You’re not the one he was dating. You didn’t see everything. Sure, he made me happy and for a while, that’s all I wanted. But I soon realized that wasn’t enough. Love isn’t enough. Not when it means I’m hiding in my goddamn room, cowering in the closet while some stranger bangs on the front door, yelling for my fiancé. I never knew where that fucker was. He was always just *out*. And then when he came back? I was ignored. He was always working, working for *us*. He said he was a professor but I don’t remember the last time a professor walked into the house at 2 a.m. with bruises on his collarbone and blood dripping from his forehead.”

Tears traveled down my cheeks as I sucked in a breath and choked on it, my entire body thrumming with energy as I stepped away from the counter. The knife clattered to the marble as I tried to get a hold of myself, memories filtering into my head, reminding me of moments I would have rather kept stuffed away. My family had never seen me like this—in full panic mode. I had kept everything under lock and key but now, they were seeing the raw emotions and they had no idea how to handle it.

Liam tugged me against his chest as I spilled the rest of my explanation, needing them to understand how terrible of a

human being Owen truly was. If I merely pulled down my collar, they'd get a very different glimpse but I wasn't ready for that conversation yet. "You know the worst part?" I whispered, smacking my hand across my cheeks to catch the tears. "The absolute worst part was the lies. I'm sure I could have turned a blind eye to everything else but the lies? There were just *so many*."

I dealt with numbers every day. They didn't lie. People lied, though, and I hated it.

Ada pushed up from her seat, that pitied expression I hated so much plastered on her face. "Rhys, you should have tried-"

I cut her off, holding up a hand out to stop her approach as I twisted around. "No more advice. You're in a loving relationship and I love that for you. I do. But you all don't get to comment on the lack of my love life under the guise of *helping*. Mom, it was lovely to see you." I wriggled out of Liam's hold and kissed my mother on her cheek, the woman too shocked to return the gesture as I headed into the living room to make my departure.

Ignoring her pleas for me to stay, I ripped open the front door, relishing the brisk night air that chafed against my cheeks. *It's just another evening*, I told myself, my fingers immediately dipping into my pocket to grab Fibo. Curling up on my couch with liquor, sugar, and a terrible 80s movie sounded like a much better time than staying here with people who didn't understand.

I should have said goodbye to Tia, but I couldn't have her seeing me like this.

Liam and Ada rushed after me, Ada catching up with me moments before I slid into my car. "You're a fucking child, Rhys. Stop thinking with your emotions and just talk to us. I'm sure that Owen-"

I twisted around, narrowing my gaze at my sister. There were so many things I wanted to say to her. I wanted to blow up at her, to truly make her understand the horrors I had experienced over the last few months. Instead, I stood there like an idiot, one hand in my pocket, the other fisted at my side. Liam stepped up and squeezed Ada's shoulder, trying to keep her from crowding my space. "Step off, sis. He broke up with Owen and that's that, alright?"

Ada shook off Liam's hand. This conversation was far from over for some godforsaken reason that I couldn't fathom. "Why can't you just believe that this is for the best?" I asked again.

"Because he made you so fucking happy!"

Even after I told them Owen hurt me. That he abused me. That he fucking terrified me in my own house. She *still* wanted me to take him back. My breathing quickened but I would not fall apart in front of this woman I shared blood with. "I'm not taking him back, Ada."

She opened her mouth to say something else when Liam stepped in and said the words I was hoping to keep silent. "Owen is an abusive asshole, which is why Rhys has a

restraining order against him. There will be no ‘bringing back Owen’, Ada. He’s not welcome in Rhys’ life and definitely not in mine.”

Ada scoffed, “That’s *excessive*.”

She wouldn’t listen. She never did. So, I did the one thing I was regretting. I slowly pulled down my collar to show off the healing bruise, her eyes widening. She gasped, stepping back in horror but for once, I was glad to put that expression on her face. “*This* is why he’s not allowed near me.”

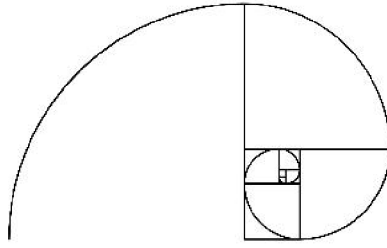
“He would never! Owen-”

I refused to listen to her anymore, especially because with each word that came from her vile mouth, it seemed like she knew my ex-fiancé. Personally. And I didn’t like the feelings building up in my chest at the idea that she approved of him for other than reasons than the faux personality he showed when he was at the house.

Slipping into the car without another word, I turned the key, ignoring her harsh stare as my music immediately blared through the stereo and I peeled out of the driveway. Free from the stifling aura that was the Knight’s residence, I sped off toward my next destination.

The liquor store.

It had better be open because I needed to drown today in the devil’s juice.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **RHYS**

Liam ensured that I was alive while Mom tried calling three times before I made it back home, two bottles of whiskey and some cotton candy-flavored tequila tucked in one arm and a dozen glazed raspberry danishes in the other. My biggest craving was also my biggest vice—sugar. However, I was going to milk my insanely fast metabolism until I couldn't anymore. Owen always hated the fact that I was nibbling on something or at least trying to. He just didn't know that it was also a way to distract myself.

Like sure, the sugar was *fantastic* but it didn't produce the same kind of endorphins as sex did. I craved physical touch so much that it hurt and having Gianni in my bed earlier today had only made it worse. With Owen, he was more of a quality time guy where quality time included being in the same general area but not speaking. Or touching. Or even doing the same activity. I couldn't remember the last time I spent actual time with Owen before I kicked him out of my house.

And now? I was starved of my needs while avoiding the issue with sweets and booze.

Another very healthy adult response, right?

<<*How was the dinner?*>> A text from Gianni rolled across my phone screen. My heart clenched as it showed that I read his message, the man immediately texting again. <<*The fact that you're reading this means you're already back home. That bad?*>>

I didn't know how to answer him, especially when he all but told me that this was the end of whatever we had. Or maybe I was reading too much into and he had wanted me to turn around and make out with him in my driveway. All the signals were confusing.

The strong scent of Febreze hit me as I walked into my house, a twinge of warmth running up my spine at how well Gianni had taken care of me. I should have been a bit peeved that he picked the lock or how he even knew how to do that but I was too excited about how the rest of my night was going to devolve into a chaotic masterpiece.

I ignored my phone after throwing it on the couch and headed straight to the kitchen to unload my goodies. My first instinct was to reach for the cupboard and then I thought better of it. It was just me. I didn't need a cup. Drinking out of the bottle hadn't gotten old since undergrad, no reason to grow out of the bad habit now.

*Eenie, meenie, miney, mo. Tequila it is.*



I swiped the clear bottle and three danishes, neatly stacking them on a napkin before marching to the couch and turning on Beetlejuice to make it seem like I was just unwinding for the night.

The top of the bottle came off easily and I took a healthy swig, the acid taste of cheap alcohol and ratchet candy coating the back of my throat. *This shit is disgusting. And yet... we shouldn't waste things.* I giggled to myself, snuggling farther into my cushions as I stuffed half a glazed danish into my face. Raspberry jelly exploded in my mouth, smearing across my lips as my tongue darted out to catch any lingering sweetness.

*This was the life.*

Well... it would have been better getting fucked into a mattress until my voice was hoarse from screaming too much, passing out, and then waking up just to repeat it but...

This was good.

Still, I reached down to adjust myself at the thought of submitting to Gianni's unrelenting mercy like I used to. I missed those days, stumbling into his house disoriented before his hands were on me, taking away the panic, the pain, *the feelings* that I just couldn't deal with. Every single piece of that man had been a goddamn gift.

Blinking away fantasies I could no longer entertain, I focused on the rolling introduction credits and took another large swig, followed by stuffing an entire danish into my mouth. I groaned as the mixture of horrible alcohol and

sweetness tangled on my tongue, the warmth of the devil's juice warming my insides.

Mom and Ada weren't here to ridicule me and Owen was wherever the fuck he was, hopefully not watching my front door. And that was all that mattered. I lost myself to the famed quotes of Beetlejuice himself as I took another healthy bite of my sweets, groaning as I stared at the last one on my lap.

Halfway through the flick, I was down a bottle of nasty tequila and trying to savor the danish so I didn't have to get up. It was a fun game to play as I picked at the icing along the top, even going so far as to swipe my finger through the jelly and suck on it to pass the time.

However, the little bit of joy I had saved for tonight disappeared when my front door opened, and in walked my worst nightmare. Again.

“Rhys? Fucking hell. Babe, *sweetheart*,” Owen raced over to the couch as I cringed against the cushions, my movements a little slower than I would have liked due to the alcohol racing through my system. He slid the bottle out of my hand and removed the pastry from my lap. “Shit, it's gotten this bad?”

I stared at him, frowning. There was already a slight buzz to my thoughts, my eyes unfocusing from the nearly a liter of alcohol I had chugged. “Why the fuck are you here?” I bit out, refusing to let the panic take over. He had to be lingering outside the fucking house for him to have shown up so quickly.

“I saw your car in the driveway-”

*Bingo.* “Restraining. Order.” I grumbled, pushing away from him and stumbling to my feet. I was more worried about the danish that he had ruined rather than my safety which made no sense. Still, I pointed to the door, trying to help him understand where he was supposed to be. Which was—not in my house.

He sighed, taking a seat on my coffee table and looking up at me. He reached for my hands but fuck if he was going to pretend like we were still a thing. “Your sister called me. Told me that something seemed off.”

If I was a thug, I’d threaten to kill her for bringing harm to my door. I didn’t understand her fixation with Owen or me and Owen being together. However, I was not a thug. I dealt with numbers and none of these things were adding up. “I told her we were done.” I didn’t understand how much clearer I was supposed to make things. Owen had always dismissed my words, thinking that I’d just forgive and forget. Even with a legal tender document, he still thought that I’d take him back eventually.

The question was why he was so adamant to be in my life. His obsession seemed to encompass more than me. With the multitude of questions he asked nearly every time he strolled in here, I could only believe he was interested in something he shouldn’t even know existed.

Owen tilted his head to the side, his expression softening. It was that expression I used to fall for but now it was easy to see through his façade. He was here because he wanted something.

“Babe, we were both angry that day but you can’t keep doing this. Your project is stressing you out. You need to-”

“That day?! It’s been *months* of this,” I whined. My flesh burned from where he touched me when he swiped my hand. I shied away from him, falling back onto the cushions in an ungraceful heap. I used to crave his touch, his attention, his *love*, and now I wanted to burn it with hellfire. Focusing on Gianni’s thick hands from earlier and the way he so lovingly caressed me until I fell asleep, I kept my cool.

Owen had always been obsessed with two things in our relationship—me and my project. The questions he asked were borderline intrusive, not to mention that I had told him multiple times that I couldn’t talk about it. At first, I thought he was just naturally inquisitive, the same way I was with numbers. But that was hardly it.

I wracked my brain for answers but I couldn’t do much other than regret the alcohol I drank at this point. I did know that Owen thought I was spiraling because I had always done things in excess—namely eating and drinking. If I was avoiding a problem, I’d binge on things until I felt satisfied. It made me look like a fucking addict, a high functioning one because I was still somehow the smartest guy on campus.

It also now made sense why Owen thought making things with cheese would earn himself automatic forgiveness. I was still fucking pissed he had ruined the gooey goodness for me.

“I appreciate the concern, but I need it back.” I wiggled my fingers, changing the subject, while he just looked confused.

“Need what back?”

*Is he serious?* “The key. You shouldn’t be here. *I* don’t want you here. The law fucking says you can’t be here.” Several deep breaths helped me keep my shit as I fought to not break down in front of this man. To be honest, I forgot he even had a spare key, although I had sworn I had taken that shit from him. Which meant that he had *multiple* spare keys, a thought I really didn’t want to dwell on right now. Thank fuck Gianni had promised to come and change out my locks.

“Let me just help you to bed.” He reached for me again, concern etched into his features but I shrugged him off. I wasn’t spiraling. I wasn’t acting out. I was unwinding after a stressful moment at my parents’ house. This had *nothing* to do with Owen and even less to do with Ada. That overstepping bitch of a sister was really getting on my nerves.

Owen sighed, crouching by my knees. It was a submissive position but not one he had ever offered while we were together. I hated him looking up at me like that, trying to give me hope that he had changed. When his hand raised to sit on my knee, I scrambled to the other side of the couch, the devil’s juice giving me the courage to call Owen out on his bullshit. “I will call the fucking cops if you so much as touch me. Ada had no right to call you and you were wrong for showing up. Owen-”

“Babe.” He cut me off and that’s when I realized that I was done. Unbeknownst to him or anyone else, if we hadn’t dated—if we had *just* been friends—I’d have gotten a restraining

order against him a long time ago. Love made me blind to several things, mainly Owen's uncanny ability to insert himself *everywhere*, even the places he didn't belong. He always seemed to know where I was, what I was doing, and where I was going. At first, I loved his ability to provide for all my needs until I realized it was because he had fixated on me and my motherfucking project. "You need help. I'll come back in the morning to-"

Oh, the absolute fucking horror... "You will do no such thing." Owen showing up in the morning to cure a hangover was not my idea of *help* especially since I now knew that he was in cahoots with Ada. I took a deep breath before standing up and unsteadily ushering him to the door. He didn't fight me, mostly because he thought he was going to waltz in here tomorrow to 'take care' of me. He turned around to say goodbye as he stepped outside, leaning in for what I assumed was a kiss but fuck that.

Slamming the door in his face had never been so fucking satisfying in my entire life. For good measure, though, I grabbed a chair from my kitchen table and stuffed it under the handle. I had seen it done in movies, so it'd help, right?

Two seconds later I dialed Ada, hoping that she'd still be awake. "What the fuck, Ada?"

"Nice to hear that you got home safely. We're worried about you and-"

"No, you're not. You want control. You don't like the fact that I'm different..."

She cut me off. “Rhys, are you drunk?”

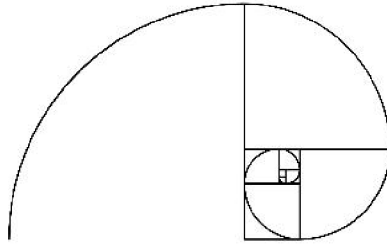
“That’s none of your concern.” She seemed to forget that I was almost 30, that I was a grown adult with my own house and my own life to live. Sure, I was still in school but the advanced degree with a dissertation could very well change statistical analysis as we knew it. But because I was the baby of the family, I always would be.

“Babe, you’re spiraling.”

Why did everyone think that?

I fumbled around for the right words before ultimately settling on three. “Lose his number.” Then I hung up, eyes drifting to the TV and realizing that it was time for a different kind of stress relief. I grabbed the whiskey off the counter and stuffed another danish in my face before turning on the stereo and blasting Metallica.

More healthy reactions to this adulting thing. I was killing it.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **RHYS**

Fifteen minutes went by and I realized the pent-up aggression and adrenaline were only heightening as I tried to dance it off. Instead of it being a stress reliever, I was finding that the combined stimulation of my favorites was making everything worse. I shut everything off, eyes wide as I stood in the middle of my living room, half-naked, and half a danish dangling from my mouth.

My gaze landed on the phone in my hand, somehow traded with the unopened whiskey bottle on the floor. I stared horrified at the device, an entire speech typed out and ready to send to Owen about how much of a terrible person he was. 90% of the words I had put in that box would get me killed as I hurriedly erased it and swiped out of that message, only to see additional texts from Gianni and another one from Liam.

I messaged Liam that I was still alive before running through Gianni's. They became progressively more worried, the last one threatening to check in on me because I hadn't answered.



That had been nearly thirty minutes ago so I called him back, knowing that I was in no state to talk to anyone. “Heyyy,” I drawled, Gianni chuckling at the slur to my greeting.

“Thought we’d drop by and change out the lock with something a bit more high-tech. You’re home, right? I see your car.”

I didn’t answer him, wondering why I wasn’t creeped out with Gianni hanging around the same way Owen had. Many of Gianni and Owen’s actions were the exact same—watching me, providing for me, checking in on me. The difference was that I craved Gianni’s attention and I was madly in love with him.

*Well, shit.*

Alcohol definitely made it easier to act on thoughts that shouldn’t exist and if he was going to waltz in here tonight, there was a very real chance, I was going to end up confessing to him.

“Hey, Rhys. You good? Don’t make me pick the fucking lock again.”

“It wouldn’t work anyway,” I mumbled as I made my way to the door and pulled the chair out of the way before unlocking it. Gianni pushed his way inside, frowning at both the lack of clothing—apparently, my shirt had disappeared at some point—and the device I had used to keep Owen from barging in again.

“Two questions and I’ll start with the easier one.” Gianni filled the fucking doorway, his expression darkening as he pointed to the seat. “Why the fuck is a chair there? Did Owen come back?” I shrugged as if it was no big deal but then Gianni’s hand was around my throat, his other hand trailing the dark bruise on my shoulder. “And this? Where the fuck did this come from?”

I swallowed, unable to meet Gianni’s gaze as he backed me into a wall, his touch soft but firm.

“Tell me this wasn’t Owen.” When I didn’t answer, he pulled away, a thick growl on his lips. His next words weren’t for me to hear but they warmed my poor little heart. “I’m going to fucking kill that man one day.” His fists clenched at his sides before surveying the bit of chaos I had unloaded on my living room.

This was a side of me that Gianni hadn’t seen yet—the part where I let myself unwind on my own terms and fully experience the adulting part of life that would have consequences in the morning. Gianni moved toward the coffee table, trying to hide his chuckle. “Tequila, really? I thought you might need a pick me up after your family dinner and thought I’d drop off some chocolates while we changed out the lock for you.”

I greedily wiggled my fingers, ignoring the ‘we’ part of his statement. I was rewarded with a small box that I immediately tore into, groaning when the first truffle hit my tongue. Gianni’s eyes heated, silent promises of what he wanted to do

me hanging between us. My cock throbbed in my pants, making me painfully aware that I was standing in front of him half-naked.

The moment was broken as the second half of the ‘we’ stepped inside my house, the man just as gorgeous if not more than Gianni. He was taller and wider, his thick shoulders making the room feel ten times smaller but despite how lethal his aura was, I wanted nothing more than to sink into any embrace he was offering. My tongue darted out to lick my lips in response, Gianni clearing his throat to drag me out of my lust-filled haze.

I thought he might have been angry or disappointed that I was ogling his partner but instead, it was more of the same—the promise to get me not just under him but both of them. That was not something I was going to shy away from.

This new arrival into my house had to be pushing 6’5”, his luscious black hair pulled back into the kind of ponytail that people drooled over, his piercing blue eyes staring through me. If I wasn’t mistaken, he wanted to devour me just the same as Gianni did and I was here for it.

All of it.

In any position.

In *all* of the positions.

Alcohol made me horny. Well, hornier than I usually was and there were two very beautiful men standing at the entrance

of my house like some terrible porno that I was absolutely going to indulge in.

That's when it all clicked as I looked between them both, blinking several times and cursing the universe for being unfair. "Gianni, is he one of your-"

"Partners, yes. One of 'em." Gianni twisted around and patted the man's massive chest, a silly grin on his face. "Don't let Valentyn intimidate you. He's a big teddy bear."

Valentyn grunted but couldn't hide his amusement. "He likes to think so." He stuck out his hand for me to shake. "It's a pleasure to meet the man who's putting stars in Gia's eyes." This man was all beast, even more so than Gia. Muscles and veins rippled through his arm as I shook his hand, my fingers dwarfed, my entire body shuddering with the fantasies of those hands elsewhere.

Add in the thick accent from northeast Asia and I knew I was in trouble. Accents were just one of many weaknesses I had and between the hair that could easily have come out of a Loreal commercial, the sea-blue eyes, and the firm handshake? I was all in. Again.

I would be thoroughly disappointed if Gianni had *just* come to change out my doorknob. Besides, this counted as outside of my comfort zone, right? Valentyn would be a new part to the equation. Gianni snorted, catching onto my thoughts as he turned my attention to the TV.

"Beetlejuice? Seriously?"

“I was a little wired and that seemed like a good idea at the time.”

A drill turned on as Valentyn began disassembling my lock, Gianni looking me over once more before throwing his arms open. “Got it. Come here. I know you need it.”

Fuck yeah, I did.

Gladly, I fell against his chest, wrapping my arms around his waist and soaking up his warmth. I would never be able to get enough of this man, despite the warning—or had it been an invitation?—from earlier. I stuffed my face against his chest, dragging in his scent like a man starved. We stood there for several minutes, the soothing hum of a drill in the background lulling me into a sense of security.

“It’s got a few new bolts in it and this is the only key,” Valentyn said, his voice suddenly much closer than it had been. I tore myself away from Gianni, eyes wide when I found him directly behind me, his breath fanning my cheek in anything but an innocent gesture.

I held out my hand and squeaked a thank you as he dropped the key into my palm.

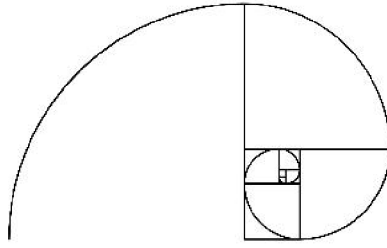
“How about a movie, Rhys?” Gianni suggested as Valentyn closed my door and locked it. Several chimes and clicks sounded afterward. Valentyn hadn’t been joking about a few extra bolts. “*Just* a movie. Help you wind down a little, alright?”

I couldn't say no to a little quality time, although we'd be watching something better than Beetlejuice. The moment I nodded, Gianni was dragging me to the cushions, those chocolates still clutched in my free hand. Valentyn disappeared for a moment before returning to the living room with the rest of the danishes. I waited for an explanation as the man took up residence on my other side.

“Gianni won't shut up about your sugar addiction. Thought you might like chomping on something other than chocolates.”

I nearly pounced on him and smothered him with kisses at the fact that a guy I had never met *listened*. Sure, he had been listening to me indirectly through his partner, however, that was the only thing I wanted aside from the intimacy. For someone to heed my words, to truly understand what I was saying? That feeling was orgasmic in and of itself. I felt no shame when I let out a groan of appreciation and hastily grabbed another danish before ripping a piece off, keeping eye contact with Valentyn at the same time.

I'm not sure my gratitude came off the way I had wanted though because he licked his lips before resituating the growing bulge between his thighs. I held back the urge to say 'Is that for me?' and focused on whatever Marvel shit Gianni had chosen for our impromptu movie night.



## CHAPTER NINE

### **RHYS**

The focusing continued for *seconds* before they started touching me. For a moment, I thought that since I was between them, the groping was meant for each other until I caught Gia's smirk as he played with the hair at the back of my neck. His lips brushed my temple as he strung an arm around my waist, Valentyn's hand on my thigh inching up until his pinky brushed my cock, making it jump in my pants.

His electric blue eyes found mine as he squeezed my thigh, his lips brushing by my ear. "Tell me to stop, Rhys." I made a little sound that was definitely encouragement, the beast leaning in to steal a kiss when I twisted toward him. It was slow and sensual, something I hadn't been expecting. Even his grip boasted control—that I would only be able to take what he was giving. "You're so fucking delicious. I can see why Gia's enamored," Valentyn breathed against my lips as he pulled away.

"I'm not enamored," Gia snorted.

“No, you’re right. You’re obsessed,” Valentyn purred.

And for the first time, I wasn’t weirded out or terrified by those words. I loved the thought of Gianni being obsessed with me, with *both of them* being obsessed with me. I gave Valentyn a nod, hoping it would be enough to continue whatever this was.

“I need to hear it, sweetheart,” he drawled in that thick accent, making my body light up with the need for them both. “Tell me you want this or I’ll stop touching you.”

*Stop touching?* That idea was horrendous.

Gianni caught onto my hesitation, his hands settling on my waist as he pressed a kiss to my shoulder. “What’s wrong, babe?”

“My therapist said to branch out and do things out of my comfort zone.” I had no idea why I blurted that out, both of them laughing.

“Valentyn is new to the equation and we’ve never done this,” Gianni pointed between the three of us.

Right, of course. “Fuck me,” I breathed out, smiling wide at Valentyn, hoping that he would ravage me in the way that I needed. Hell, I hoped they both did.

Hands and lips were back on my body, Valentyn stroking my cock through my pants, his large hand swallowing me whole. Gianni twisted me back around as he attacked my lips, taking what he wanted as he leaned me back into the cushions. It was too much and not enough all at once as I curled my fingers in



Gianni's hair and then tangled my fingers into Valentyn's shirt while pumping my hips until my body began to thrum with pleasure.

"I'm gonna-" I whined, Valentyn's hand picking up pace as I squirmed before shooting my load in my pants, my shoulders sagging into the cushion. "Cum. Fuck." I felt like a teenager all over again, unable to weather my own needs but fuck if it wasn't exhilarating coming apart between these two men.

Valentyn pulled me away from Gianni, his expression full of lust and desire as he kissed my ear, his lips sucking on my lobe a second later. "I feel like it's time for a few less clothes, eh?" They eagerly stripped me, both of their shirts joining the floor and I knew that whatever this was, was going to be hard and fast.

And one-time only.

Gianni had made it very clear on my driveway that this couldn't be a thing. Why he had brought his Alpha partner over to fuck me too, I would never know but I would be forever grateful because I was about to be manhandled.

Owen could *never*.

I stood between them, the coffee table pushed to the side, giving just enough room between the table and my couch. I shivered with anticipation, my living room closing in on me until all I could do was drool over the expansion of abs and thick muscles, both of these sex gods so wonderfully defined I thought I'd cum again just ogling their beauty.

Tattoos wound around every inch of Valentyn's chest, designs that seemed to draw me in and reveal the numerous cuts and scars littered beneath them. I wanted to ask but it seemed doing so at first fuck would be in bad taste.

Moving to Gianni, I appreciated the body I knew like the back of my hand. His dark skin glistened under my shoddy lights, smooth and perfect as it wrapped around muscle and hidden strength that I had loved to explore. I could say that I had licked nearly every inch of him until he had cum untouched, quivering beneath my attentions.

The snap of a cap had me twisting around to look at Valentyn, wide-eyed. Had they been preparing for this shit? Gianni chuckled at my shock. "Babe, Valentyn's been known to bend his conquests over wherever he pleases. He needs to stay prepared."

My expression soured. "These conquests are often?"

Valentyn grunted, squirting a healthy amount of lube in his hand. "Haven't had one in years."

"Then-"

Gianni moved closer, running his hands up and down my shoulders. "I'm one of those conquests, babe. I might like a few extra positions but the dirty one is right behind you."

That didn't make sense to me. Gianni was playful and outgoing. He'd say whatever was on his mind, regardless of how raunchy it was. Valentyn had this gruff exterior that softened every time he looked at Gianni but I couldn't imagine

pulling Gianni into random places and fucking the life out of him.

Until I felt Valentyn's thick fingers rimming my hole in the middle of my internal discussion, his other hand pressing into my side. There would be bruises tomorrow but these would be ones I was proud of.

I let out a little moan as he slipped a finger inside, my body folding in half as my hands searched for purchase. They fell on Gianni's meaty thighs, every smart thought flying out the window. I was supposed to be unwinding and finding healthy avenues to deal with my issues. Instead, I was drunk on cotton candy tequila and about to let these men fuck me into next week.

Another finger slipped inside my ass, my entire body melting between the two of them as I groaned in a mixture of relief and need. There was care in his touch, something I would have never imagined just by seeing him, Gianni's grin widening as he wiggled his eyebrows. "You think you can take both of us, babe?"

"Fuck yes," I whined as another finger was added, my hips moving back to meet Valentyn's thrusts. I scratched at Gianni's pants, fumbling with the button and the zipper before moaning as I unearthed his cock. It was heavy and pulsing in my hands, Gianni sucking in a breath as I ran my hands up and down his length, my tongue darting out to lick him.

"Well, isn't that a pretty sight," Valentyn purred as he leaned over my back. He pressed a kiss between my shoulder blades

before swapping out his fingers for his cock. The bulbous head stretched my hole, dragging a whine from my throat. “Let me see how far you can take Gia, yeah?”

I nodded enthusiastically, slurping Gianni into my mouth, his hand already sliding into my hair and yanking me back. “Babe, I told you that Valentyn needs your words. He’ll tease you all night until you tell him what you want.” My face flamed at the need to voice my desires. Gianni had never required that. He just knew what I needed. “I never asked because I knew your comfort level but our needs are different. Sometimes, I like to be used and other times I like to do the using. Valentyn, though, needs control, and that only comes with conversation and submission.”

My body thrummed with energy and pleasure, fantasies of giving myself over completely to these men running through my head. I couldn’t think of anything other than these two men, their cocks pressed to my entrances, throbbing and ready to take me for a ride. Gianni wanted to use me and Valentyn wanted to own me.

I was *so* down with that.

Gianni slipped the tip of his cock between my lips, teasing me with his taste before yanking my head back again. “Words, babe. You want it hard and fast, don’t you? You like being used. You like not needing to think or make decisions, isn’t that right, Rhys?”

I moaned, unable to believe that Gianni had picked up so much in the little time we had spent together. I made so many

goddamn decisions with my work and my life that I was constantly trying to find ways to avoid the world. Moments like these were perfect when I didn't have to think, didn't have to control anything, not even my pleasure.

Again, I nodded but this time, I added one little word. "Yes," I breathed against his cock before greedily opening my mouth. He obliged, shoving it down my throat until I choked. Valentyn froze behind me until I began bobbing my head with Gianni's harsh rhythm, keeping my gaze locked on the gorgeous dark sex god as he obliterated my mouth.

"You weren't joking when you mentioned he liked it rough, were you?" Valentyn asked, obviously intrigued by the display before him. I pushed back against his cock, needing more, his fierce grip on my hips halting my movements. "Greedy, are we?" His laugh rumbled through the room before he plunged into my hole, pushing me toward Gianni until my nose was pressed against his skin. My hands tightened their hold on his thighs as Valentyn found his pace so that I was merely a part of a well-greased wheel. Moans and grunts filled the room, passion and desire wrapping around me until I gave in, falling apart as an orgasm rushed through me.

I shook between them my cock jutting white ropes onto my discarded shirt, Valentyn still pounding into my ass as Gianni used my mouth. At one point, I was sure that they leaned in for a kiss but I was too far gone to care what they were doing on top of me.

“Give me one more,” Valentyn grunted. I frowned, unsure who he was talking to until Gianni’s fingers tightened in my curls.

“He’s talking to you, babe. Give us one more. Let go.” His wild eyes bore into mine, flashing green and then turning back to hazel. I whimpered and shook my head, unable to comply. There was no fucking way I could come again. Gianni giggled before pulling out of my mouth, the grin on his face telling me that they were going to drag that orgasm out of me one way or the other. His cock bobbed as he stepped back, Valentyn hoisting me up against his chest, his cock still firmly seated inside me as he twisted around and moved toward the couch.

He sat down, a thick arm around my stomach, the other on my cock as he began to stroke at the same time he thrust up into my ass. I yelped, as heat bled through my limbs, Gianni moving forward again to take my mouth. He waited a second, silently asking for permission before I reached for him, both of them once again using me.

Valentyn’s hand swallowed my cock as they relentlessly pursued my third orgasm, the familiar feeling building in my lower belly before I was chasing that need for release. I hallowed out my cheeks as Gianni hastened his thrusts, his cock swelling when I reached beneath and began massaging his balls. He jerked forward at the same time Valentyn’s lips fell to my shoulder, his teeth digging into my skin.

We came together—I had no idea how they managed it—Valentyn stroking me through my orgasm as heat spilled down

my throat and filled my ass. I went limp in their arms, panting for air as Gianni pulled out, the man stealing my lips a second later. He thrust his tongue into my mouth, no doubt tasting himself as he pushed me back against Valentyn, claiming me.

“You’re so fucking precious,” Gianni whispered against my lips.

“I’m a fucking adult,” I clapped back and then moaned as Valentyn lifted me from his lap, cum slipping from my gaping hole. Oh, I was going to turn into a greedy bitch if this is what they were offering. My gaze fell on Gianni who was still half-hard, leaning back on one foot as his arms folded across his chest, seemingly proud of displaying himself in front of us. “You get this treatment all the time?” I asked, a little jealous.

I was rewarded with another giggle as I stood there, completely naked between these men, nearly ready for another round.

Valentyn stood, grabbing his shirt and wiping off his dick before tucking himself back into his pants. I didn’t know why that shit was as hot as it was when he tucked the soiled cloth into his back pocket, hanging out the back like a dirty handyman. Gianni mirrored his movements before they pressed against my sides, their heated touches making me shiver. I felt like I was on display between them, my thighs still shaking from the three orgasms they had given me.

Valentyn stepped up to my side and two fingers slipped between my cheeks, rimming my hole, my back arching forward. The squelch of his release coating his fingers as he

began to fuck me all over again had my cock hardening and I had no fucking clue how I was onto my fourth orgasm. Goddamn, Valentyn was a surprise. I moaned as he continued probing my bruised ass, his lips finding the side of my neck a moment later. Gianni chuckled when I grabbed onto both of them, trying to handle the pleasure shooting straight to my dick again. I could tell that Valentyn was a possessive fuck but I was loving his attention at the moment.

“As much as we’d like to stay, we’ve got a job early in the morning, babe. Valentyn, let him go or we’ll never leave.”

Valentyn huffed against my flushed skin, “That was the plan.” His presence disappeared from my side, including his fingers. I grumbled at the loss, knowing that this would have ended at some point anyway. I quickly grabbed my clothes, covering my dick as I nodded to them both, unsure of how to thank them for their time.

This hadn’t been a transaction but with the way they were leaving, these fucking sex gods with their soiled shirts hanging out their back pockets, it sure felt like it. They resituated the cushions and returned the coffee table to its rightful place, eyes peeled for anything else out of place as I stood there in my birthday suit, eyes wide. *They clean up like handymen too.*

My heart dropped into my stomach as Gianni kissed the side of my head, promising me a round two at a later date. I didn’t trust it although one could hope. “Wait, you work together?” I finally pieced together Gianni’s words. “That’s not fair.” To be able to work around beautiful people all day and then go home



to fuck them? That was the life. Granted, my work provided very little time for other people so it wasn't something that would have worked out for me anyway.

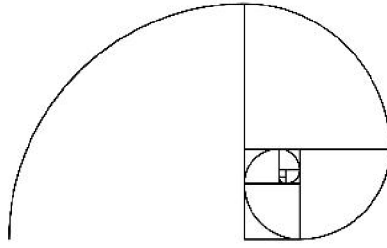
“Take care of yourself, babe. Key is on the counter and there's no fucking way that little shit is making it in here. Make sure you lock up after us.”

I nodded as I followed them to the door, still holding my clothes to my dick. Valentyn laid another kiss on me before Gianni had to rip him off, only to replace him so that I was clinging to his arms, whining for more as my clothes made a thump onto the floor between us.

“Later,” he whispered before slipping out the door.

I dutifully locked it behind them, enjoying all the clicks that followed.

*I'll hold you to that, Gianni.*



## CHAPTER TEN

### **RHYS**

The ghost of their fingers along my skin left a trail of pleasure as I wrapped my hand around my cock several hours later, fantasizing as if they had come to bed with me. I cried out as I stroked myself, precum beading at the tip. Using it as lube, my hips pumped into my hand until I was exploding all over my palm and my stomach, breathing heavily as I sprawled out over my mattress. Gianni had said he was obsessed with me. Well, I was positively feral for the beautiful moments they had just offered, moments that I had been craving for *months*.

After running to the bathroom to clean myself off, I rushed back to the comfort of my room, the weariness of the day finally taking over my body. There was only the loneliness of my mussed-up sheets on a mattress to greet me, but it was better than nothing.

Pulling myself under the blankets, I allowed myself to rest until the faint stench of Owen ruined the endorphins running

through my head. I threw the covers off and fumbled around my nightstand for my backup Fibo, trying to calm my breathing while running through the sequence but my usual crutch wasn't working.

Yet another memory slipped into my head, similar to the one that happened yesterday.

*“How were your classes today?” Owen called from the kitchen, peeking out into the hallway as I walked into the house. He wore a silly grin, flour on his face that didn't quite hide the bruise under his eye, and a bowl in his hand. I knew he was making cookies but that didn't explain why he was home in the middle of the day nor why he was baking.*

*Not to mention the fact that in the last several weeks, I had found out he'd been following me. He knew everything about me and while I knew that he taught BioChem at one of the state colleges, that's kind of... all I knew.*

*I tried my best to reel in my disappointment that I didn't have the house to myself—another indication that this relationship was dead in the water—but it didn't work. “Don't you already know?” I clapped back, Owen's expression darkening.*

*“I come home to surprise you with the sugar you crave so damn bad and this is the attitude I get?”*

*Another thing I couldn't stand about him. Owen's ability to twist my words and make it seem like I was the bad guy. I wasn't. He was in my house, using my shit but was ridiculing me? “Sorry. Just didn't know you'd be home. I'm going to take a nap.”*

*Like passing ships in the night. I wouldn't eat his cookies anyway. That guy didn't know the difference between flour and sugar half the time and I was convinced he didn't know how to use the oven.*

*"Rhys, talk to me. How's the dissertation coming? Get over that roadblock?" I stilled, halfway down the hall because this was one of those things that Owen asked about incessantly. Always wanted to know about my work and if I had completed it.*

*My work on predictability and statistics could very well change how things were done, especially for the government—which is why I wasn't allowed to talk about it. Not to mention the fucking security clearance I had to obtain and keep whilst working on my dissertation.*

*The problem was that Owen always wanted to know what stage I was in—he never asked for specifics but he was 'just curious'. I couldn't tell if he was being supportive or devious but paired with the mysterious cuts and bruises on his face, I just kept telling Owen that it was in progress.*

*He gave me a strange smile as he set down the bowl and raced after me. I swiveled around, wondering what he wanted when his eyes flashed with interest. For a moment, I thought I was going to get the fuck of my life until he just stuffed a small box in my hand and kissed me on the cheek. "Think about it. We could be **everything** together."*

*When I looked down to see a velvet cube, I couldn't help the rage that built up in my chest. If that was his idea of a*

*proposal, it was a poor one. The fact that he either expected me to say yes or that it was just a run-of-the-mill choice I was to make like I did when I chose coffee or juice in the morning didn't sit well with me...*

I had accepted his proposal but every day since, I regretted it.

An abrupt knock on the front door followed by an impatient, ring of my doorbell ripped me out of the memory. I was both glad for the interruption and fucking pissed that my precious sleep had been ruined by that stupid nightmarish scene. I didn't even remember falling asleep which was a bad enough sign in and of itself. The doorbell rang again and I grumbled, throwing off the sheets, my entire body tender from last night's impromptu fuck session.

One that I was all too eager to replay.

However, it was now 6 a.m., Friday morning, and someone was knocking on my door.

I could only hope they'd go away but the neighborhood I lived in wasn't known for randos and hoodlums. The constant barrage of noise would draw the cops, something I was avoiding. At the very least, I was pretty sure that it wasn't Owen. I dragged myself out of bed and smoothed down my hair before wiping the sleep from my eyes with my thumbs, coated with the wetness of my tongue. Yeah, yeah, it was gross but I wasn't exactly thinking.

"I'm coming!" I shouted, rather forcefully as I shoved on a shirt and a pair of boxers by the bed and then pattered into the

living room, yanking open the door to stop the sound threatening to worsen my headache. “What?!”

My brain short-circuited for a moment as three men crowded around the door, the shock on their faces mirroring how I felt, although I was a bit more horrified. My gaze perused the three sex gods, two of which I recognized. Fucking Gianni and Valentyn were staring at me, Valentyn’s gaze heating as he took in my odd choice of clothes. It was only then that I realized I somehow had opened the door wearing one of Gianni’s old shirts he had left during one of many fantastic nights.

I should have known it wasn’t mine when it smelled like honey and darkness. “Fuck,” I spit out, muscles and smiles that rivaled the sun staring back at me. Gianni looked like he was about to bust out laughing and I was pretty sure, given the chance, Valentyn would bend me over the side of the couch to fuck me again. I wasn’t complaining but Gianni said they had a job this morning.

My attention drifted to the third man, no less stunning. Three pairs of eyes, blue, green, and hazel, flared with amusement at my disheveled greeting, the unknown of the three trying to hide his chuckle and failing.

The longer I stared, the harder it was not to ogle but it was also abundantly clear from the tool belts that there was a reason they knocked on my door and it wasn’t just so that I woke up to eye candy. Maybe I got the timing wrong and

Gianni promised to come over *before* work. However, that didn't make sense either.

“Um...” Confidence flushed down the sewer, I fought for the right words. “What are you doing here? This isn't some weird porno, right?” *Those* were not the right words.

Gianni couldn't hold it anymore, outright laughing at my bewilderment. I feared he was going to tell the third just how close we truly were rather than answer my question but Gianni had always been able to gauge my comfort level and it was slowly waning. “We were hired, babe,” he let slip. He clicked his tongue in a silent apology, the third one nodding.

“Got the job a few months ago and just got around to performing it,” the third stated. His words were laced with the hint of a French accent, his sharp features already making me hate him. It wasn't his fault, but the fact that he reminded me of France and the day I met Owen already put one strike against him. Granted, if he kept looking at me like that, I might just forgive him.

It clicked that this was Gianni's other partner.

Them all being this fucking hot was not fucking fair to the rest of the world.

“Hired for what?” Sleep was still taking over half my brain and mixed with the hangover, I really couldn't understand why they were standing there. Until it finally hit me that this must have been one of the last projects that Owen had scheduled before I kicked him out. “Oh. I... yeah...” I pulled at the hem of my shirt, feeling extremely self-conscious all of a sudden.

Valentyn grinned at my lack of composure, his shoulders relaxing as if he was trying to seem less intimidating. “We met,” he purred, making me remember the way his breath felt on the back of my neck as he fucked me. “However, it seems a renovation was scheduled for this location.” The way he said it made it seem like he wasn’t talking about my house, but that didn’t make sense.

“Right. I just...” Well, this was embarrassing. My words were usually a lot sharper than this but my dick was taking over my ability to speak. In another second, it would be nearly impossible to hide the growing tent in my pants. Since when were handymen this fucking *sexy*? And why the fuck were they at my door? And why did it have to include Gianni and Valentyn? Quickly, I made up a lie because while I vaguely remembered Owen scheduling this shit, there was no fucking way I was letting Gianni fix up my kitchen. “I forgot to cancel. I don’t have the budget for it and-” *Did we ever have the budget for it?*

Gianni just waved his hand, his beautiful mane of blonde hair moving with his head. “No worries. We’re just here for the estimate, alright?”

I nodded, stepping out of the way so they could enter, hating the way my body shivered at the mass amount of testosterone that had just entered my home. The worst part wasn’t even how fucking sexy they were—it was how they owned it and not in a haughty way but in a way that literally screamed power and intrigue and darkness.



In a way Owen had tried and failed. Miserably.

I watched in interest as they donned blue booties to protect my carpet but I wasn't sure I cared. I'd let them walk all over my house for me. I'd let them walk *all over me*.

*Fuck. Head in the game.*

I threw them a smile as I gestured to the kitchen, remembering Owen had said something about it. I should have told them no, that I didn't need their business especially since I knew I wasn't doing a great job of hiding the fact that I fucked two of the trio. God, this was going to turn out horribly, wasn't it?

Nothing could happen again—not when I caught Valentyn's hand resting against the Frenchman's back, a small but sweet gesture that I felt like I was intruding on. My cheeks flamed as I quickly looked away, trying to hide my jealousy and disappointment.

“Nice,” the French one mumbled, eyes surveying the area that needed just a little more love than I had been comfortable doing myself. I knew before I bought the place that there were several renovations I wanted to tackle but Owen had been the one that insisted that the kitchen and bathrooms were to be done first. He needed to be able to relax in his own home.

The fact that it was now just me left a bitter taste in the back of my throat.

Not because I wanted *his* company but because it made me realize that I had enjoyed—in some part—coming home to

someone.

*Wouldn't mind if it was these guys.*

Valentyn stepped into the kitchen, frowning as he stared at the project ahead of him, his deep blue eyes darkening as they fell on me when he turned around. "This is quite a job. And you didn't budget?"

Shame flooded my expression as I thought of the best way to answer that question, Gianni giving me a comforting smile as he pushed me into the living room. "Leave him alone," he joked. "Let me talk to him for a bit while you two get started."

I said nothing until Gianni pushed me far enough down the hall that we had a little privacy. "I thought you said you had a job!"

He snorted. "And I had no idea it was your house. Dmitri only gave us the address this morning."

"I don't... this isn't my project. Well, it was but--"

Gianni cut me off with a simple kiss on my forehead. "Babe, it's fine. Give us some time to give you an estimate, alright? Valentyn won't say anything unless you want him to but I'd change out of his shirt if I were you."

"What, why? This is *your* shirt." I pulled it away from me and sniffed it like a lunatic, realizing that it really did smell more like Valentyn than Gianni. Not even my fucking detergent had been able to fully wash it away. I wasn't mad.

Gianni smirked, "Uh huh, see? That's why I was wearing it. He smells amazing. Seriously, though, Rhys... Val gets a little

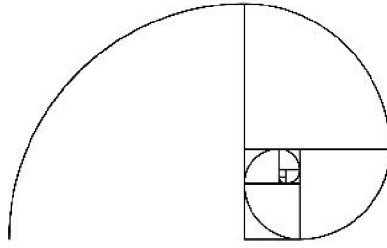
feral seeing things he deems are his.”

“We fucked. Once,” I stated firmly.

Gianni raised an eyebrow as if he counted last night as more than just ‘once’ but it wasn’t supposed to mean anything, right? By the expression on his face, I realized that it might not be the case.

Gianni managed a shrug. “That’s all it takes before he claims someone. Now, go change and leave the rest to us.” This time he pressed a kiss to my lips, my fingers curling into his shirt at his waist. I tried to take more than he was giving, Gianni chuckling as he pushed me toward my room. “*Change.*”

I disappeared obediently, my entire body alive with need all over again. Gianni was going to be the fucking death of me and I’d let him.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### VALENTYN

The kitchen was a disaster, however, that's not the thing I was focusing on at the moment. It was the fact that we had somehow picked up a job including the same man from last night, a man I hadn't been able to stop thinking about. I knew now why Gia was so fucking obsessed every time Rhys Knight stumbled into his place. I would have been as well and it wasn't just his body. It was everything about him. How he was somehow both fragile and strong. How he was intelligent but could be brought to his knees with a little bit of sugar.

The fact that I had caught him in my shirt a few moments ago, a disheveled and ruffled Rhys staring at us as he opened the door made me want to bend him over the nearest surface and pump into his sweet little hole. I grunted, reaching down to adjust myself, and tried to think of literally anything else than Rhys.

"How the fuck did he not budget? This isn't a simple renovation," Dmitri called out, sticking his head in one of the

cabinets. It pained me how empty the kitchen was—even the fridge was sparse of any real food. My gaze darted down the hallway, wondering how Rhys survived. I had seen my men fall down a rabbit hole of research and it took effort to pull them back into the world.

But if everything Gia had told me over the years was true, then I could only imagine how much of an extra push Rhys needed. And I assumed that for a while Gia had been that sweet spot.

I managed a shrug, leaning against the entrance of the kitchen as I waited for Rhys to reappear. We had a lot of fucking things to talk about, mainly yesterday and whatever the fuck we were doing here. Either Rhys was playing a game or we weren't meant to renovate the kitchen. After all, the first half of the deposit currently hanging out in my bank account wasn't a small one.

Kolas Renovations was mostly just a cover for some of the shadier handyman work we pulled off. We were good with our hands and while on the upside, we fixed up houses and small businesses, on the less legal side, we fixed problems. Give me a hammer or a gun, it didn't matter—the job would be completed. Under the guise of a renovation and purely by word of mouth, we were hired, given a job, and paid for our work upon completion.

The genuine shock on Rhys' face and the way his adorable cheeks heated, when he realized who was at the door, told me that he had no idea about our second profession. How could

he? Someone as pure as Rhys would never look at us the same if he knew. Hell, he would have never let last night happen if he knew.

Rhys just didn't fit the profile of people who usually hired us. The ones whom police refused to touch or were too scared to. Just like with any job, I looked up our clients before we met them. I didn't like surprises.

Rhys Knight, however, was a surprise, and not just because I received his name from Dmitri after we had gotten back home last night. Rhys was unassuming with dark brown, doe eyes, and a lean build that screamed a silent strength he had created to survive his nightmares. The fact that his beautiful body was now covered in marks made by my lips just made this worse. I should have never indulged last night but fuck, he was so enticing and everything I needed at that moment. Sharing him with Gia was a memory I wouldn't soon forget.

I sincerely hoped Rhys wasn't tangled up in our world and that the lingering innocence in his expression stayed far longer than mine did.

My eyes roamed the chaotic design of greens, yellows, and blues that contrasted and twisted around the cupboards and screamed for relief. I had seen similar designs in older homes, but Rhys didn't seem like he enjoyed the older ambiance, and I didn't blame him for wanting to change it.

Stepping back into the kitchen, I finally focused on Dmitri's question. "There's a possibility this is something else but we won't know until we speak with him." I tried to keep a

professional expression plastered on my face but it was difficult when all I wanted to do was walk down the hall and pull Rhys into my arms. It told me just how fucked I was that I didn't *just* want to replay last night's escapade. Ignoring that problem for now, I grabbed a tape measure from my belt and started on the small island in the middle of the kitchen. As is, the stand served little to no purpose. When we were done, though, I'd have an entire plan that would suit this small space and bring it back to life.

Gia clearing his throat drew my gaze back to the hallway. He was slowly inching himself toward Rhys' room and I had to drag him back into the kitchen. "Don't even think about it." I knew he was just trying to help but at some point, we had to draw the line between business and pleasure. My words didn't wipe the stupid grin off his face, though, his blonde mane flapping against his neck, a stark contrast with his dark skin. I fucking loved the odd colors he experimented with although the blonde was one of my favorites.

Reaching forward, I tangled my fingers in the base of his mane, tugging ever so slightly. I was rewarded with a pleased grunt, Gia's eyes flashing with desire that he wouldn't get to act on until we got home. Served him right.

"I wasn't going to do anything," Gia finally muttered. I released him, stifling a laugh. Gia was full of shit and we both knew it.

Dmitri chuckled as he turned around and leaned against the counter before folding his arms across his chest. "Why? He's

cute as fuck. A little skittish. Just Gianni's type. Besides, he's your type too."

That wasn't the point and if we didn't focus, Dmitri was going to see right through the thinly veiled detours I kept trying to throw his way. "Leave him alone. Looks like he's got one killer hangover from whatever party he stumbled home from." I neglected to mention the truth about last night because we weren't here for that and I didn't want to explain my hypocrisy to Dmitri in Rhys' kitchen.

On our way home, I'd let it slip and Dmitri could do with that information what he chose to.

Right now, I really wanted to go into that room and take care of Rhys, my protective instincts overriding everything else. Dmitri said it was my curse and the French bastard wasn't wrong. I had this burning desire to protect anyone and everyone, especially my family.

It was ultimately why most of them ended up hurt or dead. Anyone I had ever cared about other than the two men in this room had left or lost their lives. All except for my brother's kid, Paval, and I would fucking die for that kid. If anything ever happened to him, I'd never survive. Neither would Dmitri and Gianni, for that matter.

Our unconventional relationship worked for us though. Paval had three dads and I had two men to lean on that would never leave my side. Through thick and thin, always together. Sure, we roped in the occasional additional party for a night or two of fun but it was never long-term and never permanent. I



couldn't handle any more loss. Even if that beautiful statistician down the hall had already gotten under my skin and I wanted to do more than just nurse his hangover.

“Thought this was a job. Like a *job*,” Gianni blurted out as he hopped up onto the counter and began swinging his legs. The youngest by nearly five years and the only full-blooded American of us three, he tended to be a lot more relaxed in his approach. He was the ‘fun’ one but he could afford to be. His upbringing screamed pristine suburban life while mine and Dmitri's were a bit... darker.

Dmitri shrugged as he set down his tools. “Does it matter? We could use something simple for once. The last job was a bit tough.”

And once again, the Frenchman wasn't wrong. The last job we had almost lost Dmitri when a client had neglected to let us in on a few details. The job itself had been straightforward—we were just rescuing a piece of property that belonged to our client. However, we weren't told that the heirloom was part of a decades-old tryst between two warring families and that anyone in possession of the item held the rights to the company.

It was all very hush-hush so no amount of research would have dredged up that kind of information. The worst part was when one of our rivals was hired to keep us from our mission. In the end, we retrieved the piece but not until our client forked over double the amount and a bonus for Dmitri's hospital fees. He was lucky that the shot lodged in his chest

hadn't killed him. This job didn't accidentally have healthcare options.

And as much as I had wanted Dmitri to stay holed up at home, continuing to heal, he wasn't much of a 'sit and let things pass him by' sort of partner. I wouldn't want him any other way, even if I caught the way his jaw tensed every so often as he warded off the pain.

Taking one last look around the kitchen, I made some mental notes. The paperwork hadn't said much about what Rhys was looking for so we'd just give him options. This job didn't seem like it would pan out—whether it was an actual renovation or something else. We'd need to speak with Rhys to figure it out anyway.

The vibration of my phone in my back pocket dragged me back to the present. *Fuck.*

"Who is it?" Gianni leaned forward, still propped up on the counter.

"The school." I swiped the green button across the screen. "This is Valentyn."

"Mr. Kolas? Ah, yes... we need you to come to the school as soon as you can. It's about Paval."

I hung my head. These calls weren't new. It wasn't that Paval was a problematic kid. It was the fact that the world didn't understand him. Even at 5 years old, he knew what he wanted and he worked to get there. Apparently, that's not how

kids his age were supposed to handle things. They were supposed to be, well... kids.

“He’s been suspended for the week.”

“Why?” I put the phone on speaker, Dmitri furrowing his brows as he came closer and rested his chin on my shoulder. He threw his arms around my waist as we listened in, the heat against my back calming enough to keep me from raging at Paval’s teachers. We all knew our little boy didn’t do things to get suspended. After all, he took after my brother and my brother had been *very* timid.

“He punched another child and refused to apologize. We would like you to come in so we can speak about it.” I resisted the urge to growl, knowing that there was a reason Paval had acted out. There *had* to be. My brother had taught him better than that. *We* had taught him better than that.

I didn’t even respond as I hung up and took off in the truck, leaving the other two to finish up the measurements. When I got to the school to retrieve Paval, a flurry of unruly brown curls attacked my legs, fingers digging into my upper thighs as my kid clung to me. I picked him up, my heart breaking slightly as he stuffed his face into my neck and tightly wrapped his arms around me. There were no tears or sniffing but I knew Paval well enough to know that the current situation had distressed him.

The principal, Mrs. Jameson, scowled at my arrival or maybe it was the way Paval rushed over to me as if I was saving him from whatever torture her office offered. We

usually sent Gianni because he was the least threatening of us three but I hadn't been thinking.

It was obvious that she hadn't been expecting me.

"Uh, yes. Mr. Kolas, please have a seat." I followed the request as she continued speaking, Paval snuggling a little closer. "There was a fight on the playground and Paval here, won't apologize. The other family is insisting that there is some remediation at home before he returns."

"Noted. Did anyone ask Paval what happened?"

She bit her lip as a little sigh fell from her mouth. "That's not-

"It's very important." I tried to weather my anger, knowing that the monster I kept locked up had no business showing up at an elementary school. "Paval," I tapped him on the back as he twisted around to look at the teacher. "Tell us what happened."

"I was just standing up for myself. You said that I should do that," He said, looking at me.

Oh, I was so fucking proud of my little boy. "Yes, I did. But you can't go around hitting people."

"I didn't mean to. Sam kept saying really mean things. I told Miss. Riley but she wasn't listening to me." I swallowed the response I *wanted* to give as Paval continued. "Sam kept getting in my face, talking about how my parents didn't want me and how I was too much to handle. That three men had to take care of me because no mother loved me and-" Tears

started down his face as he clung to me, my gaze drifting to Mrs. Jameson.

She cleared her throat and sat forward, clasping her hands on the desk. “Mr. Kolas, have you ever considered a more female touch at home? Maybe a nanny? Someone who-”

“Mrs. Jameson, your concern is noted. However, his parental situation is not the issue. What are you doing about the other kid? Sam? Have you spoken to his parents about the bullying or did you only let them know about the final altercation?”

She shrunk back, trying to hide her emotions and failing miserably. “Mr. Kolas, the issue here is that violence has no place at this school and I feel like he might be picking things up at home considering...” She trailed off as she waved her hand toward my face, pointing at a dark bruise at the edge of my jaw. I hadn’t bothered covering it up because it hadn’t mattered at the time.

I should have known that there would eventually be a conflict between Mrs. Jameson’s core family values and the life we had chosen to live. Her idea of heterosexual monogamy was so... old-fashioned but it ruled most of her decisions, which meant Paval’s actions were heavily scrutinized regardless of what he did. A little too much violence? It was a result of the lack of female influence. Didn’t say thank you after receiving something at lunch? Not enough female influence at home. Standing up for himself? *Not enough female influence.*

Not to mention that she made assumptions about our profession and our ability to parent Paval, regarding the few bruises that accompanied our visits to the school.

Mrs. Jameson began to speak, to defend her position and possibly also Miss Riley's but I had heard enough. "I'll take Paval home to reflect. He shouldn't be resorting to violence when his words aren't heard. We'll work on that. However, I'm disappointed that the bullies aren't being dealt with similarly. If you despised how I and my partners raise my son so much, I wished you would have denied his admission for a second semester."

"Mr. Kolas!"

I stood up, cradling Paval against my chest. "I don't think you're a bad person, Mrs. Jameson but your professional attitude could use a tune-up. I will be unenrolling Paval next semester and should I find a more suitable elementary school in the meantime, he will be transferred immediately." I didn't wait to hear any more of her lies and excuses as I walked off the school grounds, strapped Paval into his car seat, and took off down the road.

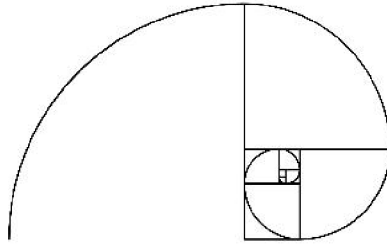
"Dad?" Too angry to answer, I just grunted. "I didn't mean to." He hiccupped, another onset of tears pouring down his flushed cheeks. I couldn't bring myself to look in the rearview mirror, knowing that I'd see a younger version of my brother staring back at me.

"Fuck. Yeah, I'm not angry with you, Pav. I'm pissed that I can't do anything to make it better. That the only option we

have is *not* dealing with it.” As my emotions settled, there was something else I realized. I should have told Gia and Dmitri that I’d swing by later to pick them up but we were nearly back at Rhys’ house so there wasn’t much point. “Pav, we have to finish an estimate. You okay to sit in the car? I can call grandma to come pick you up but we shouldn’t be much longer.”

“Take me with you! I like seeing the houses.” He wiped his face as I took a chance and twisted around to look at him, Paval smiling wide. It hurt that he thought he had to hide his emotions but it made sense seeing who his fathers were. We were constantly trying to weather our expressions around him and hide the pain. It was only a matter of time before our kid did the same.

“Alright. One house coming up,” I said before focusing on the road again. Paval wasn’t just the last piece of my brother I got to hold onto; he was also the perfect kid. He loved drawing pictures and observing different structures. I could see him being an architect at some point, designing his own buildings and houses, following in our footsteps. The legal ones at least.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### **RHYS**

Nearly twenty minutes later, dressed in something a *little* more respectable, teeth brushed, and hair a lot less tussled, I wandered toward my office, wanting to avoid the kitchen altogether. The front door had opened and closed at some point as I lingered out of the way, not wanting to fall victim to the gorgeous testosterone in my house.

I had no problems with them being here in general.

It was more of the fact that they were working on a kitchen renovation that I hadn't ordered *and* I had slept with two of them last night. Ignoring the problem wouldn't make it go away, especially when I couldn't stop remembering the way they took me apart in my living room *and then fucking cleaned it up*.

Like who did that?

That wasn't even just aftercare. That was...



I shook away the idea that last night had been more than it was, despite Gianni's statement that somehow Valentyn had already claimed me. *Can't trust that.* Turning my gaze to the small laptop on my desk, I sat down to focus. The device whirred to life, bringing my project to reality. Numbers and letters ran across the screen as I stretched and began working through the newest algorithm I had programmed into the system.

There wasn't much time before my dissertation and everything had to be perfect. My entire life's work depended on it and while that sounded like an exaggeration for someone as young as I was, it wasn't. I had poured every ounce of my time and effort into this. If it didn't work, I'd be devastated and possibly looking for another line of work.

A world without numbers? I couldn't fucking imagine that.

When one of my cabinet doors slammed shut in the kitchen followed by Gianni's giggle, I couldn't fucking help but wander down the hall to see what all the commotion was about. I shouldn't have bothered, a kitchen full of eye candy staring back at me as Gianni startled to attention, followed by the Frenchman's relaxed lean against my fridge. A smirk overtook his handsome face, deep blue eyes flashing with amusement at my uncomfortable expression.

Head tucked, I stepped into my own kitchen, feeling much smaller than I had a half hour ago. These men weren't just intimidating—they were *huge*. Like a whole head and some

taller than my 5'8", not to mention that the French guy's hands would make a very, *very* pretty necklace.

*Shit.*

Gianni had always been bigger than me, the size difference one of the things I loved but Dmitri and Valentyn made Gianni look nearly petite which was a feat. While Valentyn had these thick, broad shoulders that commanded a certain respect when he walked into the room, Dmitri was tall. He was still built and for a split second, the only thing I could think of was both of the men in my kitchen, shirtless as I stood between them drawing pleasure from hands, lips, and dicks.

Sue me, numbers weren't the only obsession I had.

Gianni raised an eyebrow as if he knew what was going through my head but shuffled out of the way, his toolbelt swaying along his hips with the movement. Why was that hot to me? And why did it make me want to start something I had no business thinking about? I cleared my throat and pointed at the fridge, Gianni chuckling at my lack of words. "Dmitri, move," he said playfully.

"We should be done in a bit," Dmitri stated, the electric blue of his eyes darkening slightly as they watched me venture to the cupboard.

"No worries. Just... water." I grabbed a glass and then moved to the fridge, praying for it to fill my cup faster before sucking the liquid down. Water splashed down my chin but I didn't fucking care until I turned around, both of them staring at me with heated expressions. We stared in tense silence as I

lowered the glass and set it on the counter. “Um... you—why are you guys looking at me like that?”

Owen had *never* looked at me like that, although I’m not sure what I would have done if he had.

“Like what?” Gianni grinned.

“Like... that. *Shit.*” Unable to stand here without *doing* something, I reached down to adjust myself, nearly letting out the moan that had been sitting at the back of my throat since they had walked in. God, I was so fucking sensitive with these men in my house. I moved to duck my head when Gianni stepped up, wrapped an arm around my waist, and placed two fingers under my chin before lifting to meet his green eyes.

“Your blush is adorable,” came Dmitri’s voice as he saddled up against my back. Oh, the fucking warmth. I didn’t even care about how he reminded me of France now. The heat pressed up against me was too good to give up. God, I was spiraling, wasn’t I? Succumbing to the touch of the men supposed to be fixing my kitchen? And yet, they weren’t *just* men fixing my kitchen, were they?

“Gia let me in on a few details from last night, Rhys,” Dmitri purred. My face flamed with the memories, realizing that somehow I had fallen in with Gianni’s other two partners in less than twenty-four hours, and just like I had thought, Dmitri’s hands on my waist were glorious. Long thin fingers edged into my hips like he belonged there, his chin brushing the top of my head as I began wavering between them.

My head slowly fell back against Dmitri's shoulder as he tightened his grip and the thick member pressing against my ass had me gasping at the sensation, Gianni trying to hide his excitement.

“What... what are we doing?” I asked, breathily.

Gianni leaned in, his lips brushing against mine with unspoken promises. He tasted like he always did—*safe* but this time there was an added sensation of mystery and danger that intrigued me. None of the things that I should want and none of the things I needed in my life right now. “Tell me you weren't thinking about it when we walked in here, *Rhys*.”

After Owen and all of his... issues, I should have been looking for something sweet and wholesome. Something that would attend to my needs. The men pressed up against me were not those things. Sweet and wholesome were the farthest things from my mind right now because yes, I was absolutely thinking of getting railed by one or more of them when they walked in here.

I kept my drooling in check so I didn't let on that I was thinking about if all three had decided to join this morning. Their presence was wiping away any lingering effects Owen's memory had had. The therapist had said to find something new and this definitely qualified. It had to.

“Is this what you were hired for?” I asked, trying to be cheeky and failing as my hands fisted in Gianni's shirt at the same time Dmitri thrust against my ass. Oh, I was definitely in a losing battle—not that I wanted to win.

“Funny,” he purred against my lips, this time, dragging his tongue across my bottom one as he rocked his hips against mine until I was stuck in a tantalizing dance between these two men, feeling their arousals pressed up against me. “We haven’t technically been hired yet.” Gianni was playing word games with me but he wasn’t ready to let me go and I was having too much fun between them.

Dmitri’s lips attached to my neck, my back arching forward at the heat that shot straight to my dick. Still being the brat that I was, I gave him one last reservation because all this was, was a game right? “Is this one of the add-ons?”

“Funny,” Gianni growled before his hands cupped my cheeks, angling my chin further which in turn gave Dmitri better access. I was fucking melting between them, but my smart mouth wouldn’t let me give in. “Rhys, my sweet boy, for the love of god, stop thinking.” Then his lips were on mine and Dmitri’s hands were gripping just a little harder, one of them slipping between me and Gianni to grip me through my pants.

A moan slipped from me at the contact, Gianni swallowing it hungrily as his tongue thrust into my mouth, Dmitri’s hand moving in time with his gentle thrusts against my ass. My eyes slid closed, my fingers tightening in Gianni’s shirt as they dominated me, owned me, and suffocated me in the most delicious of ways.

Was it too much to ask to have a threesome every once and a while? Maybe even a foursome. Where was Valentyn?

My mind told me that I shouldn't be craving this. That this was wrong. That giving in to my whims was going to get me in so much goddamn trouble and yet, Dmitri's strokes on my needy cock and the way Gianni kissed me so tenderly and thoroughly was too hard to give up.

I could get used to this.

And that's when my overactive brain decided to take charge as I squirmed in between them before ripping myself from their embraces. I stood, panting, wide-eyed, arms wrapped around my chest, horrified of what I had given in to. "We-" Gianni had told me that it was a one-time thing and then told me this morning that Valentyn had claimed me. Numbers was my game and things weren't adding up again.

Gianni smirked as he padded over to a counter, resuming his work as if he had never stopped. Aside from the obscene bulges in both of the men's trousers, there was no indication that they had been part of anything that just happened.

Dmitri shifted past me, just as the front door opened. "We'll continue this later, Rhys." He placed a chaste kiss on my temple, leaving me confused and horny.

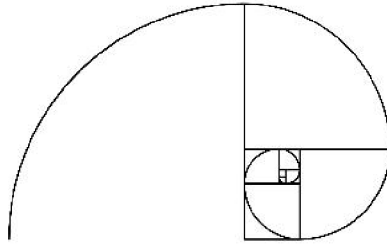
*Continue?*

We had been overcome by desire and need but they wanted to... continue? One could only hope.

And yes, I was going to be ignoring *all* the warning signs and red flags. Men that looked like these three didn't happen, especially not ones that enjoyed cuddling and cleaning up after

our little parties. Gianni had been a welcome surprise but the other two who somehow wanted me just as much? I could suffer a little embarrassment if that's what it took to get a Greek god or three in my bed.

Greedy, was my middle name, and fuck, I'd own it.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### **RHYS**

The heavy stomps of Valentyn entered the hallway, my immediate need to avoid the kitchen taking me to the front door as if to greet the man coming into my home. His expression had tightened since I had last seen him and it took a moment to figure out why when I locked eyes with a small kid peeking out from the back seat of their truck. He looked nearly identical to Valentyn, inquisitive eyes observing everything before him with a smile that radiated purity despite the darkness that surrounded the three men in my house.

*He has a kid?*

For some people, it was probably a turnoff. For me? It showed me that Valentyn had a heart or at least that he was capable of having one. Ada was the exception.

“Is there a kid in your truck?” I didn’t wait for an answer as a frown overtook my face. “It’s weird you’d leave him in the car,” I blurted out, ignoring the heat in my cheeks. Valentyn



grunted at my statement, searching my expression for something. It took me a moment to realize that he was worried I had found out about his kid, waiting for me to react.

He gave me a sheepish smile, running his hands through his hair. “We’re almost done with the estimate and then-”

I shook my head. “Why is there a kid in your truck?” It’s not that I cared but it seemed odd that he had disappeared and now there was a sweet little face staring back at me. The kid threw me a small smile and a wave, opening my heart a little more. Owen and I had never discussed kids but I fucking loved them and that one seemed like he was adorable as fuck. Maybe even more adorable than Tia.

“He won’t be a bother. Just had to pick him up from school.”

It seemed like there was a bigger story there but I wasn’t going to press him on it. I also wasn’t going to have a kid sitting out there while his father was in here, professionalism be damned. “He doesn’t have to stay outside.”

“We’re on a job,” he stated. “I would have taken him home, but we live a little farther out. He’s not going to be any trouble and-”

Valentyn trailed off and I could see that he was worried I’d say something, or fire him, or report him. On top of last night, I knew that this wasn’t exactly the prime time to reveal that there was a kid involved. I could see the desire to fight me on what came out of my mouth, that that kid meant more to him than anything else. I wished Owen had looked at someone like that for me...

“I’m not asking you to *leave*.” The words bundled with a chuckle as I said them, walking around Valentyn and approaching the truck slowly. I knew Gianni and Dmitri weren’t going to finish in the next five to ten minutes and it made no sense for the kid to stay out here. Especially not one as young as that. Ignoring every bit of panic in my body and knowing that I was probably overstepping, I leaned through the back window to catch the kid’s attention. “Hey, wanna come inside?”

The kid stared at me and then grinned, sitting back in his seat. “Dad said to stay here.”

“And I own the house. I’m sure the couch is more comfortable.”

He looked at me and then toward the house where Valentyn was standing, his arms folded across his chest as he gave the kid a pert nod. The kid’s smile widened, his eyes sparkling as he unbuckled and flung himself against my chest when I opened the door. “Let’s go!” The kid threw up a fist as if I were his chariot, his bag bouncing on his back, making me chuckle at his antics as we went inside.

I placed him on the couch, the kid pulling out a workbook from his backpack and immediately ignoring the rest of the world. It was endearing to watch, images of my own fantasy filtering into my head. A child—*my* child—on the couch, giggling and playing with *my* husband as I experimented with a new flavor in the kitchen just before screaming that I had found a proof to support my research. My husband would run

in and try to drag me out of the wormhole I had fallen into, numbers and words written out in batter as I had been too lazy to grab a pen...

*It's never going to happen.*

Trailing back to the kitchen, I glared at Valentyn who seemed uneasy that I had brought his kid inside but if he thought I was just going to be okay with his son in the car... Although, now that I thought about it, I had been a little over the top. Deciding to avoid *that* as well, I walked further into the kitchen, hands tugging at each other. "Do you guys have an estimate yet?" Trying to keep this professional was becoming more difficult the longer these men were in my house but I needed to at least attempt it.

Heat rushed to my cheeks again as Dmitri and Gianni stared at me. Only silence met my words as Valentyn stepped in front of me. "What?" I cried out, cringing. Was this the part where I got reprimanded for succumbing to my urges?

Valentyn smirked. "Paval doesn't listen to many people. He'd have stayed put in the car no matter how many bribes you gave him. He's pretty submissive but he doesn't always *listen*. What did you do?"

I frowned, looking between the three of them. I hadn't done anything. I had told the kid he'd been more comfortable in the living room and then he came with me after his father nodded. That had been it. "Nothing? I-"

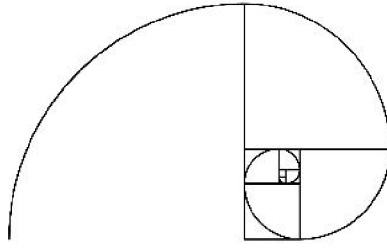
Paval squealed, stepping in between me and his father as he grabbed onto one of my hands. "Dad likes you."

“Excuse me?” I looked at Valentyn, unsure of what to do with that information. What would he do when he found out what happened a few minutes ago? Dmitri had been ecstatic after learning about last night but was Valentyn the same? What about Gianni? Was he really okay with sharing? And what was I supposed to do when I had just found out that all three of these men I had met not even an hour ago *liked* me?

Dmitri pushed up off the counter and approached, the heat from his chest so fucking dangerous when he came within two inches of my side. Valentyn didn't seem phased by how close the Frenchman was. He seemed... intrigued.

“You're very beautiful to look at,” Gianni called out from the other side of the kitchen, embarrassment flooding my face. *He did **not** just say that.* But because my luck was shitty as hell, I wasn't able to find some snarky retort when my door opened again and the nightmare walked in.

Each of the men surrounding me glared in my direction, waiting for an explanation, wondering if I hadn't just led them on into an altercation with a man who had almost become my husband. But one look at my horrified expression should have told them all they needed to know. Unfortunately, kicking Owen out when his ego and his testosterone were threatened would be an ordeal.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### **DMITRI**

Even as much as I told the other two that I hated mundane jobs, I needed it. We all did. The last one had hit a little too close to home and I was still having trouble breathing. There wasn't anything the doctors could do without me having to spend weeks in rehab and we didn't have that kind of time. Our reputation thrived on our ability to pick up a job at the drop of a hat. It wasn't even about the money. We could have retired years ago with what we had in our bank accounts.

Not to mention that Paval didn't need any more loss in his life. He never got to know his parents and losing any of us would crush him or at least I believed it would. The kid was stronger than most adults I knew. Paval had taken my injury pretty well, accepting that 'Papa was sick', although he had elected to sleep next to me for the past few days instead of his own bed.

If things kept going the way they were, we'd have to quit this lifestyle. For Paval's safety and his future.

I rubbed at my chest, taking a deep breath as I gritted my teeth, Valentyn's gaze boring into mine when I looked over. He fucking knew everything about us, when we hurt, when we were happy, when we wanted things... He was our protector in every sense of the word and I loved him for it, however, his insistence that I stay at home went unheard.

Fuck if I was going to lie up on the couch. After a week in bed, I needed something to do. Something *simple* to do.

This job seemed different than most, though. I had been pretty sure that it was another under-the-radar request but Rhys was fucking innocent, adorable even. There was pain hidden in his eyes but there was no fucking way he needed anything other than a kitchen remodel.

And when Gianni had told me just where he and Valentyn had ended up last night, not to mention that Rhys Knight was Gianni's mystery lover boy? I knew this wasn't going to be an ordinary job after—mostly because guys like Rhys were the extra bit of excitement we enjoyed in our relationship. But it was more than that, Paval looked at him in a way I hadn't seen him do since he had lost his dad three years ago. The first time Valentyn had ever dropped to his knees and hugged the kid after his dad had passed, Paval had looked up to him like he could save him from this big bad world.

Paval wasn't looking at Rhys like that, but it was pretty damn close.

In a few hours, Rhys had somehow wedged himself into our lives and I didn't want to let him go, job be damned.

It sealed the deal for me when whoever the fuck wandered in had Rhys picking up the kid and shielding him from the intruder. Something inside of me wanted to rip the newcomer apart for putting that wild look in Rhys' eyes but Valentyn was already on it.

Valentyn stepped around Rhys, drawing him against his chest, a gentle reminder that there were men ready to stand behind him. Too soon? Probably. But Paval's acceptance of Rhys was gold in my eyes. Rhys' back arched slightly, eyes darkening with submission as he tucked Paval just a little bit tighter against his chest.

“Owen, you shouldn't be here. I told you that yesterday.” Rhys' voice shook, his body trembling against our protector. Gianni moved to my side, his jaw pulled tight as if this wasn't the first time he'd seen Owen. I wondered if it had anything to do with why he had disappeared around lunchtime yesterday. I mouthed ‘ex-fiance’ to Gianni and he gave me a quick nod. Ah, so this was the piece of shit.

Owen was a terrible sight for sore eyes, crazy brown hair that clung to his pudgy cheeks with a slim build that didn't boast anything spectacular. However, the aura that surrounded him was anything but safe—twisted, devious, maybe even a little obsessive. I wouldn't have pegged him for someone that Rhys had dated but we had all made bad choices at one time or another.

Owen sighed, eyes darting between the three of us and then back at Rhys before responding. “You were drinking. You

didn't even know what you were doing. I'll take care of this guys, alright? Why don't you go back to bed, Rhys and I'll come-"

Rhys stepped back, even though he couldn't go anywhere, Valentyn's hold tightening against the guy's waist. This wasn't going to end well, what with the Belarusian's savior complex and what seemed like a poor excuse for an inflated ego with regard to Owen.

It also made sense now why we had thought this was a different kind of job. Rhys hadn't put it in, had he? It had been Owen and the seedy feeling I was getting from the guy told me why the name on the request had been Rhys' and not his own.

Owen followed Valentyn's movement as our protector drew Rhys closer, cementing the possessive touch. Owen's brows furrowed, eyes flashing with annoyance. "What the fuck? Could you take your hands off my fiancé?"

"Language," Rhys whispered, his words barely audible. He placed a protective hand on the back of Paval's head, covering one ear with the tip of his fingers. A smile slid onto my face that even amid the tension, he was thinking about Paval in his arms.

Finally, I spoke up, knowing we weren't going to get anywhere if we waited for Owen to get to the point. "Came to visit our boy here," Lies came easy to me and this one made the most sense as I nodded toward Valentyn. "He wanted us to meet his boyfriend."

Owen hawked out a laugh. "You have tools here."



Gianni squeezed my shoulder, a silly grin plastered on his face. We could always count on him to lighten a situation if need be. “V told us to bring everything to look at the kitchen. Said Rhys here was fixing up the place and we couldn’t stay away from a puzzle.”

Rhys was visibly vibrating but I wasn’t sure if it was from fear or embarrassment as he shrunk impossibly further against Valentyn’s chest. God, I wished *I* was behind him, holding him and protecting him from the world. It hadn’t even been an hour and I had it *bad*.

Owen stared at Valentyn and Rhys a little longer, Paval just hanging in Rhys’ arms like there wasn’t this battle of testosterone erupting in the room. “Bullshit. You aren’t dating.”

Rhys whimpered, “Just *go*.” Owen didn’t budge though, ready to start some petty fight in a house that I assumed he didn’t own.

Valentyn twisted Rhys around slightly, both me and Gianni at the edge of our seats, waiting for his next move. Our Belarusian was nothing if not unpredictable. “Do you trust me?” Rhys thought for a moment and then shook his head. Valentyn snorted. “Good boy. Now kiss me.” The words were so quiet I almost missed them. Rhys hesitated before tilting his head up just enough to give him permission.

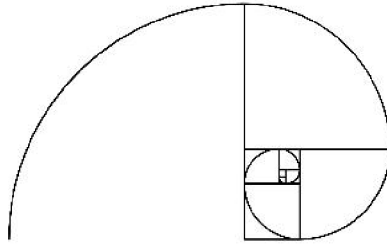
I swear it was like watching fireworks go off as Valentyn lowered his lips to Rhys’, Owen turning bright red at the unexpected public display of affection. I knew how Valentyn

kissed—slow and sensual in stark contrast to his nearly overbearing personality. And it was only a matter of time before...

Valentyn swallowed one of Rhys' delicious little moans, making my cheeks hurt with how wide my smile was.

And there it was, the sound that I needed. The one that told me that this would work. The one that told me that this job was going to be even more troublesome than the last and the last one left me in the hospital.

This one could rip out my heart.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### **RHYS**

Escaping into my room hadn't exactly been the smartest idea after Owen left. I still had to return to the kitchen to get the estimate so they could leave. The worst part was that in my haste I had also brought Paval into my room, the kid now sitting at my side on my bed. He kicked his legs, enjoying the silence for several moments before looking over at me. It was like having a physical, breathing version of Fibo at my side, no need to dip into my pocket to trace those perfect swirls.

“You like my dad.” Like was a strong word. I liked what he did to my body but the man—fuck. I did like him and I'm even sure how that happened in less than 24 hours.

*Is it that fucking obvious?* Trying to sift through my panicked reaction, I realized that I had just made a really, *really* big mess. “I shouldn't have done that.” Dragging them into the confrontation with Owen hadn't been my smartest idea to date either.

“Why? Dad likes you.” Paval stated as if it was just a fact. This time he looked directly at me, smiling as he reached for my hand. I freely gave it but I was still worried about the outcome of all of this. Owen hadn’t left quietly and I just knew that the near altercation would only bring my ex-fiancé back around again to just ‘check in’.

“I just met him.” I was also talking to a 5-year-old about his father and whether or not I liked him.

Paval shrugged, seeming much older than he was. “So? Dad says when you know, you just know.”

Those were big words for such a small kid. I didn’t want to admit that in such a short amount of time, I had fallen for Paval’s father *and* his two other lovers. So, in my adult voice, I all but told Paval to shut up. “And you’re five,” I retorted.

He giggled, covering his mouth to hide the sound. “That doesn’t mean I don’t know.”

*How is this my life?*

This morning, I had been intent on nursing a hangover and reminiscing about the thorough stuffing I had received, before working on my dissertation. Now, I was here, mortified at the dark turn this day had taken. Paval seemed completely oblivious to my warring emotions as he jumped into a fantastical tale of what he was learning at school and all the big words he had learned this week. His enthusiasm was hard to ignore as his hands moved in big gestures, his eyes wide and bright as he spoke.

He jumped off the bed and began recanting the tale that led to why he had ended up in the truck, my heart breaking just slightly for how much Paval had endured at such a young age. It spoke to why he was so well-learned and with support like those men outside, I knew he was wise beyond his years.

“Hey, Pav, can you give us a minute?”

Paval looked up at Gianni currently filling my doorway and grinned before racing off down the hallway. “Of course, Daddy!”

I flinched as he came closer, Gianni kneeling on the floor by my knees, much the same way Owen had done yesterday. The difference was how it made me feel. With Owen, I had felt patronized. With Gianni, I felt important.

I didn't know why but I kind of liked staring down at him.

“It's all a bit unorthodox and I'd be apologizing if I thought you needed it.” Gianni paused as if giving me a moment to refute that statement. When I didn't say anything, he continued. “Rhys, you know that I and Val want you, want more than just last night. I know you felt it in the kitchen with Dmitri. It's not... orthodox but we want *you*, Rhys. If you'll have us. For as long as it lasts.”

It was like he had just asked me if he could have some water from my kitchen rather than inviting me into a fuckfest friends-with-benefits situation including three Greek gods. Gianni had always been a bit blunt but this approach was new. I didn't have an answer to his proposal, especially when they

were creating an estimate for a kitchen I had no money to update.

“You’ll scare the guy,” Dmitri pushed into my room, sitting beside me on the mattress, the foam dipping with the sheer bulk of the man. Heat radiated from his skin but in a way that made me want to do very, *very* naughty things. I also just wanted to sit here with them, their arms wrapped around me as we held each other.

Starved for touch wasn’t just dramatic nonsense. I wasn’t ashamed that I shifted toward Dmitri, sighing when our sides brushed against each other. This was a terrible idea. It wouldn’t end well and yet, I wasn’t really sure I cared.

Gianni placed a hand on my knee, confusing me even more. “Rhys, this isn’t just because of last night and I think you know that.” I swallowed carefully, trying to keep my thoughts from racing. What Gianni was proposing had never been on the table. After he had moved, I hadn’t been expecting him again. And now? He was offering not just himself but Dmitri and Valentyn and fuck, I wanted it. “Babe, only if you want to but I saw the way you responded to the other two and you could use a little more than the plain face piece of shit that is Owen. Tell me I’m wrong.”

While his description of Owen was spot on, I was still a little lost with the hot and cold Gianni seemed to keep giving me. “You’re not wrong but I’m confused. I need it straight. Yesterday, it seemed like it was the end and then you came back, and now....” I trailed off.

He let out a deep sigh, running a hand down his face, regret lingering in his expression. “Rhys, we like you and we want more. It might be selfish but *fuck*.”

Dmitri squeezed my thigh, drawing my attention to him. “What Gia is *trying* to say is that the only reason he didn’t bring you around sooner is that our job entails a certain... edge to them.”

That was even more cryptic but then it clicked. “You’re not really repairmen, are you?”

Gianni forced a smile, “Oh, we are. Just not *only* repairmen.” I fumbled around with that thought, wanting to be mad that Gianni hadn’t ever said anything. Then again, I think I had always known he was a bit dangerous and it was just one of the many reasons he had intrigued me. Gianni watched my expression as I came to terms with their confession before throwing me a wink and standing up. “Right, so, the kitchen’s a bit of a crusher.”

*That’s one way to change the conversation...* It was also Gianni’s way of giving me time to deal with it without both of them crowding my space.

Dmitri had leaned in, wrapping an arm around my waist as if all this was normal. Gianni seemed turned on by the gesture but neither one said anything about it. I shook my head to stay in the present and stop thinking with my dick. “My... uh – Owen set it up. I don’t have the funds right now. I really should have canceled but he didn’t give me your number.”

The Frenchman pressed his lips to my neck, resting there for a few seconds before pulling away to speak. “Fair. We’ll give you the quote anyway just in case you change your mind.”

And just like that, the awkwardness of their proposition faded away as we made our way back into the kitchen, my head tucked a little further against my chest to avoid whatever conversation was going to happen. Paval leaped at me, throwing his arms around my legs as he grinned up at me, mouthing ‘goodbye’.

It was hard to explain how these four individuals had just bulldozed through my house and my heart.

“Val, you find another school?” Dmitri asked as he headed for the door.

I looked up to see Valentyn staring at his phone, hand on the verge of crushing the device. “No one wants to take him in the middle of the semester. He’ll have to go back after the week. Pav can’t stay home by himself and grandma can’t watch him that long.” Paval’s fingers tightened around my thighs, making me wonder how much the kid ended up getting tossed around. If it had anything to do with the dramatic reenactment in my bedroom, I truly felt for him.

Gianni jostled my arm, giggling like a child. It was the first time I actually felt like he was younger than me. “Whatcha doing this week, Rhys? You like kids, right?”

With Pav still wrapped around my legs, I’d say so. I nodded timidly, wondering what I was about to get myself roped into. “Nothing much. Just studying. And yeah, I liked kids. Why?”



“Great!” Gianni clapped his hands together. “You watch Pav and we’ll fix the kitchen.”

“What?” I whisper-yelled, narrowing my gaze at him. “That’s not a fair trade *at all*. I’m not stupid about what that renovation costs.” I also didn’t understand what Gianni was trying to pull or why the kitchen renovation was so important in all this. I didn’t *need* it to be done.

Valentyn approached, boxing me in against a wall of Greek gods. “Would save me a lot of trouble.”

Gianni laughed, “What he *meant* to say is that he’s a fucking hardass and he hates most people. Pav doesn’t even like most people. But you... you’re the golden ticket, aren’t you?”

I swallowed, nervously. “Uh... yeah, I guess? I just don’t need the kitchen done that badly and-”

“We already got half the payment,” Dmitri offered.

“Wait, what?” Where the fuck had Owen gotten that kind of money? I peeled Paval off of me and stepped back, hands raised. They wanted me *that* bad and while I knew this was just a sexual agreement, I could see the longing for something else, something more. I wasn’t going to get my hopes up though.

Gianni shook his head at my antics as he reached forward and dragged me to his chest before kissing me. “Stop thinking so much.”

The child between us giggling drew me back to the present, the horror that I hadn’t kissed Valentyn—his father, settling in.

“I told you that Daddy likes you!” Paval clapped his hands and wiggled around before throwing a fist up in the air like he had won the lottery.

I didn’t understand *any* of that reaction. “But Valentyn is your dad,” I responded, still very much pressed against Gianni’s chest.

Paval grinned at me. “They all are.”

They were... co-parenting? It wasn’t unusual, just uncommon and they had just dragged me into their little family. Gianni released me and gathered Paval up in his arms as Dmitri placed a thick kiss on my temple. Valentyn took his place, cupping my cheeks in his large hands before kissing the bridge of my nose and then lips, supping slow and sweet until I was vibrating and whimpering for more.

“See you bright and early tomorrow morning at 8.”

“What—what am I supposed to do until then?” Why the fuck was I asking *them*?

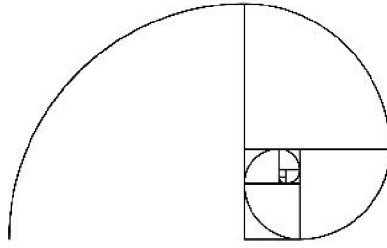
Valentyn gave me a warm expression, kissing me again, his tongue licking my bottom lip until he had me on edge, hands fisted in his shirt. “Rest. Looks like the hangover could use a few more hours of sleep.” And then he was gone, my body surging with the need for release. Fuck the sleep, I needed to relieve the pressure in my pants and then remind myself that I made dumb decisions when my dick was in control.

They worked dangerous jobs and yet, they wanted me.

I had also somehow agreed to babysit and the kitchen renovation was definitely more important than they were letting on.

2 + 2 just... didn't equal five.

None of this was adding up but the bit of reprieve they were offering from this Owen madness was worth it. Hopefully. Or, I was just trading one crutch for another.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### GIANNI

I shimmied into the backseat of the truck, Paval resting against my chest as he mumbled himself to sleep. A chuckle sat at the back of my throat as I watched, wondering if we hadn't just dragged Rhys into something he wasn't ready for. My eagerness usually drove our fourth away and even though I could gauge Rhys' comfort pretty well, this had been something I had been dying for, *for months*.

The extra tidbit about our jobs didn't worry him as much as I thought it would have. Then again, Rhys was a thinker, so things might be different in the morning.

"So, that's Rhys Knight," Dmitri purred as he leaned back in his seat, rubbing his chest. We should have left him at home but he was a stubborn ass most of the time. "Makes sense why you didn't want to move."

"Not just that," I blurted out. It was mostly that. Those beautifully bright red cheeks every time I said something to

catch him off guard. The way he melted in my hands when he came over. The way he seemed to settle when I was around. “His piece of shit ex was an issue. You know that Rhys has called the police on him a few times?”

I bit my lip, realizing that I probably shouldn't have said that in front of two men who would do anything to protect those they deemed important. Valentyn caught my gaze through the rearview mirror before focusing back on the road. It was a miracle Valentyn didn't turn the car around and return to Rhys' house.

The silence grew tense as the cute snores of our kid erupted into the car, Paval murmuring about something unintelligible as he twisted around in his sleep. I smiled at the boy again before looking up at the guys seated in the front of the truck on our way home. “Val, you know that Owen was the one who probably hired us.”

He just grunted, Dmitri stretching obnoxiously as I slapped at his outstretched hands. “I guess this was a job after all. It makes sense.”

I cradled Paval against my chest as the kid wriggled around again. I was so thankful the kid had grown out of his nightmares because having him crawl into my bed every night and kick my back had been a terrible thing to wake up to. “Then why didn't we-” My words trailed off as I looked at Val through the mirror. “Right.”

My mind traveled back to Rhys. We had asked him to be ours, hasty decision as it was. The fact that Paval had accepted

him meant so much more than Rhys could possibly understand. In our line of work, trust was everything, which meant that we'd also have to eventually tell Rhys that continuing the renovation was to investigate the origins of the job itself.

The truck pulled to a stop and I looked up to see that we had arrived back home. Valentyn jumped out and opened my door, arms outstretched for Paval. "Did you see the way Rhys stepped toward me when I touched him?" His eyes were hopeful even if his expression was strained.

I handed off Paval and then jumped out after, nodding. "For once, we weren't the monsters in the room." It was weird, having someone that looked so fucking innocent choose us over someone else.

Valentyn opened the front door as we shed our shoes, moving toward Paval's bedroom to set him down. "It just says that whatever Owen is bringing to that door, the reason he wanted us—Rhys has seen some part of that."

Valentyn tensed and I knew what he was thinking. If he thought for a moment that Rhys was in danger, our newest renovation was going to turn into a sleepover. Unfortunately, someone like Rhys was going to push back on that shit. He didn't seem all that excited to have people encroaching on his territory.

"Val-" I stared, hoping the warning in my voice was able to deter him to some extent but that look in his eyes told me what

I needed to know. Not that I was complaining. I hadn't wanted to leave the house in the first place.

“He intrigues me. No one ever gives a shit about Paval.”

Valentyn wasn't wrong about that either. Everyone worried that Paval wouldn't have the right upbringing, not because he had three fathers, but because he didn't act like a kid. Sure, he enjoyed the occasional blocks or hanging with kids his age but he spent a lot more time drawing and reading. He loved using big words and learning about the world around him. He knew how to handle himself and at five years old, he was a handful.

Most people saw that as neglect rather than a smart kid.

Still, this was a bit too soon, wasn't it? Dmitri stepped in as we watched Paval curl into a little ball and start snoring. “His choice of family isn't the best.” Dmitri's voice was thick and deep with his accent, Valentyn slapping the back of his head as an immediate response.

“I don't judge you by your family. Don't judge Rhys.”

Fucking hell. It had been a long time since Valentyn had fallen this hard. Granted, with him, love didn't look romantic the same way it did with me. The fact that he wanted to protect Rhys was enough. “You feel that strongly? We just met him.”

“I do.” Valentyn punctuated before leaving the room. Dmitri stayed behind with me, looking for guidance and finding none.

“Look, D, it's a lot and it's fast but I don't think Val's wrong. No, hear me out. We were both in that kitchen, watching him

respond to us like normal men. There was no job, no threat, nothing else to worry about. Just you and him.”

“No fucking way. You’re saying he might be a golden ticket? You can’t know that shit after one day. Neither of you can.”

I smirked, casing him in against the wall despite him being taller than me. “He didn’t even flinch when you mentioned our jobs. Tell me I’m wrong, D. Look me in the eyes and tell me I’m wrong.”

We had been looking for someone like Rhys for *years*. We weren’t sure we’d ever find someone, a few people coming damn close until the thrill of three men wore off. However, when I had found Rhys? I just knew. As off-limits as I claimed him to be, I just fucking knew that Rhys was endgame.

“If you know, you know. Right? Dmitri,” I purred as I pressed a kiss to his lips and then his chin before nibbling on his jaw. “Tell me I’m wrong,”

His breath was hot on my skin as he arched against me, hands fisting at his sides. “You’re not wrong,” Dmitri finally said, giving in. He let out a deep breath as he relaxed against the wall. “So, we renovate the kitchen, and then what? The first payment—”

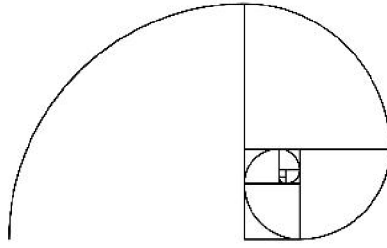
I cut him off. “We’ll use this renovation as a distraction from everything else as we find out what’s really going on.” We wouldn’t be taking the job if it was a real one anyway. That, I had already decided, especially if it involved Owen.



There was just something about him, something about Rhys that stood out. The need to protect him, to love him, to make him understand that he was more than just a passing thought. I had no idea what it was but if Valentyn hadn't chosen Rhys, I would have eventually brought him around.

And that thought terrified me.

Because I was pretty sure Rhys had been caught up in shit he didn't understand and even worse—didn't know was coming.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### **RHYS**

They hadn't been joking about showing up at 8 am the next morning, all three of them gutting my kitchen as Paval ran around my living room using his crayons as imaginary swords. He didn't resemble the same kid from yesterday but I wasn't complaining. Paval was enjoying his five-year-old self and I was loving the absence of silence in my house.

Gianni had shown up with a dozen assorted pastries and enough coffee to jack a racehorse. I had happily obliged, stuffing half a cheese danish into my mouth at the same time all three of them burst out laughing. When I had questioned it, horrified that something was wrong, Gianni quickly corrected those thoughts.

*Seeing that kind of happiness on your face is everything, Rhys, he had said.*

I retreated to my office anyway, dragging Paval with me to make sure he stayed out of the kitchen. I was a little confused

about how I got roped into babysitting but it felt normal. Domestic. *Nice*. Between all the little kisses and touches before I retreated and Paval happily drawing in his notebook while he sprawled out on my couch, it almost felt like this could be my new reality.

If it wasn't for the fact that the kitchen renovation felt like it was the result of something else entirely. Why had Owen been so adamant to take care of it? He had been so sure Valentyn and I weren't dating, not because of any warped obsession but because it seemed like there was a different connection between Kolas Renovations and the kitchen project that was currently underway. Not to mention that Owen had apparently dropped a deposit. With Gia's bomb yesterday, things were starting to fit together.

I took a deep breath and reached for Fibo in my pocket out of habit but realized I didn't need it. For once, I was okay.

A knock on my door pulled me out of the algorithm I had been playing with for the better part of an hour, not annoyed like I usually was when Owen appeared in the doorway. Gianni leaned against the archway, his attention focused on their kid before he looked over me. "We're ordering lunch. Want something?"

I shook my head. "I'll just get something from the fridge," I mumbled. I didn't want to be a bother and I already felt weird stuffing my face with sugar in front of them. Owen had always told me that I was spiraling when I did shit like that and while

I knew these men weren't anything like him, I couldn't shake the feeling.

“Babe, I looked in there and you don't really have shit other than pastries and alcohol.” There was no judgment in his words. “Come on, Dmitri's putting in the order.”

I opened my mouth to protest again when Gianni ushered Paval to head down the hall and then all but dragged me toward the kitchen. Barefoot, a little underdressed, and clutching my pen against my chest, I stood in front of Valentyn and Dmitri with Gianni at my back. His hands fell to my shoulders, massaging lightly before gesturing to the menu in Dmitri's hands.

Paval had crawled up Dmitri's side, giggling at one of the entrees before gesturing me to come forward. This whole thing felt a little odd, like this wasn't the first time we had done this and it scared me how easy it was. The heat against my back though made it hard to concentrate on what I wanted. I pointed to two things—a large entrée of sesame chicken and those sugar donuts that were just dough and a bag of sugar—, Dmitri pulling out his phone to place the order.

Valentyn stepped up in front of me, pinching my chin between his fingers. “Why do you look so worried, Rhys?” I trembled at the command in his eyes. Gianni nuzzled his nose against the back of my neck, pushing me to answer the question.

“The order was okay?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Valentyn asked, tilting my chin just enough for our eyes to meet.

Dmitri hung up before returning to my side, frowning at the conversation taking place. Paval had his head resting on Dmitri’s shoulder, eyes closed, not a care in the world. “Did someone make you think what you love and enjoy isn’t okay? I saw the way you flinched at breakfast too. Was it Owen?”

I didn’t answer that, but I didn’t have to. They all seemed to just understand it. The silence morphed into something uncomfortable as I fiddled with my hands, debating on whether to return to my office or find a place in the living room with Paval. However, Dmitri seemed to have that covered, Gianni offering to pick up the food moments later.

Instinctively, I moved toward the door, unsure if I wanted to stay in my house with two men that I wanted but didn’t really know yet. Gianni grinned at my attempted escape, placing a gentle hand on my chest. “As much as I’d love a partner, babe, I think Valentyn would love to have a few words with you.”

My eyes went wide, my entire body stiffening from fear. “About what?” I hissed.

“Hey, deep breaths. The kitchen renovation and maybe also about that night and the... offer I proposed.” He threw me a wink as if that was supposed to help calm my nerves. It didn’t. “He won’t *eat* you. Well, unless you ask him. You don’t have to stay.”

“I’ll... I’ll stay.”

“Good boy,” he whispered before slipping out the door, my cheeks heating up with those two words. He didn’t use that phrase often but it made my dick twitch and I knew that if the same words fell from Valentyn or Dmitri’s lips, I’d be a goner.

The door fell shut, the silence of the room returning as I realized who I had been left with. Strangely, I felt safe but still wary of what was going to happen now that we were going to have ‘the talk’. A squeak fell from my lips as Valentyn called my name, my head bowed as I approached. “Shit, Rhys, I’m not going to hurt you.” When I cringed, a growl rumbled through his chest before he cut it short. “Sorry.”

I didn’t miss the ‘I’ll rip him six ways from Sunday’ that tumbled from his lips before he gestured me into the kitchen. Dmitri was leaning against the fridge again, Paval passed out on his chest. For the second time since I had met the kid, he actually resembled the 5-year-old that he was, his mess of curls drooped over his face and one of his hands firmly secured around Dmitri’s ear lobe.

The dangerous aura that surrounded them—Gianni included, if I was honest with myself—seemed to dim the longer that I saw Paval between them. Although, Ada’s rough edges hadn’t softened with Tia’s arrival. She was still, very much, a bitch. Valentyn let out a deep sigh as he waited for me to come a little closer, his intense gaze making me shiver with a mixture of intrigue and need.

“We spoke a little before about the renovation for the kitchen, Rhys but I think it’s time to really get down to the

basics, yeah?” I nodded and he continued. This felt oddly like an interrogation all of a sudden. “Was it really for the kitchen?”

“What?” I frowned and looked between the both of them, wondering what they were insinuating. “I think so? Owen scheduled it and now that I know he paid half upfront, I think that’s why he was here last night but I don’t-”

Valentyn cut me off. “So, you had no idea how extensive the job was supposed to be?”

My frown deepened because it seemed like there was a double meaning to his words. Something wasn’t adding up, both of them anticipating an answer that I didn’t truly know the question to. “Um, I... it... I told Owen we didn’t have the money. It fell off my radar and I meant to cancel but then it was you and Gianni and I-” I trailed off as I ran a hand through my hair, the other one stuffed in my pocket as I traced my favorite swirls. Fibo to the rescue. After a deep breath, I started again. “What are you really asking?”

“I’m guessing you don’t know that he called again last night to check on the status of the renovation?” He asked and I shook my head. “Did you even know we were coming?”

“Not really. Owen kind of handled house repairs but we’re not together anymore and haven’t been for months.” Valentyn still hadn’t answered my question regarding what this was about and Dmitri’s stoic expression wasn’t providing any answers. I took a step back, running my fingers through my hair again. “Is this about Owen? Did he do something? Is that

why you're here? I don't... you're not one of them, are you?" I knew I wasn't making any sense but Owen would come back with a few bruises here or there and these men absolutely could have been the cause.

I didn't think they *would* be but it was a possibility.

Valentyn dragged me toward him, shushing me with a simple kiss on the forehead as he wrapped his arms around my back. I immediately melted into his chest. "Is it supposed to be this fucking easy?" I mumbled.

"What?"

"I didn't even know you two days ago and now, I'm here—wanting more and..." I cut off my train of thought, not sure where I wanted to go with it.

Dmitri chuckled, a warm hearty sound that made me relax even further. He moved toward my side, catching my attention even as I pressed myself against Valentyn's chest. "You're allowed to be selfish, Rhys. We all are in our own ways. Paval gets three fathers. We each have multiple men that love us."

"Love?" I squeaked, unable to fathom that. I thought I had been in love with Owen and even before that, I definitely *liked* a few of the boyfriends I had had growing up. But love?

Valentyn tightened his hold around me, nodding. "It'll come in time. Maybe not with us, but there will be someone out there who will love you to the depths of your heart." Another kiss was pressed to my temple. "And maybe I'm a little selfish thinking that it might be us."



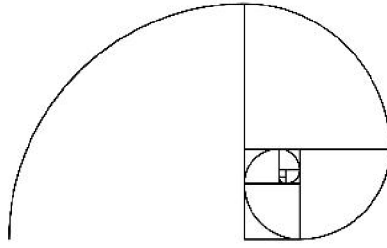
Dmitri grinned at that declaration. “I’m glad Gianni found you, Rhys.”

“Why? I’m just a statistician.”

“Rhys,” Valentyn purred, the rumble in his chest running through me and settling in my pants. “You’re much more than your numbers. I hope one day you can see that.”

I wanted to believe that, even if I realized that they had somehow still not answered my questions about the kitchen renovation that seemed to be anything but Owen’s involvement. I was sure they were connected somehow, including the darkness that swarmed around these men. It would only be a matter of time before I figured it out. I just hoped that it didn’t interfere with my work and didn’t drag me any closer to the shit that Owen somehow kept bringing to my door.

I should have had more of a problem with how comfortable I was not knowing the true nature of their jobs but my heart was charging full steam ahead and I was inclined to follow it. Just once, I hoped that I could trust more than my numbers.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### **RHYS**

They left shortly after lunch, not once making a joke about how I stuffed my face with three sugar donuts at a time. Gianni stole the bag before I could finish the last set, pointing to the lunch entrée I had ordered and demanded that I take a few bites of ‘real food’. I grumbled playfully through several bites, Paval dancing around my living room until Valentyn shot him a glare to sit down.

We sat huddled together and I couldn’t help the giggles that slipped through my lips as Paval’s happiness seeped into my living room. Leftovers were stored in my fridge as they doled out kisses and silent promises to return tomorrow. I still hadn’t been able to ask them about this renovation but there would be time again in the morning.

I’d make sure of it.

Paval hugged my thighs tight before leaving, my heart constricting just a little as I waved goodbye. Dmitri caught me

as the others headed out to the truck, his long fingers digging into my chin as he held my gaze. “You gonna be alright?”

I nodded, giving him a small smile. “Yeah, I think so. I’ve got some schoolwork I have to finish.”

“And not what I was asking. You need anything, you call us, alright?”

A frown replaced my smile as my brows furrowed. “I can call 911.” What could they do that the police wouldn’t? Even as I asked myself that question, I cringed.

He snorted at my reaction. “I’m serious, Rhys. Something happens, you call us.”

“What is this truly about?”

The Frenchman gave me a long look before releasing my jaw. “Hopefully, it’s nothing. We just want you to be safe. Lock the door behind us, Rhys.”

More cryptic words that I didn’t understand and yet I felt safe enough to obey and ignore the outside world if even for a little bit. There would always be tomorrow to ask my questions.

Laptop whirring to life, I unlocked the safe and pulled out my proofs and algorithms for the first time in two days. For a moment, it was entirely silent in my house as I sat in my computer chair, swiveling around to see the emptiness of my home.

For years, that’s all I had wanted. To be surrounded by numbers and silence. People lied. They cheated. They hurt

others. Numbers were safe. They either worked or didn't and in most cases, figuring out another path, they ended up working. After having those four loveable men in my house, things changed.

Numbers didn't fill the same void as they had before. I reached into my pocket and pulled out Fibo, running my fingers along the swirls and while it provided a bit of peace, it was nothing in comparison to having Paval's trust or Gianni's adoration or seeing Valentyn and Dmitri's desire as I gorged myself on sugar donuts.

They were small things.

But they were *everything*.

A smile overtook my face as I set Fibo aside and focused on the numbers, knowing that with a bit of focus, I could waste away the day. Tomorrow would come sooner and I'd see them again. I had finally found something I loved just as much as numbers and sugar.

My thoughts drifted to their jobs again, my curiosity too hard to ignore as I searched 'Kolas Renovations'. A phone number popped up with a location that led to the local post office. Thousands of reviews showed up as I clicked on their page, eyes wide as everyone praised Valentyn and his men for their thorough work.

They came highly recommended even if I had never heard of them before a few days ago. Continuing to scroll, I stopped when one of the reviews didn't seem to be talking about construction, renovations, or anything remotely *legal*.

*Kolas and his men really came through, retrieving that item for me. Would have been better if the opposition had been completely eliminated but I thoroughly enjoyed the hospital visit. 10/10 would hire again but here's to hoping I won't need them again.*

I sifted through each sentence, realizing that not only was this review *not* for the repairman part of the business, but that Valentyn or one of the others had sent someone to the hospital during the job. I swallowed nervously as I continued to scroll, picking out a few other reviews that described other, lethal situations, some of them eluding to death and others just thanking Valentyn for his help.

It was finally adding up. The dangerous aura that surrounded them. I needed to call someone and tell them about this dangerous group of men that were dealing justice beneath the law—if it was justice they were dealing. However, I must have been broken because I wasn't scared and I didn't want to report them. I was intrigued. I had questions and I needed to know more about the hands that had touched me...

My lips curled up slightly at how much I still wanted those three to return.

My phone buzzed in my other pocket, and I slid it out, scowling at the unknown number. Blocking his number or changing mine had always done fuck all so ignoring it was my best bet.

<<*Hey, babe, you're not picking up my calls.*>> His text rolled through.

I let out a bitter laugh as I immediately began packing up my work, talking to myself out loud. “That’s because I don’t fucking want to.” I stuffed my papers back into the lockbox and changed the code out of habit, picking something that only I would understand. Something new. Something regarding the four men who had a hold of my heart.

My phone rang again, one of Owen’s old numbers popping up on the screen. The call ended abruptly before his name flashed on the device again. *What the fuck?* He had been really over the top lately but this was a bit much, even for him. Two seconds later there was a knock on the door.

*There’s no fucking way...*

The clock read 9 p.m., which meant I had been stuffed in my office for nearly a full workday. I didn’t feel like I had accomplished much, after being distracted by the information I had pulled up on my men. Still, no one I knew would show up at my door this late without a call.

Several metallic clicks rang through the hallway, the horror that my lock was somehow being undone settling in my chest.

*What the-*

Stupidly enough, I stepped into the hallway as the door opened, Owen looking around frantically before catching my eyes. He carried two shopping bags with him as if he had just stopped by the store on his way home. “Oh, babe. I was so worried.”

I froze, hoping that this was just a terrible nightmare rather than my new reality. Having to cower in fear that this man was always going to find a way into my house wasn't a way to live.

“You weren't answering so I just came in and-”

A frown replaced my fear and confusion. “You don't even have a key.”

“No, you took it.”

He answered my question without even knowing it, the idea that he had picked the lock terrifying me. Gianni had done the same thing and I had thanked him for it. Were they really that different? Was I trading one monster for three? “Then how the fuck did you get in?” I cursed as my voice wobbled but grateful that Owen hadn't seemed to notice.

“It wasn't that difficult. Did you really think that would stop me?”

My gaze widened at the crazy look that passed through his eyes as I began to dial 9-1-1. Owen shouted for me not to call anyone, just saying that he had been worried something had happened with those men in my house.

“It's not your house. Why do you care? They came to look at the kitchen.” *I think*. Dmitri's last words, Valentyn's approach to the kitchen renovation, and the reviews I had found made me think otherwise. My thumb hovered over the 9, knowing that it wouldn't do any good. If an officer showed up, the best thing that would happen is them asking Owen to leave. He'd

be back within the hour or spin some story that he was just doing a welfare check. Somehow, law enforcement believed his elaborate lies over my terrified truths.

“I get it. I went about everything wrong and I just... things will be different, alright? Rhys, *please*.” His eyes were wild as he stepped forward, giving me a small grin as if that was going to repair everything he had broken.

That didn't make any sense. He'd been terrorizing me for a while, constantly trying to 'apologize' but nothing had changed since the restraining order had been filed, a restraining order I hadn't exactly mentioned to the men who left earlier. I knew Gianni knew about it in some part but if they knew the whole story, I was pretty sure they wouldn't have left. Pretty sure.

My eyes scanned my office for something to use against him as I spoke, trying not to let my voice waver. The moment he realized I was scared, it would be game over. “How? Things were also different then. They were always fixed. You were always going to stop doing whatever it was that you were doing. But what was it? What was so important? The bruises? The cuts? The secrecy? Do you even fucking teach?” I took a deep breath, fisting my hands at my sides. “Why are you in my fucking house?”

When his brows furrowed in answer, I knew I shouldn't have asked that question. I had had enough psychology classes to know that I shouldn't be poking the beast but running away from it.



Owen didn't step toward me but I knew there weren't many places out of here. In fact, the only real *exit* was my front door or a window. Trying to bolster my confidence, I swiped a piece of metal off the table by the door, grimacing when I realized it was a measly letter opener. "Look, I'm glad things have changed for you but I have a boyfriend now." *Three.*

He laughed, stepping closer as I took a step back, running through my options. The bedroom windows were large enough to jump out of but they were a bitch to open. I wouldn't have enough time.

His voice tore me out of my failed plans. "And you're lying, just trying to make me jealous. I get it. The gig's up though. I know they were here for the job. You should have told me and I would have handled it." It was true. Owen always handed things like that but it wasn't because I couldn't. It was just because I never cared.

"It's *just* a kitchen remodel," I reminded him, not convincing myself at all.

"It's not!" He bit his lip as if he hadn't meant to say that, the truth finally coming out. The fact that Owen was adamant about being the point person on this renovation even when we were no longer together was suspicious as fuck.

"Listen to me, babe."

I was going to be doing no listening as I thrust the letter opener in front of me, hoping it would stop his slow advance. Metal shined beneath the dim lighting. It was a good thing he was a few feet away from me or there would have been blood

everywhere. “Get. The. Fuck. Out. Of. My. House.” I silently applauded myself for keeping my voice steady.

Everyone said I was spiraling but the adrenaline running through my veins was the only thing keeping me standing right now. When Owen started toward me with no intention of leaving, I ran. Of course, my fucked up brain took me *away* from the front door and farther down the hall, to a bedroom we had once shared. I was smart enough to remember that there was one door in my house that had more than one lock, one that was physically impossible to open from the outside unless the deadbolt was undone.

I took a sharp left and slipped into the basement, doing up the deadbolt with trembling fingers, my ragged breathing telling me that a panic attack was on its way. Owen banged on the door, a scream tearing from my throat as I did the last lock. *Too close.*

“Babe, stop being irrational. It’s not that serious. Look, I’ll just wait for you out here so we can talk.”

Horror and fear swarmed me as I realized that Owen very well would stay right there and wait for me to emerge. I’d seen him wait for hours just to *talk* and it dawned on me that while he might not have always been physically abusive, he was absolutely emotionally abusive. My phone was still clutched in one hand, the letter opener discarded somewhere when I had been doing up the deadbolt.

“Talk about what?” I whispered.

“Oh, *sweetheart*,” his patronizing voice came again. “About the engagement, the house, your project.” His words trailed off as his footsteps disappeared down the hall, the familiar squeak of my office door reaching my ears. I pressed my ear against the door, Owen’s curses streaming through as metal clanged against metal. It took a moment for the sounds to register before I realized he was trying to get into my safe.

My heart dropped into my stomach as I leaned back. The entire relationship had just been for this? For my dissertation or was there something I was missing?

Owen’s footsteps pattered down the hallway in the other direction, but I knew he wasn’t leaving. He was just biding his time because I couldn’t stay down here forever. After all, the basement was nothing more than a cellar.

My nerves were shot as I sat down on one of the steps, trying to figure out what I was supposed to do. Calling the police would just have one of the detectives coming to the house, Owen sweet-talking them and telling them that I somehow locked myself in the basement. If I resisted, Owen would then tell them about the drinking and the erratic behavior, twisting my sense of freedom into the idea that I was harmful to myself.

The *stress* of my degree as Owen liked to call it.

I didn’t want everyone to know how bad things were, either. Owen had been sweet once upon a time and I guess that’s why I zoomed past all of the red flags until it was too late. Ada was

out of the question. Liam could help but it wouldn't be fast enough...

There was one number I could call but I wasn't sure if we were close enough for that. Sure, there had been a lot of groping in the kitchen earlier but not enough for me to call in a rescue. However, they had dealt with Owen already once before.

I also didn't have that many options.

Owen called from the kitchen, "Babe, I'm making some lasagna, alright? I'm sure you haven't had anything to eat. Oh and mac n cheese! And your show is on! Game of Thrones, right?"

The switch was fucking insane. He had stormed in here, uninvited, and now he was acting like he used to, like when we were dating. I didn't even like Game of Thrones, though.

Settling against the wall, I redialed the number that Dmitri had given me. There was some lingering doubt that all three of those men were wrapped up in the same craziness that Owen was and yet they were the only ones that were capable of coming to my aid in my warped mind. I just hoped Dmitri hadn't been lying about calling him for *any* reason.

They were my last hope.

"Hello?" The voice of a groggy Frenchman answered, his yawn something so fucking delicious that I almost forgot the terror running through my veins. *Almost.*

“Um, yes.” *Well, that was fucking stupid.* “Help.” The words weren’t coming to me, my throat closing, and the panic finally starting to emerge. I was vibrating like a motor, teeth chattering as I tried to calm myself long enough to speak again. “He’s here,” I whispered as if that was enough information to do anything with.

There was a moment of silence before I heard scuffling and another grunt, most likely Valentyn. Dmitri started speaking again. “How the fuck did he get in? Shit! Where are you? Are you safe?”

I ignored the first part, feeling like it wasn’t for me, and answered the last two questions. “The basement and yes.”

Another moment of silence, more scuffling, and a slam of a door.

“Stay there, Rhys. Don’t fucking move. We’ll be right there. And whatever you do, don’t hang up the goddamn phone.”

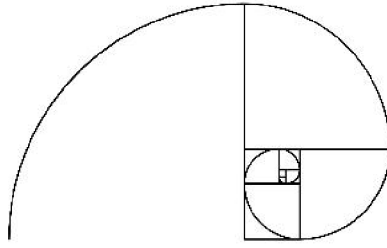
There were no questions asked, no demeaning remarks, and no trying to tell me that it was nothing to worry about. Despite how dangerous these men could be, they put me first, packed themselves up, and were going to rescue me from a man I couldn’t seem to get rid of.

If that didn’t mean something, I didn’t know what did.

“Rhys! Dinner is almost done. Did you want chicken or, oh! You have leftover Chinese. I haven’t had sesame chicken in a while...” Owen continued talking to himself as I shuddered, a whimper escaping from my lips.

I cradled the phone against my ear, content to hear Dmitri's breathing on the other side. Unfortunately, with how quiet I was being, I also heard Valentyn's lead foot and the murmur of a deadly promise. "When we get there, I'm going to rip his head from his shoulders. And I swear to god, if there's one goddamn scratch on Rhys' head, I will burn the motherfucking place down."

Those words shouldn't have made me feel special. They shouldn't have made me feel loved. And they sure as hell shouldn't have made me believe that maybe, just maybe Valentyn, Dmitri, and Gianni meant more than just the opportunity to be their temporary fourth.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### **RHYS**

I stayed on the phone, shaking as a new wave of tears overtook me, my mind spiraling out of control.

“Stay with me,” Dmitri uttered again. Valentyn’s angry curses and Gianni’s soothing voice in the background helped keep me present amidst Owen’s disturbing chatter. A knock on the door came again, drawing out a scream as I scrambled further into the cellar, pressing myself up against the stone wall in the far corner. I was still in plain sight if Owen somehow found his way down here but for now, the darkness was like a warm, wet blanket.

“Rhys?”

“I’m... I’m here.”

“You’re doing so well. Three minutes, alright?”

I nodded and then mumbled a yes, whimpering and hoping that Valentyn would actually follow through and rip Owen to shreds. Before tonight, I had never actually been this terrified

of my ex. After today though, I never wanted to see Owen again.

“Alright, sweetheart, we’re coming through the front door. You’re going to hear a lot of loud noises, alright?” I mumbled another yes, doors slamming and something that sounded an awful lot like the click of a hammer ringing in my ears. “Don’t hang up and don’t undo the bolts until I say pomegranate.”

I choked on a laugh, “Pome – pome-”

I couldn’t even get the word out. Dmitri chuckled. “Yes. Something odd enough for you to know it’s me. Ready? Count with me, Rhys.” My voice wobbled as he counted down from three, splintering wood and Owen yelling echoing through the earpiece. Curses were slung through the living room, Owen quieting immediately when I heard a lone shot released into my house. *Is he dead?*

Steps prodded down the hall, shivers running down my spine as I huddled against the stone, my knees pulled against my chest, waiting with bated breath for my rescue. I was *pretty* sure that I hadn’t just invited more darkness into my house, that these men were going to save me rather than drag me into more shit. I did know one thing though—I trusted *way* too easily.

The footsteps stopped and then I heard the secret word. “I can’t,” I whispered, unable to connect Dmitri’s soothing voice with the safety he was providing. The only thing I could think of was that when I opened that door, Owen would be on the other side.



“Sweetheart, Owen is taken care of.”

“Is he dead?” I asked, not sure of what answer I wanted.

A pregnant pause met my question before Dmitri answered. “Just incapacitated. You can come out now.”

And as much as I wanted to, I just... couldn't. A sob tore from my throat as I curled up into a ball, rocking myself back and forth for comfort.

“What's going on?” Gianni's voice could be heard from the earpiece. “Shit, Rhys? We can't get through the deadbolt.”

“I can't,” I muttered again, feeling like a failure. My math couldn't help now. Nothing could. My saviors were here and I couldn't muster up enough strength to let them in. The air shifted around me as a screech erupted into the cellar, the slow slide of the tiny window at ground level raising my hackles.

Two deep blue eyes peered through the small opening, Valentyn holding Paval across his chest as the kid clung to him. I stared in disbelief at the duo, Valentyn smiling down at my crouched position. “It's alright, sweetheart. You can go up the stairs now.”

I didn't move though, paralyzed by fear. Gianni and Valentyn switched off with warm words and while I felt safe again, I couldn't find the energy to move. “Why didn't you call 911?” I finally asked.

Valentyn sighed. “You wouldn't have called us if you wanted 911.”

Paval squirmed in his father's hold, "I can do it." A silent conversation passed between them, Paval reaching up to drag his fingers down his father's face. A torrent of emotions ran through Valentyn's gaze before he released his son, the little boy shimmying through the open window like he had done it a billion times. Valentyn slowly lowered him until Paval wiggled to be let go, the small thump of his feet making me gasp with something akin to relief.

Paval ran over to me, arms wide as he launched himself at my chest, burying his face in my neck. "I told Daddy I could do it."

I didn't even know what to do. The kid was *here* and he was comforting *me*. I wrapped my arms around him and held him tight, the phone abandoned on the floor as Gianni started speaking. "Paval, baby, you got him?"

"He needed me."

Such a small, innocent sentence but Paval wasn't wrong. I had needed someone, someone who could drag me out of the despair taking over my mind.

"Bring him up, sweetheart. You guys can't stay down there." Paval nodded but didn't answer as he crawled off my lap and tugged at my hand. I hesitated again but looking over at the window, Valentyn's reassuring gaze still focused on me gave me the last push I needed. Following Paval silently, I held tight onto his little fingers as we climbed the stairs, my body still trembling as I fought with the locks.

It felt like a lifetime as each bolt was undone, the clang of metal ringing in my ears. Paval shifted his weight toward me, leaning against my side as I continued. He truly was my real-life Fibo, keeping me away from the panic that always tried to take hold of me.

When the last one was undone, the door swung open and Gianni stole Paval from me, Valentyn dragging me toward him. A thin layer of sweat covered him, as if he had run to meet me at the door and I was all too grateful.

Paval patted Gianni's cheeks, sparing one extra glance at me. I had no idea if Paval understood what was going on here or if he was truly just that innocent. "Daddy says that sometimes someone has to be strong. We're a family and I could help." He beat his chest with one hand, a smile spreading across his cheeks before it disappeared. "You're safe now."

I short-circuited, unable to wrap my head around how calm Paval was. "How-" I knew it was stupid but I clung to Valentyn, wrapping my legs around his waist as I cried into his neck. The man held me through the tears, walking me toward my bedroom and away from the chaos. It wasn't until he had laid me on the bed that I realized my nails had dug into his shoulders, drawing blood.

I opened my mouth to apologize but Valentyn shook his head, kneeling by my bed as a firm hand ran through my hair, the other one gripping my waist. My hands clutched at his shirt as sobs continued to burn in my chest, tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Rhys, fuck, what happened after we left?” His eyes softened the longer he stared at me, Valentyn shifting closer with every breath until he was climbing onto my mattress and pulling me against him, my face pressed against his chest. The safety of his embrace calmed my unrest as we lay there in silence. Mumbling from the living room piqued my interest as I looked up to him for an explanation. “Got your call and we all just piled into the car. Didn’t even know Pav was awake when we left the car. O-” I shuddered at the start of Owen’s name, Valentyn quickly using something else. “The fucker was dead in the water when we came in. Shocked that we were here but he’s been dealt with.”

“Dealt with?” I wasn’t sure what I would do if I walked into my living room and saw the remnants of a crime scene on my living room floor.

“He’s not coming back again, Rhys. And we’re updating your security system. Fuck, that was too close.” He kissed my forehead. “How the fuck did he get in?” His voice churned with anger, the words laced with lethal intention that made my blood heat with desire.

“I...” I took a deep breath, my frayed nerves settling. “I took his key when he came yesterday but he picked the lock somehow. He’s never this obsessive. I don’t know what’s going on but he came in and I... he made me uncomfortable and then he came at me. I just ran. The wrong way.” I left out the part about my program, although it seemed like it was all connected.

He chuckled. “There’s not a wrong way if you’re still alive. But you’re safe now.”

“Am I?” I squeaked. This *thing* between us had started less than forty-eight hours ago and it already felt like it had been years. It was comfortable and beautiful and everything I wanted.

Valentyn searched my expression, “You found something, didn’t you?” I nodded, not sure if I was supposed to explain or if he would just understand that I now knew a little more about the danger they brought with them. “We definitely aren’t the good guys, Rhys but don’t ever question your safety with me. You will *always* be a priority. Now, I’m going to sleep in here with you unless you want one of the others.”

It wasn’t a question—they weren’t going to leave me alone.

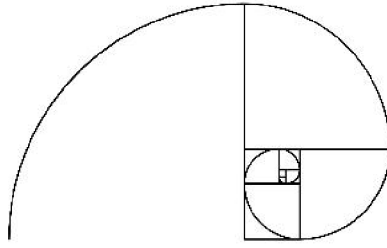
“I should talk to Paval first,” I started as I began to sit up. “He will-”

Valentyn pulled me back down. “And he can hear everything you have to say tomorrow. Right now, we’re going to sleep while the other two fix your door. And your windows. He’s not going to get in here ever again. Now, Rhys, answer my question.”

The command in his voice was all too firm to ignore, not that I wanted to. “You,” I breathed, snuggling closer to him as his arms wrapped around me just a little tighter.

“Good boy. Now, sleep. Everything else can wait.”

And I did. I closed my eyes and passed out against his chest. And for the first time in weeks, there wasn't a nightmare to greet me, just pure bliss as I held onto my goddamn savior. A man could get used to this, the safety and warmth and even love that they brought into my empty house.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

### VALENTYN

His cries gutted me as he trembled against my chest, his hands balled into fists as he tried to fight away the demons. I wrapped my arms around him a little tighter, pressing my lips to his forehead, hoping that my touch alone would help him settle.

But he didn't know me.

Hell, less than 48 hours ago, I hadn't even known who Rhys Knight was. He hadn't been on my radar—for genuine house construction or the darker, less-than-legal side of my business. He was just an NPC of the life we had chosen.

And yet... something told me that he meant more than that, not just to me and my men, but also to a world I was hoping he wasn't a part of.

When he had called this evening and Dmitri rudely kicked me out of bed, I hadn't known what to do with the shock on my man's face. And once I did find out *why* Rhys was calling,

the only thing I could think of was making sure Owen understood who he had messed with. I knew two facts now—one, that the job had never been for Rhys but Owen. And that Owen was fucked in the head if he thought we were going to let this abuse continue.

My hands rubbed up and down his back as I wished I could slip into his head and fight away those nightmares. I had never once been pushed into a situation like that but Gianni had. He didn't talk about those memories but I had seen the panic attacks and the destructive behavior that came from them when we first met.

I didn't wish that on Rhys. Or anyone.

“Mmhm,” Rhys mumbled as his eyelids fluttered open, his eyes dark with worry and panic. I still wanted to rip Owen limb from limb for the look he had placed in this man's eyes but we were professionals and Owen seemed like a person people would miss.

“Hey, go back to sleep. You're safe.”

He shook his head, “Can't sleep.” His lips pursed at the same time his back arched, those beautiful eyes boldening to their regular color. He looked like a fucking meal just pressed against me, ready for the taking but our first time alone wasn't going to be after a traumatic experience.

Rhys leaned closer, attaching his lips to my collarbone and sucking, heat licking up my spine. I tried to stop the interest but my cock was front and center, thickening in my pants. This wasn't the time. Rhys noticed immediately, gasping as his



attention to my collarbone continued, one of his hands dipping between us to cup me through the fabric.

“Shit, Rhys. We can’t.” He froze, the resulting disappointment in his eyes as he pulled away making me feel like an asshole. “No, I want you. So fucking bad, sweetheart.” I stole a kiss from him which quickly morphed into the hungry, passionate embrace that I had been dreaming about since I had first tasted him. I rolled him over until I was draped over his side, thrusting my tongue into his mouth and sucking on his lips.

When I pulled away, he chased my touch but I held him down against the bed. “I want this but not tonight. You need to rest and I’m not taking you after what happened.”

Understanding flashed through his expression so I wasn’t expecting the words that came out of his mouth afterward. “I need to feel.” I didn’t respond, mostly because I didn’t know how to. Gianni and Dmitri were very closed off with their emotions but they were always vocal about what they wanted or needed. Rhys seemed like he had been told to keep his desires to himself but being with us, I intended to change that.

“Rhys, what are you asking me?”

“I need to feel,” he repeated. “I just... I don’t want to think anymore.” I knew that feeling too, stumbling home after a particularly difficult job and needing my men to bring me back to a reality where there was love, devotion, and the family I had grown to love. But I also knew that Rhys was a different breed and making love to him while his mind was shattered

would leave him uncertain and possibly more frayed than he already was.

He needed to know that I wanted him but he didn't need to replace the terror with sex. Making a split-second decision, I decided to open a different door. Settling a hand on his waist again, I caught his attention again. "Do you trust me?"

His expression faltered before he slowly nodded, his body tensing at my words.

"I need to hear you, Rhys."

"Yes."

"Mmmm. Now, I'm going to help you relax, and then we're going back to sleep." I kept my eyes locked on his face, searching for discomfort and not finding any. He peered at me, confused as I slid down the length of his body, lips placing small kisses until I reached the waistline of his pants. Still watching him, I raised his shirt and pressed my lips against the flushed skin, Rhys' back arching upward as his eyes rolled into the back of his head. I chuckled at his reaction, loving the way he responded to my touches. "Rhys, I'm going to help you relax but I need something from you."

"Yes? Anything. *Anything.*"

He didn't mean those words—or maybe he did—but he was in a vulnerable place. I wasn't going to take advantage of that. Still, they warmed my heart. "Rhys, I need you to keep your eyes on me. Watch me as I take you apart."

A whimper tore from his throat as I dragged his pants down his legs and discarded them over the side of the bed. Then I pulled his boxers down a few inches, licking my lips at the cock I had unearthed. It sprung free, the cold air of the room making him whine with need. I dipped my head to swallow him whole, too greedy to take him apart as slowly as I had wanted. He tasted fucking divine as my tongue ran down the underside of his cock.

Rhys shuddered beneath me, his thighs squeezing around my head and his hands tangling in my hair as he whined. “Ungh—Val—don’t stop.”

“Wasn’t planning on it, sweetheart,” I mumbled around his cock, smiling at his use of my nickname. Accidental as it was, it was sweet falling from his lips. I kept my eyes locked on Rhys, loving the way his face flushed as I pumped him in and out of my mouth, using one hand to fondle his balls as the other gripped his waist. Rhys’ mouth opened again, the slight o to his lips and the way he fought to keep from thrashing around making me hasten my pace.

“Val, Val, *please*, fuck.” His fingers pulled and pushed in my hair, almost as if he wasn’t sure what he wanted. I slowed, hoping that I wasn’t pushing him down a road he didn’t want but when he thrust into my mouth, I knew that this moment was for both of us. “I’m so close,” he whimpered, a tear escaping. I wanted to kiss away the pain lingering in his expression, but I also knew that leaving him high and dry would be just as damaging.

Slowly, I moved my free hand beneath us, pressing in between his cheeks and dragging two fingers along his back hole. He bucked wildly into my mouth, his cock hitting the back of my throat as I pressed again.

Rhys screamed as his movements became chaotic and just as I slipped a finger just inside his hole, he exploded, his sweet release pouring down my throat. His little whimpers and cries of pleasure quieted down as his body convulsed, my tongue still working his cock as I shallowly pumped into his ass with my finger. When he began squirming for relief, I let him slide from my lips, grinning at the man who had become undone beneath me.

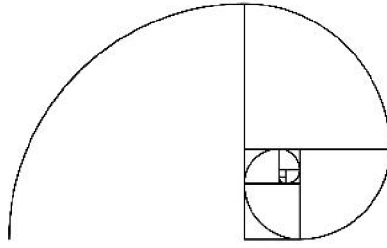
I crawled back up the mattress after resituating his boxers, moving to lean on my side as I placed a brief kiss on his nose. I could tell that he wanted more, even as his lids began to close. “Sleep, Rhys. I’ll still be here in the morning.”

He shook his head, his body now trembling with the aftershocks of his orgasm rather than the fear from this evening. “Kiss.”

I swallowed, waiting to hear him say it again but he didn’t. He just wrapped a hand around my neck and dragged me close, stealing a kiss from me until he was tasting himself on my lips. He sighed against my mouth as he drew away and placed his head on my chest, the gentle rhythm of his breathing telling me that he had fallen asleep again.

This time there was no whining or twitches, just peace.

However, for me, my mind was racing. It had only been one of many moments we had shared and I already didn't want to let him go.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### DMITRI

“And why do I have to stay here again?” Gianni cuddled Paval a little tighter against his chest, the kid still half asleep as we stood in the living room. Last night when after beating the fuck out of Owen and sending him off, Gianni and I were just kind of wired. Paval had fallen asleep after a little pushback, the poor kid stressing himself out as he continually asked to be with Rhys.

And now this morning, we were just kind of... here.

Sure, there was a kitchen remodel but now knew that's *not* what we were supposed to be doing and Owen had the answer. Just so happened one of us had to go meet the bastard to figure out why. I glanced down at Paval and smiled. “Rhys is more comfortable with you and if anyone's going to be able to talk him out of a panic attack, it's going to be you.”

Gianni nodded. “Still, I don't like you going alone. Not after-”

I put up my hand, refusing to remember that last job. “Owen is a little shit but he’s harmless. Mostly. We’re meeting at the coffee shop down the street. If I’m not back in 30 minutes, bring the calvary.” The time limit was for Owen and not me. There was no goddamn way I was going to be able to sit across from that man and not want to rip him into shreds for what he had done to one of ours.

*Already including Rhys, huh?*

Shrugging off that thought, I made my way down the street, my body tensing as I locked eyes with Owen. He was an unassuming man but after seeing the terror on Rhys’ face and hearing his voice, I knew that Owen was a nightmare all on his own. Add in the fact that he had been the one to actually hire us and I already hated the bastard.

He raised a hand, a warm smile on his face as I slid into the chair across from him. “Looks like you’ve been up all night.”

I growled at him because he had to know why, what with the way we nearly cremated him into Rhys’ carpet floor. We had mostly avoided the face, but I could tell Owen was still uncomfortable. Good. I kind of wanted to finish what we had started. *I bet he squeals like a little pig.*

“Get to the point,” I ground out, glaring at the mug of hot coffee sitting in front of him. He really didn’t see anything wrong with what had happened last night, did he?

He took a long, exaggerated sip before nodding. “Look, I know you guys came for the job I called in and... I don’t know why he called you guys last night but I’m not happy with the

way you treated me. That's my fiancé. Stop fucking jerking him around with false promises. He's a little fragile."

*Fragile?* Rhys was anything but fragile. Soft, a little timid, sure. But fragile? If he was, it was only because of the disaster sitting right in front of me. I decided to play whatever game Owen was playing because it would get me out of here faster without breaking any of his bones. "Didn't know he was yours. Good to know."

He took another sip. "So, you'll leave him alone."

It wasn't a question but a rather weak statement. There was no force behind his words and so I wasn't going to succumb to whatever he wanted. "That's not what I said. Do you want our help or not?"

Owen sighed. "Fine. Yes. Just stay away from him. There's this-" And then he went off on this wild tangent about a program that could determine almost any statistical value and the likelihood of where that value was. I was no math major but I could foresee a billion different issues with this program, especially when Owen finally told me the dangers of it. "It can determine monetary values. Dmitri, think banks, trucks, businesses. If this gets into the wrong hands, it'll be a disaster."

There had been many jobs where our task was to steal an object like this, something invaluable—priceless. However, this was the first time we had been hired to steal a program. I also didn't know how to go about doing that. Did we take a computer? Kill a scientist? Burn down an IT building?



“I need you to find it and bring it to me.”

And that’s when my hackles raised. Owen was a shady character. He was the very definition of the *wrong* hands. However, my curiosity got the better of me. “Do you know who has it?”

He shook his head. “Not a clue but I know where to start. I just can’t get any information out of him. Tried everything and he just clams up. Keeps saying it’s top secret or some shit when I know it’s not. He’s playing a dangerous game and I just want him out.”

I had a bad feeling. Like a *really* bad one. “Who is it?”

“Rhys. God, I love him so much but he just doesn’t understand the world he’s stepped into or he does and he’s harboring one of the most destructive programs in the world. I just want to help him and... I didn’t expect this, but because he trusts you guys for some reason, maybe you can help. You just need to find out where it is and bring it to me so I can take care of it.”

His words didn’t match the light dancing in his eyes so I just nodded, needing Gianni’s wise words before I did anything stupid. There was no fucking way Rhys had any idea how dangerous his stuff was. Then again, I had been lied to on more than one occasion and hadn’t seen it coming. “You got the rest of the funds for it?”

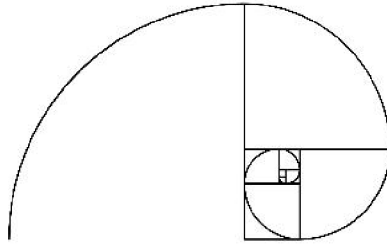
Owen pulled out his phone and tapped a few keys before showing me the balance in his bank account. “Yep. And it’s yours the moment you leave my house.”

*His house?* Valentyn had shared his research with us and it had been in Rhys' name, *not* Owen's. Instead of making a big deal about it, I just nodded and let him know that I'd get back to him. Then I pushed away from the table and headed back to the house. Gianni caught my expression immediately. "That bad?"

"That's one way of putting it. He's looking for a program that can do some real damage. He says that he's going to get rid of it but I don't believe him."

"And said program is where exactly?"

My eyes traveled to the back room, my shoulders falling. "Apparently, it's Rhys' dissertation project."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### **RHYS**

I woke up cuddled in Val's arms, my tears dried on my cheeks, the weariness of last night keeping me from freaking out, not to mention that I felt safe and protected right here. He hummed as I moved, drawing me closer to his chest. "Five more minutes."

As cheesy as those words were, they warmed my heart with the slight rasp to his voice thick with sleep. I nodded and closed my eyes again but instead of finding peace, I saw Owen's crazed expression staring back at me as he yelled about dinner.

I shot up out of bed, holding my head, shaking away a memory that wasn't possible to have. I had been in the basement then. I hadn't seen those eyes and yet it wasn't a foreign expression. Owen had looked like that more often than not the past few times I had seen him, especially when he waltzed in at all hours of the night.

Terror flooded my senses as I wondered what kind of mess he had left in my kitchen. Needing to know, I slipped from Valentyn's embrace completely, shoved my legs into a pair of sweats, and prodded down the hall, wired on nothing but fear as I stalked into the kitchen. Burnt cheese suffocated my nose, dirty dishes in the sink staring back at me. It hadn't been a dream.

Owen had been here.

A cry tore from my throat as Dmitri stole me from the tiles and rushed me back to the bedroom, Valentyn profusely apologizing but I wasn't focused on that. I was trembling in the Frenchman's hold, freaking the fuck out that even with these guys here, Owen would find a way back in.

All that hard work Valentyn had done to calm me down was falling apart again.

"What does he want?" I cried out, Dmitri stroking the hairs at the back of my neck but not answering. I clung to him, trying to block out last night, at least most of it. I was a fucking statistician, studying algorithms and probabilities. There was nothing interesting about me unless you counted my insatiable desire for sugar and the inability to gain weight from it.

Before I knew it, I was being passed off to Gianni, my head spinning with all of the hands, touches, and smells, making me freak out all over again. "Breathe, sweetheart." I rocked myself in his arms, tucking myself into a tight ball. "Breathe with me. Come on, Rhys, you're not *breathing*."

“Yes, I am,” I choked out and then coughed, air trying its damndest to crawl into my lungs. *Oh*. I gasped for more, sweet relief clouding my movements as I sagged against his chest. How the fuck was I such a mess?

“Alright, that’s good. Keep breathing. Now, we’re going to go take a nice bath while the other two clean the kitchen alright? And then we’re going to have breakfast and talk about everything. How’s that sound?”

I was still rocking in his arms, unable to say anything just yet but they were patient as Gianni rubbed my back. Then I asked, “Paval?”

They all shared a laugh, the sound from Gianni’s chest rumbling and filling me with warmth. “Always so selfless. He’s sleeping. Now, a bath and then some food. Let’s go. You got this.” He helped me to my feet, his wide smile giving me the courage to walk on shaky legs to my bathroom, all the while he whispered words of encouragement. When Gianni sat me on the toilet to turn on the water, Dmitri and Valentyn stepped inside to press kisses on my forehead and then made their way to the kitchen.

“They don’t-”

Gianni shook his head. “Try telling them not to take care of people and you’re dealing with more trouble than it’s worth. Your job is to relax and stop thinking so damn hard. Yesterday was a lot for anyone to deal with and right now, you’re still hyped up on adrenaline and memories. I’m going to give you a little massage and then I’m going to make sure you’ve had

your fill before we talk.” I opened my mouth again but he just shook his head. “No exceptions.”

We waited in silence as the bathtub filled up, Gianni slowly stripping his clothes off and then doing the same for me. I resisted at first, Gianni waiting for my permission but it wasn't permission he needed. I was just terrified of being vulnerable and these men somehow brought that forefront and center. Had it not been for yesterday, I might have stripped myself and jumped into the tub headfirst.

As it was now...

“I can't,” I whispered.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Gianni reached up and held my cheeks, thumbs caressing and wiping away a new set of tears. He pressed his forehead against mine, waiting until I stopped trembling before trying again, my resolve gone as he helped me into the tub and sat behind me.

I leaned back against him as he dragged a sponge along my flushed skin, my eyes fluttering closed as I realized that for once in my life, I really was safe. Owen had tried to do... whatever he had tried and these men had saved me.

And they were ready to do it again.

Lips attached themselves to my neck, my body growing tense, Gianni pulling away. “Do you want me to stop?”

It gave me a moment of hesitation, the power with which I held when it came to these men. They wanted me but they

weren't going to force it. They wanted me to choose. Every time. Not just once. Or most of the time. But *every* time.

“No. Keep going,” I pushed out, barely above a whisper.

And so he did, that sponge continuing along my chest and thighs, his lips nipping and sucking along my neck and shoulder until my breathing became erratic and my cock grew hard. Unconsciously, I pushed back against him, feeling his length thicken against my back, a moan falling from my lips.

“Gianni...”

He chuckled. “If you want something, Rhys, you have to say it.” My head lolled to the side as his lips grew more passionate, moving to my ear, his tongue licking the backside. “Say it, Rhys, or I’m going to stop.”

“I-”

“Yes?”

“I need it.”

He chuckled again. “Need what, babe?”

Sponge forgotten, his hands traveled up and down my sides before moving to my thighs, a guttural sound vibrating off my tongue. “Shit. *That.*” Using sex as an avoidance tactic wasn't healthy but fuck, I wasn't going to say no at this point. Besides, this man's hands felt like heaven.

“*Words*, Rhys.”

His hands continued until his fingers wrapped around my cock and gave an experimental stroke. “Fuck me,” I breathed.

Gianni twisted me around just enough to steal my lips, licking me from the inside out. He kissed differently than the others, more playful and way more passionately, a way to get lost in the world that he created.

When he pulled away, his eyes were glittering, his hand still moving in languid strokes along my cock. “I’m not going to fuck you right now, babe. I don’t want it clouded by the murky thoughts in your head. However, I will gladly give you this.” Then he hastened his pace, my hips moving in time with his hand as I tried to muffle my cries and failed.

Gianni’s other hand wrapped around my mouth, squeezing my jaw. “Can’t have Paval wondering what’s going on here, Rhys.” His lips dipped to the curve of my neck, teeth grazing the sensitive skin as he continued to stroke me, his thumb running across my slit as I jerked forward.

I squeezed my eyes shut, falling apart in Gianni’s hands as the water sloshed and splashed over the side, Gianni focused on me and only me. My hands fell to his thighs as I fought against the sensation, unconsciously sliding my ass along his thick cock.

“Fuck, you feel so good, Rhys. Just like that. Keep going.” I kept up my movements, twitching and trying not to scream when I exploded all over Gianni’s hand, Gianni biting into my shoulder as he came with me, the flood of his release slipping through my ass. Even in the water, it was a strange sensation, one that made me want him *inside* of me, rather than just

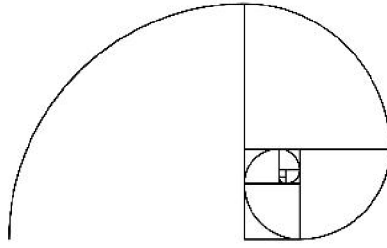


against me. As if he knew, he kissed my neck, running his lips over his fresh claim.

My head fell back against his shoulder as I opened my mouth, unable to hold my tongue. “Why didn’t you tell me that you loved me?” I asked quietly, realizing the double-edged sword after I asked. Had Gianni said something, maybe I would have never chosen Owen. Or maybe nothing would have changed and I’d have broken Gianni’s heart.

My question was met with silence for several seconds, Gianni slowly standing up and helping me to my feet afterward. “You weren’t ready to hear those words, Rhys. Now, I wish I had.” There was sadness in his eyes as he reached past me to drain the tub, putting a cork in that conversation. “Let’s finish up with a shower and then see what they’re whipping up for breakfast.”

I didn’t argue, worried that the first of many cracks had begun to show in a relationship that had barely started.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### VALENTYN

I couldn't help but think we were dragging Rhys into our world, that soft, sweet, loving kid, and yet, what Dmitri was telling me, told me that Rhys was far deeper into our world than I would have liked. Watching Rhys break down again before Gianni was able to get him in the bathroom broke my heart and the amount of pain he was carrying told me that there was something more between him and Owen than just fear.

“So, what you're telling me is that Owen is a piece of shit?” I asked while scrapping a pan full of cheese eggs, onions, and peppers around. Dmitri had run back out to the store for essentials seeing as Rhys only had alcohol, sweets, and Chinese food, minus whatever shit Owen had put together last night. Using the little bit of counter space not messed up from our ‘renovations’, I had been free to stir up scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, and those stupid potato pancakes that Paval

liked. They tasted like ass to me but whatever made him happy was okay in my books.

Dmitri chuckled as he swiped Paval away from grabbing a fistful of a pancake just out of the oven. “Yes, but it’s worse than that. Owen’s been in this business for years. Apparently, he went to France to look for Hawk International’s newest program—which, yes is where Rhys Knight comes in. Rhys was over there for a conference and they magically met. Come to find out they live close to each other. Nothing’s a coincidence. Owen engineered everything. He needed it to work. Unfortunately for Owen, Rhys is the purest kid I’ve ever met and won’t break his secret clearance for anything. Not even for a fiancé. Well, ex now.”

That made way more sense than Rhys had just stumbled upon Owen and they started darting. They didn’t even run in the same circles as far as I knew.

Dmitri continued, watching my expression as he spoke. “And apparently, Rhys neglected to mention that he has a fucking restraining order against the guy. I don’t blame him for not saying anything, seeing as the few times he’s called the police, it hasn’t gone anywhere.”

An undignified grunt tore from my throat. Leave it to Dmitri to figure out the connections. The restraining order gave more weight to Rhys’ fear and that bruise clearing on his neck. The fact that Rhys had called us instead of 911 told me just how much he trusted us. Or just how scared he’d been.

“What are you thinking?” Dmitri asked.

I shrugged as I pulled the pan off the stove and emptied it into a bowl. The shower shutting off told me I had timed it perfectly. “Just that Owen’s a little more dangerous than I thought before. Yesterday, he was just a crazed ex, one who didn’t understand that they were over. Now, it’s not love driving him but power and possibly also obsession. You can’t combat that with a few extra locks on the door. Rhys also knows a little more about our job than we told him. Don’t look at me like that. Apparently, google truly is a wealth of information.”

The conversation was paused as Paval squeezed out of Dmitri’s arms and ran up to me, hands out to grab the plate, oblivious to what we were talking about. “I can take it to the table.”

“Yes, you can Pav. Just be careful. It’s hot.” He nodded and wiggled his fingers as I handed it to him, Paval taking off to the island where Dmitri was preparing the other food and gently placing it on the edge as that was all he could reach. I watched him pull out a chair, climb on it, and then shove the plate into the middle before rushing back to me for another. I couldn’t help the chuckle that fell from my lips. He was one of the few bright things in my life. Rhys was the icing on the cake.

Rhys made an appearance at the edge of the kitchen, his arms tightly wrapped around his chest as if he were guarding his heart. His eyes were a torrent of gray and uncertainty as he looked around before meeting my gaze. “I don’t have juice.” I never knew it took only four words to break my heart.

I let out a deep sigh as I made my way to the island and prepared his plate and handed it to him. “You do now. Go sit and eat. We’ll be right there.” I poured him a glass but he didn’t take it, Gianni swiping it from me as he guided Rhys to the couch in the living room. It wasn’t lost on me that while there was a seating area in the kitchen, Rhys didn’t have a table to fill it.

I caught Dmitri as I prepared the other plates. “Don’t mention the restraining order. We already put a lot of shit on his plate. Rhys will let us know but either way, we’ll make sure Owen’s not a problem.”

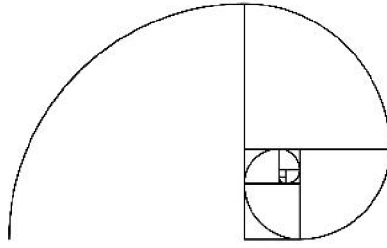
“Regardless of the job?” Dmitri asked, gathering two of the plates.

“Regardless of the job,” I said. Rhys’ safety was more important than whatever fuckery Owen had in mind.

We ventured into the living room, Gianni taking a seat first and then pulling Rhys into his lap. I knew Gianni would eat eventually as I set his plate on the coffee table, each of us eating in silence, eyes trained on the man who had somehow wormed his way into our hearts. I couldn’t handle that broken expression on his face anymore. If Rhys truly was in danger, I wasn’t sure what I was going to do.

Owen was already dead in my mind.

If anyone else tried anything? There would be no second chances.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### **RHYS**

Finding out Valentyn could truly cook was a bit of a surprise. Finding out that it tasted divine was a shock altogether but it didn't bring back my appetite. Even with the sweet words and easy conversation, I couldn't gather up the energy to eat. A stern look from Valentyn and Dmitri had me eating another bite or two before I pushed it away, something akin to bile sitting at the back of my throat.

“I think I'm going to be sick.”

It wasn't the food. I knew that much. But I couldn't help it as I leaned over the edge of the couch, Dmitri shoving a trashcan under my face as I gave up breakfast. Tears streamed down my face as I choked on my spit, a small hand stroking down my back and whispering that I'd be okay. *Paval*.

God, these guys were too fucking much.

I continued to heave for a few minutes, the entire room silenced by my pitiful self, the embarrassment and judgment

emanating from their expressions too much to handle. It could have just been my self-doubt reading those emotions but I couldn't sit here. Scrambling off Gianni's lap, I grabbed plates and made my way into the kitchen, hoping to avoid another shock to my system.

Shattered memories rushed back at me as I spit into the sink, dry heaving, additional tears gathering on my cheeks. The routine was the same—Owen would come, scare the fuck out of me, and then try to make it up with some kind of meal. I'd emerge and have to pretend that everything was okay.

Valentyn stood at my side, patting my back. "You're safe here, with us."

I turned away from him, still out of breath as I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand. "Am I?" I asked the same question from yesterday, searching his expression and hoping to find an answer but I couldn't read him. I used to think I was a good judge of character but now Owen was in my life and I couldn't seem to get rid of him. Hell, even my sister, Ada, thought Owen was a nice guy.

"Nothing has changed, Rhys but I wouldn't be honest if I didn't say we're being a little selfish by wanting you. You are safe with us but I need to ask you a few questions." That was never a good start to a conversation. I looked out at the living room, Gianni and Dmitri whispering about something as Paval stole a potato pancake and began humming as he danced around the carpet. "Rhys, we're going to be completely honest with you. We weren't hired for a kitchen reno."

My shoulders dropped even if I knew as much. “I figured.”

“And I’m sure you know that Owen hired us, yes?” I nodded, wondering where this was going and if it had anything to do with the terror that he had shoved into my life. Even the mention of his name was making me panic all over again because I had unlocked memories that I had really wanted to stay hidden. My fingers gripped the counter, my knuckles turning white from the strain but I couldn’t let Valentyn know just how much my ex had bothered me, how much he was *still* bothering me. “Whatever he’s mixed up in is pretty dangerous.”

I took a deep breath and nodded again. “It would explain all the bruises.” Valentyn stared at me for a moment just as I stumbled backward, his hands gripping my waist and lifting me onto the counter. “What-”

He pushed my legs open and stood in between them, his hands now settled on the counter on either side of me. “Because you’re about to pass out. You’re under a lot of stress. You’ve got triggers you don’t even know about and it’s going to take some time to figure out what those are. Sweetheart, was it breakfast or just everything else?”

A sob lodged itself in my throat at the way his eyes softened when he addressed me. I felt seen. It was a strange feeling but I wanted so much more of it. “No, the cheese.” A hiccup slipped through my lips. “He... he used to come in and then he’d tried to make it all better with dinner. With cheese.”



He pulled me into his chest as I clung to him. “Rhys, I had no idea. I’ll make a note, alright? Anything else?” I shook my head. “Okay, I’m going to try and ask you some questions but if you need me to stop, you let me know. He hired us to find some information, information he thinks you have.”

I pulled away. “What? I don’t have anything. I mean, my parents are a little rich I guess but I just go to school.”

“He mentioned your dissertation.”

My body locked up. My dissertation on statistics and probability was my baby and highly classified. “He always asks but he doesn’t even know what I’m doing. It’s classified.”

“Apparently, it’s not as classified as you think it is, sweetheart. And I’m pretty sure he’s planning on using it for something other than what you have planned.”

That didn’t make any sense. Owen was a BioChem professor, or at least that’s what he had told me. “What is he planning?” I was morbidly curious.

“Seeing as he seems to have a bit of a problem keeping money in his pocket, I would assume something along the lines of a payday.”

“He can’t!” I whisper-yelled, dragging my hands down my face. “It would ruin everything. That’s... that’s not what it was for.” I wanted to spill and tell Valentyn what it was truly about, how it was going to help so many people, how it was going to show people how to better budget their money and for corporations to save millions.

Valentyn stepped a little closer, the heat of his body scorching my chest as he looked up at me. I had kind of forgotten the precarious position he had put me in but I wasn't keen on moving. Everything this man did felt protective and warm and *right*. Besides, I had been touched more in three days than I had in a year and I was fucking *living* for it.

“He believes otherwise, Rhys.”

I bit my lip, trying to figure out what to do with that information. What was Owen going to do with it? Was that the only reason why he had been here, with me? Did he even love me?

“Just tell me. Was France on purpose?”

Valentyn's non-answer was answer enough as I began to spiral but fucking Valentyn had just the trick to pull me out of my head, his hands squeezing my waist until I arched toward him, my lips parted in a small o. His eyes darkened with silent promises for a future time before he started speaking. “You can tell me to fuck off, Rhys.” His voice had a slight rasp to it, his interest evident as his cock thickened between us.

I tried to ignore it, fuck I did, but my hips jerked forward anyways and an unconscious moan slipped into the air. I prayed for the ground to open up and swallow me whole but I'd never be that lucky.

Valentyn chuckled, leaning forward to press a chaste kiss on my lips. “Soon, Rhys. I promise. Tell me I'm overstepping but you're going to take the day off. No work. No dissertation. Nothing. It's just going to be the four of us today. And then

tomorrow, you can resume activities as normal. With one minor difference—if you leave this house, one of us is with you.”

I didn't know what to say to that, mostly because I had no fucking intention of leaving the house ever again. Sure, I knew that was impractical, but Owen had really terrified me last night. The fact that Valentyn would even offer that...

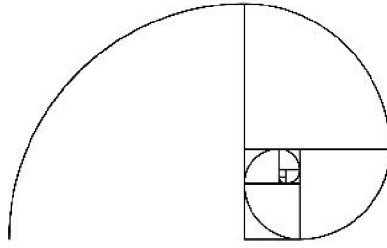
“If he's going to disturb you in your house, there's no telling what he'll try outside if you're alone.”

I nodded immediately but there'd be a few hiccups. Mainly school and family dinners. I could easily just say I had deadlines for the time being and skip a few dinners. It scared me that I was already thinking long-term. “What about school?”

“That's our problem to figure out. Now, get dressed. We're going out.” He pulled me from the counter and set me back on my feet.

“Where?” I loved the fact that I didn't have to choose but it was a lot to handle three guys who were seemingly perfect after someone like Owen. Add in Paval and it was the best little family I could ever ask for. For as long as it existed.

Valentyn threw me a large, genuine smile. “Paval said he'd like to go that popup amusement park a few streets over.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### **RHYS**

Paval sat on my shoulders as we strolled through the amusement park, my anxiety sifting into the background and only making a reappearance ever so often when the sounds became a little too overwhelming. Gianni and Dmitri took up my sides, making us look like the strangest family, Valentyn at my back, the silent protector.

The kid's giggles made everything better as he pointed and cooed at all the colors and candy and excitement. The day was made even better when I somehow convinced all three of these men to don those stupid animal headbands. They looked ridiculous but the heated looks in their eyes as they slid them on told me that I was going to pay for it later.

Most likely when we were alone and Paval was asleep.

*Fuck. Yes.*

It was nearly 2 p.m. by the time my energy began to wane, Paval nearly flopping off my shoulders. Dmitri immediately

stole the kid from me and Valentyn drew me against him, chuckling as I stumbled forward a few steps. “You alright?”

I nodded, smiling up at him because out of the past few weeks, this day had been my favorite. Valentyn leaned down to kiss me, wrapping one arm tightly around my waist as the other caressed my cheek. It would be so easy to fall in love with this man and yet I knew their presence and their protection was only temporary. When he pulled away, I was panting for air, Valentyn dragging a thumb over my moist lips.

“What was that for?” I whispered.

“Making Pav smile.”

My heart tingled with joy at how wonderfully sensitive these men were to that boy. Paval needed all the love he could get because it was everything he deserved. “We’re at a park. Of course, he’s going to smile.”

“And you’re the best thing that’s happened to him in a while.” I shrugged off the comment, going to follow the other two who had started making their way back to the car but Valentyn didn’t let me get far. “You’re more special than you give yourself credit for, Rhys. By the time I’m done with you, you’ll truly understand that.”

I shrugged that off too because I wasn’t used to the attention or the care with which they were giving me. Owen ignored my needs half the time or just wasn’t around for the rest. Just thinking of him right now made my head hurt. Focusing on the sleeping kid in Dmitri’s arms, I decided to ask the lingering question. “What are you going to do for the rest of the

semester?” Valentyn threaded his fingers through mine but didn’t answer so I tried again. “Have you found something for him yet?”

“Not yet,” he ground out, obviously not wanting to talk about it but I knew that education was important, in whatever form they chose to give it to Paval. However, I wasn’t going to let the kid suffer because of one goddamn teacher.

So, I made a split-second decision that I wish I had held my tongue on. “Why not leave him with me? I can tutor him. Most of my classes are finished anyway and I just have to go on campus occasionally. I’m sure we could find some day programs for him and then I can teach him everything else, right? It’s the least I can do if you’re going to redo my kitchen.” *Too soon.*

It took me several seconds to realize that I had blurted this out in the middle of the park to a man I barely knew and had included myself in a decision that I hadn’t been asked to make. Fear exploded inside of me as I took a step back, trying to pull myself free. *Fuck. Shit. I-*

Valentyn wasn’t as keen on letting me go though, “Rhys, you don’t have to do that.” His voice had gone soft and sweet and my stupid mouth decided to keep digging my grave.

“It’s fine. It’ll give me something to occupy my time and give you a little piece of mind knowing that he’s always near. I have room in my house and you can-” My brain finally caught up with my words as I clamped my mouth shut. There was no fucking way I was going to ask them to move in. As much as I

enjoyed their company, I had met these dangerous men *days ago* and found out yesterday that their business was a little less than legal.

Not to mention that technically they had been hired by Owen to steal my dissertation. Why I was willingly hanging around with them even for the promise of protection was beyond me.

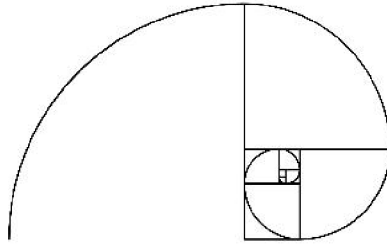
He seemed to understand my confusion as he pulled me back into his chest. “Stop worrying so much, Rhys. I like the way your brain works and I’m sure the guys will like the idea but the moment you feel it’s too much, you have to let me know.”

“Right.” I puffed out my chest, hoping to prove that I could do this one thing.

“I’m *serious*, Rhys. We’re not here to stress you out. We might have been hired but now we’re here to keep that goddamn piece of shit away from you.”

“Right,” I said again, not wanting to promise anything. I hadn’t been lying when I said it would give me something to do. It was going to help me avoid dealing with everything else.

“I don’t quite believe that you understand, but in time you will. Now, let’s get to the car before they leave us here at the park.” A giggle slipped out as we walked toward the parking lot, my heart beating just a little faster. It was too soon to talk about love, but fuck if I wasn’t already falling.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### GIANNI

Those two were fucking adorable, Paval curled up in Rhys' lap as he leaned against the passenger door. Both of their mouths were parted, little snores escaping into the thick air of the car. I wanted to draw them closer and hold them and never let them go but they needed the rest. Yesterday had been fucking stressful for Rhys and I had no idea how Paval wasn't falling apart after climbing into that basement. We had tried asking him what was going on in his head but all he told us was that Rhys needed his help.

Valentyn pulled up to Rhys' house, Dmitri opening the car door and extracting Rhys. Paval sleepily crawled over to me and promptly went back to sleep as Dmitri disappeared into the house with Rhys in his arms. The slight tremble to his slim form made me want to call Owen out and rip him apart but there would be a time for that. If Valentyn didn't get to that fucker first.



“Are we really leaving him there alone?” I hated the uncertainty of whether or not we’d get another call tonight that Owen was in the house. “We put a few deadbolts on the door and reinforced the windows but it doesn’t make me feel any better, Val.”

Valentyn sighed. “Dmitri will stay tonight. Rhys almost asked us to move in, Gia. He’s scared. I can see that but I’m also not going to push him. I don’t think he’s ready for the kind of love we’re prepared to give him.”

I chuckled at that, glad that Valentyn had finally seen reason. “Love, huh? Is it crazy to say I’ve already fallen?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

I leaned back in my seat, resituating Paval as Valentyn pulled out of the driveway and headed to our house. “I wouldn’t be able to trust anyone else after Owen. Anything good coming at me, I’d definitely think was a trap. I guess it makes sense why he wasn’t really laughing. There’s still so much pain...” I trailed off, thinking about the different families we had come from and the things we had had to go through over the years to be the men we were today.

This incident would no doubt strengthen Rhys but it was the pain he had to endure to get to this point that was breaking me.

We pulled onto the highway, but my mind was still reeling. “What now, though? We work on his kitchen, figure out what to do with Owen, and then what? Just leave? I don’t see that going well, Val.” Not for us, not for Rhys, and definitely not for Paval.

Valentyn wasn't much of a talker but I had to work through my thoughts. He was more of a 'create a plan, enforce the plan, regroup' type of guy. "Me neither but Gia, this has to be *his* choice. He only knows the tip of the world that we work in. I am not going to subject him to that without making sure he understands what he's getting into."

That was a fair assessment because the life we led wasn't an easy one.

A shrill ring through the car brought my attention to the unsaved number rolling across the dashboard. I'd recognize it anywhere though. Valentyn answered the call. "What?"

The cheery voice coming through the speaker didn't do the man justice. He was a lean kid, no taller than Rhys, but one of the most terrifying fucks in our line of work. If you needed something done and done right, you called us. If you needed someone fucked up or something done in a big way? You called Chester.

"Working a job?" He song-singed and I could almost imagine the way he'd dance around the room, giggling like a maniac as he sipped some fruity drink.

"Maybe," Valentyn ground out, my loveable Belarusian waiting for Chester to explain what he called for. The guy would say it all on his own.

"I thought so. My spidey senses were tingly. Some wank ass dude strolled up in here a few minutes ago with a job for us, not our usual type of shit so I told him I'd think about it.

Talking about some program he wants to squash. Sound like your guy?”

My blood froze just hearing about the fact that Owen had approached Chester. Owen had to be fucking desperate to be on that side of town.

“Why are you calling *me* about it?” There was no emotion in Valentyn’s voice but even I could hear the displeasure with what Owen was trying to pull. It was bad for business when clients pitted us against each other. You just didn’t do it unless you wanted a bullet to the head.

“Because he seems like the guy who tries to get multiple people on a job. Doesn’t seem like one straight thing comes out of his body. Told me that the original people he hired fucked up but The Kolas Crew? No fucking way. So? He yours?”

“He’s mine.”

“And you fucked up?” Chester asked, sounding almost hopeful.

“Haven’t even taken the job yet. Doing some research first.”

Chester burst out laughing. “I knew it!” A gunshot sounded in the background, Chester screeching. “You fucking idiot! Who let the pleb in here? Take him out back and shoot at him too. Let him know how it feels. Goddamn, I think I shit my pants. Where was I? Right, the little bastard said you stole his fiancé. That a load of crap too?”

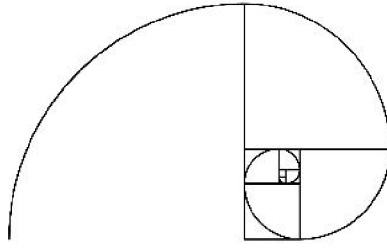
Chester had always been a wild card, only made more evident by the way he talked. Valentyn kept his eyes on the road but I could see the beginnings of a snarl upturning his lip. “He doesn’t even have a fiancé.”

“I’m not vouching for homewreckers, Kolas.”

“And I’m not one. Fuck off.”

“Fair enough. I’ll tell him I’m not buying and put the word out. You drop the job though, let me know. That’s a pretty penny.” Chester hung up, leaving us unsettled. If we decided not to take the job, every goddamn crew would be clawing at that payday which meant that Rhys’ safety was at risk.

We drove in silence for a while before I finally asked what we were going to do. Valentyn grinned as he looked at me through the rearview mirror. “Pack a bag when we get home. Seems like Rhys is going to have a few roommates after all.” The fact that we were going to be bunking with the sweetest guy I had ever met shouldn’t have put as big of a smile on my face as it did.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### **RHYS**

I wandered down the hall, eyes wide when I caught Dmitri in my kitchen, a sandwich hanging from his lips as he concentrated on some measurement of my counter. His shirt had disappeared somewhere, the history of scars and tattoos winding around his muscular chest making my breath hitch in my throat. A patch sat over one of his pecs, supposedly from one of the jobs that I still didn't quite understand.

He was humming something, his hips swaying to the tune, my mind running and jumping headfirst into the gutter.

As much as I hated the memories of France, Dmitri was abso-fucking-lutely delicious. His muscles moved and stretched as he leaned over the counter, nodded, and then chewed a little more of his sandwich. When he stood up to stretch, one of his hands moved to his stomach and scratched, the thick veins filling out his hands just a little more.

The groan that slipped past my lips was entirely unintentional but it drew Dmitri's attention. Unlike the other two who would have grinned at my arrival, he grunted, his eyes darkening with the desire to do more than just stare at me. Still, he was cordial, to say the least.

“Did you sleep well?”

I wanted to melt into the floor at the richness of his voice but thought that I shouldn't embarrass myself just yet.

“Uh, I guess?” I didn't really remember the last couple of hours if I was being honest but now it was nearly 5 pm and I wanted something to eat. I stepped into the kitchen, painfully aware that I wasn't wearing a shirt either, just my boxers, as I slid around Dmitri and made my way to the fridge. Had it been another time, I wouldn't have minded walking around my house stark naked but this wasn't just a hookup or a fling. This was three guys who had somehow pledged their loyalty to me in under three days.

And now Dmitri was staring at me like a piece of meat, wanting to devour me, sandwich abandoned on the counter.

I chanced a glance at him, halfway to the fridge, my resolve to eat dying on the spot when I caught the growing bulge between the man's thighs. My thighs quivered with the fifteen different positions I wanted him in right the fuck now but he seemed less approachable than the other two. Ripping my eyes away from him, I apologized profusely but he didn't seem to have the same reservations.

He stalked toward me and caged me in against the island. His hot breath was on my cheek as he dragged his nose along my heated skin, his lips meeting the curve of my ear. “Was a bit jealous that my guys got to have you first. They’ve explained,” Dmitri sighed, hands moving to my waist, “In detail,” his thumbs slipped beneath the waistband of my boxers, “Just how beautiful you look when you come.”

I gasped, my back arching toward him as he continued to play with the one piece of clothing keeping my cock from the cool air of my kitchen. “Shit. You guys talk about me?”

“We do. But there’s something *I* want, Rhys. Well, there’s two things. I want you to ask those questions, the ones on the tip of your tongue, the ones that I’m pretty sure you know the answer to. And then I want to feel you. I want to *hear* you when you come. When you let go. When you finally give in.”

I shuddered, not sure what to say to that. Where Valentyn was all about control and taking charge, Dmitri was danger and the unknown. It was as if he knew that while I knew everything was connected, I was strangely attracted to the darkness they brought into my house rather than repulsed by it.

“Just one question,” I whispered as he moved back a little, that sultry smile on his lips widening. “It’s all connected, isn’t it?” He dragged a hand down my chest, cupping my waist and squeezing as I arched against him.

Dmitri nodded, “Turn around for me, Love.” I twisted around, my ass now pressed against his erection as I all but melted against the counter. The silence should have been

awkward and overbearing but instead, it was raw and heavy, Dmitri's fingers resuming their playfulness with my boxers before he dragged them down my hips. I moaned as he thrust against my bare ass, chuckling when I flattened myself against the island.

“One more question.”

“You already asked one,” he purred but it wasn't a deterrent for asking.

“You guys... this is real?” I hated asking but Dmitri didn't even hesitate as he placed a soft kiss in the center of my back.

“Absolutely, Love.”

“Then fuck me,” I breathed. Red flags were everywhere but where Owen brought fear, these men brought safety.

“I plan to, Rhys. I plan to.”

“Fucking finally.” My cheeks turned red as I tried to push up and away from him but Dmitri held me down, laughing at my words.

“I've been thinking the same thing ever since I laid eyes on you, Rhys. I've wanted to fuck this ass so bad. Imagined how you'd squeeze my cock. I imagined the pretty little sounds you'd make when I hit your sweet spot just right. You'll let me hear them, won't you?”

I nodded, falling into whatever headspace Dmitri had just created because fuck, whatever *this* was, I wanted more of.



He dragged a hand down my back, thick fingers slipping in between my cheeks and rimming around my hole. “Fuck, you’re going to be so tight, Rhys.” Dmitri produced his wallet on the surface beside me, opening it and retrieving a travel-size lube package. My face warmed as he tore it with his teeth, the familiar squirt of lube and the cold gel pressed against my hole coming a few seconds later.

The fact that he was prepared made me think that he was into some of the same things Valentyn was. I couldn’t see Valentyn bending Dmitri over in public, but Gianni? A finger slipping into my ass tore me away from that fantasy, not that I minded because Dmitri’s touch was glorious.

“Relax, Love. I got you. Need to do this.”

And I fucking loved him for it. Owen would have done some half-assed job with my spit or just worked me over dry and while I fucking *loved* rough sex every now and then, I loved the sweet stuff more.

Dmitri worked me over until I was a shivering mess, my cock leaking as I bucked backward, pleading for his cock. He didn’t make me wait longer than I had to, Dmitri shoving his pants down and angling his cock at my hole. “Breathe, Love. There you go. God, you’re so fucking perfect.”

He was a stretch, as I knew he would be, Dmitri sinking in, inch by inch. My head fell forward to the counter as I thrust my ass backward, the man slipping in fully and his hips colliding with my ass. His cock hit my sweet spot and as

worked up as I was, I came instantly, groaning as my fists clenched and unclenched against the counter.

*Fucking hell.*

I was stuffed.

There was no other explanation.

This man was going to tear me apart with his cock in the most delicious of ways and I was here for it. Dmitri continued running his hands down my back as he gave me time to get accustomed to his length, my thighs trembling with the shock of my orgasm. He wasn't laughing and he didn't make me feel rushed, waiting until my breath returned to normal.

His cock twitched as I propped myself up on the counter, my ass pushing against him involuntarily. "Move," I ground out, my voice strained. My head fell forward again as Dmitri gladly obliged, one of his hands settling on my waist and the other perched against the counter so I couldn't so much as budge. He was in charge of this moment and fuck if I didn't just let him use me.

He began to pump in and out of my ass with slow, languid strokes, his cock dragging along my walls until I was whimpering for release again. My cock ached as I tried to rub up against the counter for friction, Dmitri's hold keeping me from that sweet relief.

"You can come again, Rhys. I know you can." He thrust forward a little harder and I cried out as he hit that spot again, my entire body shaking as I gripped onto the counter. His cock

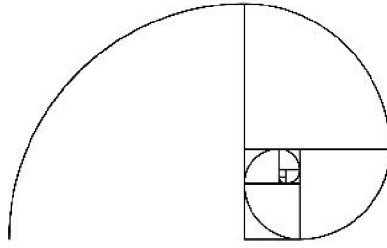
thickened inside of me as he continued, his strokes slowly becoming sloppy, his grunts becoming a little more forceful. “Fuck, I’m going to fill you up so good tonight, Rhys. Make you forget anyone else who’s been inside you. After tonight, the only name on your lips is going to be ours.”

And with that, I came again, screaming until my voice echoed through my kitchen, Dmitri spilling into my ass until his release was dripping down my thighs.

I sagged against the counter, spent and unsure of what to do next. “That... fireworks,” I said, lamely, unable to think of anything else.

Dmitri laughed as he slid out of me, two fingers pushing his escaping cum back into my hole. I jerked forward at the overstimulation, his movements hastening as he continued to massage and prod until I was shaking. “Please. God, I need a break.”

That brought on another laugh as he gathered me up in his arms and stomped toward the bedroom. “Love, I haven’t even started.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### **RHYS**

Once again, I woke up being crushed against a muscled chest, groaning when I pulled away and a thin trail of saliva followed. *Fuck*. That was some seriously unsexy shit as I hastily wiped my mouth and moved to wipe off Dmitri's chest. That's when I realized he was awake and he watched that entire five-second freakout.

"Don't worry," He chuckled, "I quite like your juices. Come here." He wrapped a hand around the back of my neck and dragged me closer, intending to kiss me but I pushed against him.

"What? No. *Morning breath*."

"Didn't say I cared," he mumbled against my lips as he rolled me over onto my back and draped himself over my side. I squirmed beneath him, whimpering when his hand slid beneath the covers and grabbed my cock. "Mmm, delicious." It was cheesy at best but coming from Dmitri, it was fucking

sexy. I hated how easy it was for them to take me apart without even trying.

“Need... to pee,” I breathed out, finally pushing him away and racing to the bathroom attached to my room. I spent five minutes washing my face to wake up, trying to see if any of this was real. *It is. They’re yours.* A giddy smile slipped onto my face as I patted my hair down and ventured back into the bedroom, disappointed to see Dmitri gone.

However, when I made it to the living room after shoving on a new pair of boxers and a shirt, I wasn’t sure what to make of the two delicious men sprawled on my couches, Paval fanned out over Valentyn’s chest. Dmitri popped his head out of the kitchen, the fucking French bastard still shirtless. The sandwich from last night was hanging from his lips. “Apparently, a few things have changed since we got home yesterday. I’ll let Val tell you.”

“That sounds bad.”

He shrugged. “Could be. What do you want for breakfast?”

I stared at Valentyn a little closer, wondering if the tightness in his face had to do with the reason he was on my couch and not at home. “You know why they’re here.” It wasn’t so much a question as a statement. I wasn’t dumb but I also didn’t know how far I could press the matter without upsetting Dmitri, especially after finding out that everything was connected.

“Love, I don’t know all the details. Come eat something, alright? I’m sure the smell of food will wake them up.”

I *really* didn't like the sound of that. It had to be Owen, right? That was the only reason. I took a step back, eyes wide with a fear I didn't understand. "Um, I'll be right back." Running to my office, I shut the door, waiting for the inevitable panic to bring me to my knees. Owen wasn't even here and he was still plaguing my mind. The fact that Dmitri wanted us all together before I was told why they were here was suspicious at best.

There was a knock on my door, my terrified ass scampering onto the couch, just as my phone lit up. I answered without thinking, staring forward and wondering if Dmitri was just going to open my door. I hadn't even locked it.

"Rhys?" My expression changed, dread consuming me as I went to hang up, the voice filtering through the earpiece. "Don't hang up, baby. Shit, I really made a mess of things, didn't I?" I didn't even know what to say to that as I curled up in a little ball, trying to block out his voice. I hit the end button but it didn't make him go away. He was back, invading my fragile mind as I grabbed the pillow and folded it over my head. *No. No. No. No...*

A nightmare flooded into my head, one that just helped confirm why I was so fucking terrified of him.

*It was supposed to be a whatever-month anniversary since we had met but it had devolved into Owen asking rapid-fire questions about my work, questions that I couldn't answer without revealing classified information. The problem was that*

*Owen knew that. He knew I couldn't talk about it and he was still pressing.*

*The cheesy pasta that he had whipped up churned in my stomach, bile sitting at the back of my throat and threatening to spew forward. I grabbed our plates and walked them to the kitchen, ignoring his newest round of questions. I just wanted to sleep at this point.*

*“Don't ignore me, Rhys!”*

*I whirled around, slapping at the hand that tried to grab my waist. I was all for a bit of loving but his hands were always so goddamn rough. “What do you want me to say? I can't tell you anything. You know that!” I took a few deep breaths to settle my emotions, knowing that when I was angry, it just made everything worse. “Owen, I can't tell you. It's classified.”*

*“And I'm not asking about **details**, just... you know. You never talk about your work. I thought this was a partnership.”*

*I frowned as I rinsed off the plates. A partnership? I wanted to rage and yell at him. A partnership meant that we were equals. That we loved and cherished each other. That we enjoyed being around each other and didn't fucking pry into projects that we were politely asked to stay away from. Instead, I just nodded. “It is but I can't talk about it.”*

*Fear raced through my body when I felt his hand on the back of my neck, squeezing hard as he yanked me backward, my head angled up to see into his black eyes. “And I told you this is a **partnership**. Rhys, you're always so goddamn selfish,*

*dangling your little dissertation over my head. You have to be the smartest one in the room, don't you?"*

*I gargled, trying to grab air, the plate in my hand shattering on the floor as I scratched at the hold on my neck. "Ow-en."*

*"Always gatekeeping and trying to make the rest of us feel unimportant. I'll ask you again, what's the project about, Rhys?" His fingers tightened and a silent scream fell from my lips as I tried to kick back at him and loosen his grip. Neither one worked. For how scrawny Owen looked, he was pretty strong. Those dark eyes continued to stare at me and then in the next moment, he let me go, suddenly on his knees. "Oh, you dropped a plate. No worries, I'll clean it up. Go ahead and get a broom, sweetheart."*

*I stumbled backward into the island, staring at Owen in horror. The flip in demeanor was terrifying and there was no fucking way I was going to be getting him anything.*

I had locked myself in the guest bedroom that night, terrified that Owen was going to try something else. It was the first time he had been violent toward me but not the last. Why all these memories were resurfacing now, I had no idea but I wished they would have stayed buried.

The buzzing came again and I glanced at it, a text popping up on the screen.

*<<Pick up or I'll make sure those men understand just who you belong to.>>*



My irrational mind couldn't handle ignoring the threat as I answered the call. Owen sighed. "Don't you dare fucking hang up on me again. Those bastards are trying to protect you from things you don't understand, luring you in with false words and little touches. But you don't need any of that Rhys. You don't fucking need that."

A sob tore from my throat as I buried myself farther into the cushions. The men just outside my door were more than capable of getting rid of Owen, but his paws seemed to reach much farther than just himself.

"I called your sister and she's on her way over. She agrees with me that you're spiraling. Sweetheart, I need you to understand the danger you're in. That... project you're working on is going to get you killed. You have to—"

"No," I managed in between hiccups, clutching the phone with a death grip. "*No.*" Ada on her way to my house? That was the worst possible scenario. Out of all my family members, she was the only one who truly couldn't see Owen for who he was. *Why the fuck had he called her?*

"She should be there in an hour after she drops off your niece."

"*No,*" I whined again, my office door smashing open as Dmitri stalked forward. I didn't even have to say anything as I sat up, tears running down my cheeks. He took one look at the phone and slipped it from my hands, even against my protests. "*You can't.*"

Dmitri held it up to his ear. “Listen here, you little shit. Keep terrorizing Rhys. Go ahead, try one more time and I’m going to have you wishing you didn’t try to hire us in the first place.” He hung up and flung the phone onto the couch before crouching in front of me. “Rhys, I need you to understand that that bastard is going to be saying a lot of shit to get you to cave. But we’re not going anywhere. The other two are here because your safety is of the utmost importance. Do you hear me?”

My entire body sagged as I let out a warbled cry. “My sister’s coming.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I’m assuming she’s not the understanding type?”

“He called her,” My voice cracked as I hiccupped again, unable to comprehend the shit that Owen was trying to pull. All for a program. “Why is he using her to harass me?”

“He wants what you have. He thinks it’ll help him but once he finds out that he doesn’t know how to use it? He’ll be right back at your doorstep. The requests won’t end once you hand the project over. And we’re here to make sure you don’t.”

“But he hired you to-”

“Fuck him. Rhys, *listen* to me.” Dmitri reached forward and I flinched, immediately hating the pain that flashed through his expression. He changed his tactic as he placed a firm hand on my thigh, massaging the bare skin with his thumb. “We’re not here for him anymore. That ship sailed the moment we walked into your kitchen and we figured out the mistake. It’s you,

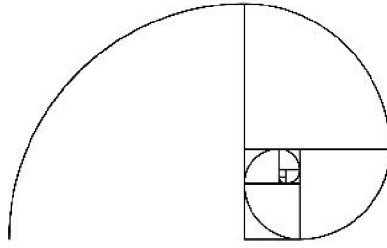
Love. Only you. Now, I need you to focus because you said your sister is on her way and I need to know what we're doing."

"Doing?" God, his hand felt good, and the way he seemed to immediately change his movement based on my discomfort? I didn't deserve him. I didn't deserve any of them.

Dmitri cracked a smile even as I trembled beneath his touch from the shock of Owen's voice still ringing in my ears. "Are we your boyfriends? Contractors? Friends?"

*Boyfriends...* "Oh. Um... I don't know."

"Got it. We'll play it by ear. Now, let's go freshen up before the witch gets here. I'll let the guys know to behave." Calling Ada a witch put a little smile on my face but I was still fucking terrified of her trying to take over my life for the sake of 'helping'. Little by little, Owen was going to try and ruin my credibility. Continually calling me and threatening me was definitely one way to start.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### **RHYS**

Fully dressed, I stepped into the hallway, smoothing down my shirt as if it would wipe away the visible panic on my face.

We had agreed that they were *just* contractors, which meant they had to be way farther along in my kitchen than they currently were. In fifteen minutes, Valentyn and Dmitri had essentially stripped my counters of the fake marble and had already started on the wall beside the fridge. Plaster had exploded over the tile, Gianni taking apart my oven with ease.

Paval and I stood in awe as they worked seamlessly, each one of them losing a shirt at one point until I was basically standing there drooling.

Wild smiles adorned their faces, sweat glistening along their muscled torsos as I realized that the destruction was *fun* for them.

I had almost forgotten that Ada was even on her way over here until I heard the rapid knock on my door. “Wait!” All of

them stopped and looked at me. “What about Paval? I don’t have a kid. I have no idea-”

Gianni stepped up to me, grinning. “Just say he’s your boyfriend’s kid, alright? You’re babysitting while he’s out. You’ve got this. She’s just coming over to see if you’re okay, right?” And then he turned to Paval, “Sell it, kid.”

Paval gave Gianni a terrible salute before running to the couch and pulling out one of his books. I knew this wasn’t going to work, that something was going to go horribly wrong but if I left Ada out there, she would 100% call the cops.

“Hey....” I drawled when I opened the door, Ada pushing past me and looking around as if I was hoarding something I wasn’t supposed to. She didn’t even greet me, scowling at Paval and then moving into my kitchen.

“What is going on here? Owen told me you were spiraling but this?”

I looked into the kitchen, wondering what she was seeing. Internally, I was freaking out but on the outside, I kept a calm and collected expression on my face. “Ada, what are you doing here?”

“Stop playing. I know Owen called you. I just didn’t know how bad it had gotten. Hiring sex workers? Babe, *really*? I know the stress-”

With all of the panic and adrenaline I had been holding onto for the past several hours, I couldn’t help but laugh. It wasn’t a small laugh either, bubbling out until I was holding onto the

wall for support. Owen had told Ada that I had hired sex workers to satisfy me? In all actuality, it did sound like something I would have done in undergrad but that was just ridiculous.

“Ada, *no*. I’m getting the kitchen redone. You knew how much I hated the colors. I had a few extra dollars and apparently, Owen hired them when we were still together. It still needs to be done, but-”

Ada frowned and finally looked at me as she folded her arms across her chest. “There’s no need to lie. Owen was good for you and then you broke up with him for whatever reason and now you’re using a service. I get it. Everyone has needs but, this is extreme. I’m going to call him and-”

“No!” Oh, I didn’t mean to scream it but I hoped and prayed that Ada could see the terror on my face, her fingers hovering over the buttons. “No, don’t call him. I’m not using any service and I’m not dating Owen either. He’s an abusive piece of shit that I have a restraining order against. He shouldn’t be within 100 feet of me and yet you’re encouraging him?” I searched her expression but there was no sympathy in her eyes. Instead, she just deflected with another question.

“Answer me this. Whose kid?”

“Boyfriend’s.”

“And I know that you don’t have a boyfriend. Try again.”

I let out a deep sigh, trying to find the right lie. Paval prodded over to me and smiled, hands raised in the air, fingers

curling and uncurling. I gladly picked him up as he laid his head on my shoulder. “Where’s dad?”

“In the kitchen. He’s still busy like the last time you asked.” It wasn’t part of the script and I was going to fucking kill myself for it later but Ada would have never believed that someone had left their child here. Ada’s frown grew and I knew that if I didn’t produce a boyfriend in the next ten seconds, things were going to go from bad to worse. “Uh, Gianni? Can you come out here?”

Gianni was the most believable, seeing as he had a similar physique to Owen—granted, *way* sexier *and* taller but Valentyn and Dmitri would terrify Ada and set her onto the wrong path. Gianni prodded into the living room, cheesing at the two of us as he bent in to place a kiss on my cheek. I resisted the urge to drop Paval and run my hands down his chest. The man was slick with sweat, his abs rippling every time he took a breath.

*Sex. God.*

He seemed to know what I was thinking, his eyebrows wiggling in jest before looking at Ada. “Hey, I’m the boyfriend. I’d shake your hand, but I’m kind of messy.”

*Just the way I like it.*

God, if I ended up sporting a hard-on in this situation, I was going to die.

Ada looked between us, still not convinced. “That’s *your* kid? Where’s his mother?”

“Didn’t want the responsibility. I didn’t know you were stopping over. Rhys is pretty quiet about his family shit but I would have asked the guys to work on the kitchen at a different time.” He danced on his toes, almost as if he was just as antsy as I was. The only reason I wasn’t showing it was that I had my hands full with Paval. The kid was lightly tapping my back in sequences of five, almost as if he knew. What the fuck, these men were perfect.

“There’s no way you guys are dating. Owen specifically mentioned that he hired-”

Gianni put his hand up, “Used to be his neighbor. Look, I’d love to sit down and get to know Rhys’ sister but he’s paying for a job and I intend to make sure it’s completed on time. He starts studying in an hour so we have to be in a good place to stop so we don’t ruin the silence he needs.”

God, this man was selling it. Ada, however, couldn’t let things lie. “No, Owen-”

Gianni’s brows furrowed and I could feel the anger welling up in his expression. I carefully laid a hand on his arm to remind him that he couldn’t do anything... *to* her. He let out a deep breath and clasped my hand in his. “Owen is no longer allowed in the house. He broke in a few days ago and is intent on trying to worm his way back in here. I don’t know what lies he’s told you but he is not welcome here. I’d rather you stop speaking about him as if he knows what’s going on and if you’re not here for any other reason than *Owen* called you, I’d suggest you leave.”



“He swore to me-”

Gianni squeezed my hand a little tighter but this was for his comfort, not mine. “And I don’t really care because he’s not important.”

I watched my sister’s facial features, trying to understand why Owen had such a hold on her. The way she spoke his name, the way she believed that Owen was a fucking god among men. She always had so many goddamn stories about him, ones that didn’t always include me. Granted, my brother sometimes hung out with Ernest but Ada and Owen didn’t run in the same circles.

At all.

However, it was always ‘Owen this’ and ‘Owen that’ when we were together.

“Please tell me you didn’t,” I asked, wondering if Ada would take the bait. She was still staring at Gianni, sizing him up before she looked at me, her eyes wide like a deer in headlights. “You *did*, didn’t you? That’s fucking disgusting. Ada, no wonder you always listened to him. I have no idea how you don’t see what a manipulative bastard he is but please leave.”

“You can’t say anything. It was just one time.”

And now the roles had reversed. “I doubt it was just the once. The infatuation is too strong, but I do know that I don’t want you in my house. Ada, don’t make me fucking say it again.” I was falling apart inside, my world crumbling in on

itself but I couldn't break now. Not in front of her. I clutched Paval a little tighter, the kid squirming in my arms but not asking to be put down. His little taps became more insistent in response.

Ada sighed. "I guess I just-"

"No explanations. Just go home. Please. If he tells you anything else, believe it or don't but don't show back up at my house." Ada slipped back out the front door and I locked it the moment I closed it, letting Paval go so I could finally take that breath that I had been holding. Gianni was immediately by my side, pressing a hand to my stomach.

"Deep breaths. There you go. In, yep. Just like that. And out. One more time. Good. Okay, so clue me in here because I missed something." He stared at me, genuine confusion etched into his expression.

"Um, she's sleeping with Owen?" Saying it out loud made me cringe, just thinking of the way Owen had played and manipulated me and was now doing the same to my sister. The worst part was that Ada seemed to like the things about him that I hated. Worst still, Ada was *married* and the only reason I assumed Owen was with her was to get to my research. And if by some miracle Owen was actually in love with her? That was just... twisted.

Gianni let out an anxious laugh as he pressed himself against the wall, running his hands through his hair. "No fucking way. Val, D, you won't believe what the fuck-"

Both of my men exited the kitchen, strange tools in their hands. Their expressions were hardened, dark, and terrifying as I stared at them from the foyer. “What-”

Gianni cut me off as he slapped a hand across my mouth and then nodded to the other two. They walked through the house for several minutes, Gianni’s hand still there as I relaxed against his chest. Paval was standing beside us, rocking back and forth to his own little tune with his hands over his mouth as if this was a regular occurrence. I still didn’t know what was going on until Valentyn and Dmitri resurfaced with what looked like three circular devices the size of a coin.

Dmitri disappeared and returned with a glass of water before Valentyn smashed each one and then dropped them inside.

“Something we should have checked out earlier, Rhys. Your ex isn’t playing games, but it didn’t dawn on me how tangled he was until your sister said something about us. There are things he can’t possibly have known unless he had access to your house, either by video or with these bugs.” I just stared at them, Gianni lowering his hand. “This ups the stakes a little bit but don’t worry, we got you.”

“Why are you here? Dmitri wouldn’t tell me this morning.”

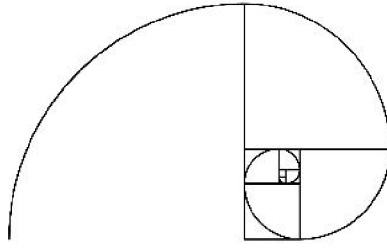
The air seemed to shift as Valentyn just sighed. “Sweetheart, we’re not the only ones that Owen’s trying to hire. If we don’t take the job, any one of those groups is going to come to your door and I guarantee they aren’t going to ask questions first. Now, to make this work, I’m going to ask you to do something, alright?”

I nodded, not sure what was going on. I trusted them, even if I knew that I probably shouldn't.

“When you get the chance, move whatever you have locked up somewhere else. Owen knows where it is and he's going to let everyone know. On the off chance someone gets in here, I don't want them to be able to find it.” That was easy enough. I nodded as he continued. “And whatever you do, don't fucking talk about it outside of wherever you're allowed to. Don't say its name. Don't mention anything about it. Hell, don't even tell anyone that you're in school. No one needs that information and officially, as of now, I have no idea who's been hired versus who is just some random person on the street.”

“So, treat everyone like they're out to get me? That doesn't seem healthy.”

Valentyn snorted, shaking his head. “It's not. But it's how we survive.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY

### **RHYS**

The air was tense in my house as I tried to relax against Dmitri's wide chest, trying to understand the thoughts running through my head. Owen wanted the program I was working on and he was doing anything he could to get it—going so far as creating a romantic meeting in France and making me believe that he loved me. Making me believe that I loved him.

And then roping my goddamn sister into all this.

All for a fucking program.

The moment Ada had left, I had moved around my office and thrown everything into a safe under the floorboards. The government had given me a few different precautions, but I would have to report this incident. Either they'd deem my house too risky to keep working out of or they'd pull me off the project. At this point, I wasn't sure my work was worth the hassle. It was *just* a dissertation after all.

“Rhys, sweetheart, stop thinking so hard,” Dmitri placed a kiss just behind my ear, tightening his arms around my waist.

I sat up, looking around my living room, wondering how they were okay just lounging around, waiting for something to happen. I had watched enough TV to know that there were three very lethal men surrounding me and one kid who had been through more than most people had been through in a lifetime. “I’m not thinking hard.”

Gianni burst out laughing from his perch on the other couch as he popped another handful of popcorn into his mouth. “Seriously? I can hear your thoughts from here.”

Valentyn sat up and dragged me into his lap, my body falling with an unpleasant thud as I collided with his chest. “I understand the worry, which is why I think we have to do things a little differently.” He kissed the bridge of my nose before standing me up and following him. “Your mind is always working, always running through scenarios and situations. It’s what you do. It’s your entire job. What we need to do is get it to stop working.”

“What?” How was that even possible?

Valentyn gestured for Gianni to follow as he stood, Dmitri grunting from his seat. “Seriously? *Paval* is here.”

“And he’s sleeping. Make sure he stays that way.” Valentyn grabbed my hand and guided me to the bedroom, my eyes widening when Gianni stepped in after us and closed the door. “What’s your favorite topic, Rhys?”

“Um... statistics?”

Gianni laughed. “Of course it is. We want you to tell us all about it.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Wait, really?” Owen had *never* asked me about the math I did or the classes I took. Hell, no one could understand much of what came out of my mouth when it came to academics. I couldn’t blame them but it still hurt that no one was at least interested in what I did all day. Giddy, I took a seat on my bed, grinning as I started spewing about algorithms and formulas that I had found in my freshman year.

It wasn’t until I was halfway through a proof that I noticed both men were sitting at my sides and my pants had disappeared. I jerked forward when Valentyn’s hand grabbed my cock through my boxers, Gianni’s lips attached to my neck. “Wait... what—ungh—shit—I thought-”

“Too much thinking,” Gianni whispered, continuing to suck on the sensitive skin, one of his hands roaming as it slipped beneath my shirt and started circling one of my nipples. He pinched the erect nub and I cried out before biting my tongue.

“Paval’s out there!” I hissed.

Valentyn just smiled as he turned my attention to him, still stroking me in antagonizingly slow movements. “And Dmitri is out there making sure he’s asleep. Rhys, we’re going to take you out of your head for a little bit.”

“But-”

“No buts, sweetheart. You need a break. A break from all the chaos in your head. A break from *him* and your sister and everything else that is plaguing you. So, we’re going to help you with that and then we’re going to get something to eat and figure all this shit out.”

“But,” I continued to stutter, Gianni pulling away with a deep sigh.

“Val, I think it’s time for something a little more... rigorous. He’s still *thinking*.”

I was, I totally was but just the thought of whatever they were going to do to me had me even harder than before, whining for release. Just as I went to start pumping into Valentyn’s fist, he pulled away.

“I agree with that. Rhys, do you trust me?”

He waited for me to respond, seemingly knowing that I was going to hesitate. “Yes,” I finally answered.

“Good, then come here.” He climbed onto my mattress fully, his body positioned sideways across my bed, his feet dangling off the other side. I frowned as he waved me over, Gianni grinning as he manhandled my body and twisted me around until I was face-to-face with one of the most glorious cocks I had ever seen.

“When the fuck did you get naked?”

Gianni chuckled. “When you were spouting about shit that made no fucking sense to us earthlings. The smile on your face



though was worth every fucking word I didn't understand. You ready?"

I didn't get a chance to say yes before Val swallowed my dick and I lurched forward in shock. I should have known that his mouth was heaven, hell he had taken me a few nights ago but I had been so panicky at that point that I couldn't really appreciate it.

Deciding to give in, I leaned forward and licked his tip, the man's massive thighs twitching with pleasure. I sucked him into my mouth, loving the weight of his cock on my tongue and the salty taste on my lips. I moaned as Valentyn's hands gripped my ass, slowly kneading the flesh as he swirled his tongue around my dick.

*Fucking hell.*

I definitely wasn't thinking about math right now.

"Can you take more, Rhys?"

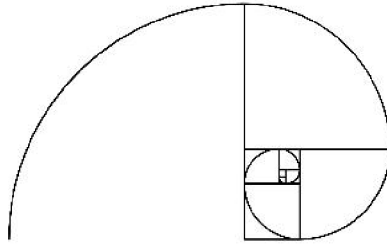
*More?* I had no idea what Gianni was referring to so I just moaned my answer, too intent on bringing Valentyn to completion to understand what the man was asking. It wasn't until I felt something cold against my hole that I realized what he was about to do. *No fucking way.*

A thick digit slipped into my hole and I all but screamed around Valentyn's length as Gianni fucked me with his fingers until I was a moaning mess, trying to keep from spilling down Valentyn's throat before the finale.

And that's when I felt it, the thick head of Gianni's cock pressed against my hole, slowly inching its way into my ass. I collapsed against Valentyn, unable to hold up my weight as Gianni continued to slide in, stretching me and filling me up until I was pinned between the both of them. A gentle hand stroked up and down my spine, soothing the initial sting of discomfort as my eyes rolled into the back of my head and I came just like that.

Valentyn hungrily gulped me down as I began lazily lapping at Valentyn's cock, the man lovingly thrusting up into my mouth as Gianni began to move as well.

This felt like a whole Ferris wheel of emotions and sensations that I couldn't get enough of. If the intent was to give me something else to think about, then the task was successful. I also knew from experience with these Greek gods that this was only the first stage of whatever they had planned. Selfishly, I hoped that it included Dmitri.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

### **RHYS**

It did not include Dmitri but it did end up with me squashed between two beautiful human beings, their deep snores lulling me into a false sense of comfort. I didn't believe for a second that I had seen or heard the last of Owen or Ada's excuses about how things came to be. With the few explanations they had given me as I tried to wrap my head around their less-than-legal activities, there was no fucking way Owen was just going to roll over and die.

The worst part was the fact that if these men *didn't* take the job, everyone else would be on my ass about a program they shouldn't have even known about. It worried me that my advisor hadn't reached out after I sent him a panicked email and then a voice message about all of this. I wasn't so much as worried about my life as I was about the state of the project I had spent years working on.

Carefully, I slipped from between them, trying not to giggle at the way that Gianni melted against Valentyn's chest as if I

had never even been there.

I squashed those nasty thoughts, the ones that told me I didn't belong and headed for my office. A quick search for my phone made me realize it was in the living room. Too lazy to venture out there, I snatched the neglected house phone from its stand on my desk and tried calling my advisor. When he didn't answer, I tried calling the number Hawk International had given me for emergencies, knowing full well that no one was going to answer at midnight and that if they did, they would be pissed.

“Mr. Knight, would you like to tell me why you're ruining my sleep?”

*It's a personal number? That's odd.* “How did you know it was me?” I whispered into the earpiece.

The man on the other line chuckled. “Mr. Knight, there's something known as caller ID. Now, you wouldn't be calling me if it wasn't urgent. Tell me before my wife starts calling for me to come back to bed.”

I cleared my throat, trying to get rid of the scratchiness of my voice. “There's... someone after the project I'm working on. I tried calling my advisor but he never called me back.”

“Do they know where it is?”

“No. Well, yes. They know I have it. I moved it though. But they... they put a hit out on me.” It sounded so fucking stupid saying it aloud but I wasn't going to detail the fact that my ex had broken into my house and then hired people to take the

program. This was the easiest way to explain it as I tightened my grip on my phone, waiting for his answer.

“Yeah, okay. Mr. Knight. Go back to sleep. Your paranoia is going to drive you mad. You know that you’re allowed to keep any and all documents on-site if you would like instead of at your house.”

“I’m serious!” I hissed into the phone, panic building in my chest again. If this man wasn’t going to believe me then no one else would. I already knew I’d be safe with the men in my house but I needed someone to take this seriously.

The man drew a long sigh before speaking again. “Mr. Knight. I’m only going to say this once. We have surveillance on your house. We haven’t seen anything suspicious, alright? Go to bed. Your anxiety is making me anxious.” I opened my mouth to reiterate my fears but he seemed to catch on. “Goodnight, Rhys. Come by the office tomorrow if you’d like to start working on-site. Otherwise, there are only a few more days until your presentation and then it’ll be off your hands.”

I frowned, reading the calendar in front of me. I had May 19<sup>th</sup> circled in big red lettering, which was two and a half weeks away on a Wednesday. “Um, *days?*”

“Things got moved up. We’ll see you on Thursday, Rhys.” And with that, he hung up, leaving me completely confused and even more strung out than before. I had less than a week to prepare my entire presentation to Hawk International. It was the sum of my life’s work, something I had lived and breathed for six years, and now I was just going to hand it over.

Something felt wrong.

Like *really* wrong.

I turned around, sifting through my emotions to find out what was bothering me. Hawk International had always been shady to me when I found them at the job fair. The security clearance had been a terrifying ordeal, as well as the polygraph, but it hadn't raised any red flags at the time. I frantically ripped open one of my cabinet drawers and rifled through the papers until I found my interview questions.

I hadn't been allowed to bring anything into the building or leave with anything during the interview process but they forgot that I was great with numbers and memorization. Needing to dissect everything, I had written it all down on paper, word for word so that I could comb through it later. I wouldn't ever need it but I'm glad that at a time like this, I was as weird as I was.

The questions in general were harmless—where I worked, what I did, my background, my trustworthiness. But then they morphed into my livelihood and where I lived and how close I was with my family. If I had a car and how often I went out and who I called. Again, the questions in and of themselves were harmless. But together? It was like someone was trying to see how often I was alone.

Which was most of the time.

The man on the phone had told me that they had surveillance on my house and that nothing had seemed suspicious but that couldn't be true. Owen had picked my lock and the men

currently in my house didn't exactly fit the bill of ordinary handymen.

*Hawk International doesn't work with the government.*

Had the bugs been from them? But then how did Owen know things he wasn't supposed to? My thoughts went haywire with the forbidden connections, ones that I hoped and prayed weren't true.

It was a dreadful realization as I stumbled backward, gasping when I bumped into Dmitri who was standing at the edge of my office. I nearly screamed but he wrapped an arm around my back when I twisted around and kissed me. Like it was the most natural thing in the world. The panic disappeared in an instant as I melted against him and then pulled away. "Why did you do that?"

"Didn't mean to scare you, Love but I thought slapping my hand over your mouth wouldn't be the way to go." Sweet of him to think about my triggers like that. I nodded slowly, pushing him back into the hallway, eyes peeled for Paval. Dmitri pulled me toward the living room. "He's in the guest bedroom, I hope you don't mind."

I didn't. "Why were you outside my office?"

"Heard some noise and then I found you and you looked like you saw a ghost. Didn't want to interrupt your train of thought and I knew that we probably shouldn't be in here without an invitation. Unlike last time. So, this is your office? There's a lot of numbers. I didn't get a chance to look at them before."

Once again, grade A guys. How they had fallen in my lap, I had no idea. “Yeah, um. I just... I called my advisor to let them know about Owen but he wasn’t answering. So I called the company I work for and he blew me off.” Dmitri frowned as he sat on the couch and I crawled on after him, situating myself on his lap, my back against his chest. He strung his arms around my waist and I closed my eyes, relishing the comfort this embrace brought.

“You mean he didn’t believe you?”

“No. Well, yes, he didn’t believe me.”

“I would have. You sounded terrified.”

I groaned because I hated that. I hated that these men could tell by the tone of my voice how I was feeling. “It’s just that none of it makes sense and so I went through my notes and... I don’t think they work for the government. They’ve moved my dissertation up to Thursday and I just—something’s off.” I twisted around so I was looking up at him from an odd angle. “You know they said they had surveillance on my house and that they haven’t seen anything suspicious?”

“That’s... interesting.”

“Yeah,” I twisted around again, threading my fingers through his. “I don’t get it. I don’t feel good about it either.”

Dmitri dipped his head and placed a kiss on the edge of my shoulder. “We’ll deal with it when the sun comes up, alright? For now, you need sleep. You’ve been strung out for the past few days and your body is going to start protesting. Do you



want to go back to bed?” I thought about the two men snuggled up on my mattress right now and shook my head. I didn’t want to ruin that. “Okay then, go to sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up. There’s a full day tomorrow.”

Other than working on my dissertation, I had no idea what he was talking about. “What?”

“You left your phone out in the living room. Seems your mother called three times. Someone named Joey messaged you about what time you were going to be there and then Liam texted 7 pm. It wasn’t until I saw your father’s message that he was making your favorite that it all made sense. Someone has a birthday tomorrow, don’t they?”

The color disappeared from my cheeks as I froze. In all the craziness, I had completely forgotten what tomorrow was. May 3<sup>rd</sup>. My birthday. A day that I enjoyed forgetting because I would have rather stuck my head under the covers and eaten raspberry-flavored sweets all day in peace. Everyone in my family put so much stock in getting older whereas I liked to avoid the conversation altogether.

“Were you going to tell us?”

I shook my head. “No, I hate birthdays.” The fake happiness and pretending that nothing in life felt wrong as we ate dinner and cake and played games. The gifts were always atrocious as conversations morphed into my love life. Last year’s party had been the worst, Owen always trying to outdo everyone and parade me around as if he was the only one capable of taking care of me. I really didn’t want to show up to one of those

things and have to play nice again, especially with the recent developments where Ada was involved.

I realized the words that had come out of my mouth, the dismissiveness of the relationship we were trying to start but it had been several seconds of silence when I finally addressed it and now it was awkward. “I didn’t mean it to come out like that.”

Dmitri snorted. “We haven’t given you a lot to work with, Rhys. I know that. And that’s on us. We’ve been so focused on making sure you’re protected that we’ve kind of forgotten to let you see who we are. You know that we work dangerous jobs and you know that we have Paval, a kid we love more than life but there isn’t much else you know about us.”

He wasn’t wrong.

Despite how comfortable all this felt, I still didn’t know the men in my house. He pressed another kiss to my shoulder. “I grew up in France until I was about 16 before I came to the States. Could you believe that my parents used to bake fresh bread? I thought I was going to be a baker.”

I choked on a laugh because there was no way the monster of a man I was leaning up against would have ever been a baker.

“Don’t laugh. I had dreams of creating pastries and savory snacks, opening my own shop in New York City.”

“Why didn’t you?” I twisted around again to look up at him but he wasn’t looking at me. He had this faraway look in his

eyes, remembering years before this moment.

“Couldn’t. I couldn’t sit still. Saw something I wouldn’t wish on anyone and it ruined my perfect little dream. I went from wanting to bring a smile to everyone’s face with a snack shop to not being able to deal with anything out of place. Everything pissed me off. I couldn’t pretend that the world was this vast open place where I could do anything that I wanted anymore. I fell in with the wrong crowd and tried to make my way back. College happened but I don’t remember it and then something snapped.” His body tensed, his arms tightening around me as I waited for him to continue. “The anger, it was too much. Watching people get away with shit. I... someone died because of me.” His accent seemed to thicken with his dark emotions. It was both hot and slightly disturbing, considering what he was talking about.

“Did they deserve it?” I didn’t know why I asked it like that. I shouldn’t have. I should have been appalled that this dangerous man had killed someone with his hands but I kind of knew that already. I knew that all three of them had probably killed more than one person while they had been working and yet... it didn’t bother me as much as it should have. A week ago, I might have run screaming to the police. But today, just past midnight, I snuggled a little farther into his chest because it was warm and it was mine.

“Shit, yeah. They did. That’s how I met Val. Gianni followed soon after but without Val, I’m not sure where I’d be. He brought me into this world but it’s given me a way to release all those feelings.”

“Do you regret it? Being a part of this world?”

He fell silent for a moment before he relaxed, shifting me until I was curled up on my side, my face angled to meet his. “No, not really. I didn’t have much else to live for and when Paval came to live with us, it was like my whole world brightened.” His thick accent was making me really hot, even as much as I hated the reminder of what France had originally brought me. “Just like when we stepped into this house a few days ago, I had no idea we were going to meet you.” He bent down and placed a tender kiss on my lips. “Do you? Regret meeting us?”

I had no idea how he could fucking ask that question as I shook my head, wrapping a hand around his neck and pulling him back to my lips. “*Never.*”

God, I loved everything about this man, the sweetness, the tenderness, and the way he could switch it on a dime and then fuck me into oblivion. I missed this, all of this, all of the nuances of a relationship that Owen had denied me.

“And now?” I whispered when I came up for air.

Dmitri sighed, “I’m not sure. I just know that I want this.”

“This?” I knew I was playing with fire, asking questions that would give me answers I wasn’t sure I was ready for.

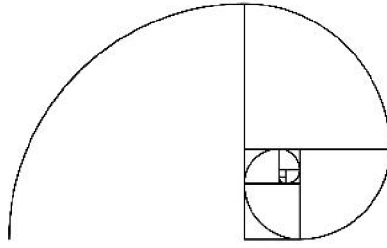
“Yes, Love. *This*. I don’t want it to end. I don’t want it to just be a job. I don’t want us to just be here because of Owen or your project or the kitchen renovation that you don’t really need.”

“*Oh.*” I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my lips as I reached up to drag him into another kiss. He was saying that he wanted this not because it had to be but because he wanted it to be. I threw my leg over his hip, one of those beautiful hands squeezing the underside of my thigh as his other arm curled around my back and dragged me closer to his chest. His tongue swiped along the seam of my lips, before slipping into my mouth and dancing with mine. He swallowed one of the moans that escaped me, chuckling as I rocked my hips against him.

My cock hardened as it pressed against his, his arousal thickening and pressing against me. Too soon, he tore his lips away from me, the deep blues of his eyes sparkling with desire. “As much as I want to take you on this couch, Love, you need to sleep. I’m not going to ruin your health for pleasure.”

I knew he was right but I kind of *really* wanted this as I chased his lips, Dmitri’s hand on my thigh squeezing until it was almost painful. “What the fuck?” I hissed.

“Be a good boy and go to sleep and I promise you that I’ll fuck you in the shower in the morning.” That wasn’t helping the rock-hard case in my shorts but I complied anyway, trying to think of dead spiders and Ada’s terrible personality before drifting off to sleep.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

### VALENTYN

The satisfied look on Dmitri's face when he exited the bathroom this morning was nearly enough to have me dragging both him and Rhys into the bedroom for a lesson on gloating. However, Rhys reminded me of the timeline and the thorough pounding I wanted to deliver to both of them would have to wait.

Hopefully not too long.

My attention switched to protective mode as I kept an eye on everything around us, praying that I wouldn't have to deal with anything out of the ordinary.

If Rhys had been contracted by some secret group to create a dangerous program, then *everyone* in our line of work would be out to get it. As much as I wanted to understand it, the numbers made my head hurt.

All I knew was that in the wrong hands, it was dangerous as fuck.

And Rhys had the key.

The *only* key.

My eyes darted to the left when a car zoomed across the parking lot, my hand shooting out to grab Rhys and pull him back against my chest. He flew toward me with an ‘oof’, rolling his eyes for the umpteenth time. I was on edge; anything could be an issue.

Out in the open on his campus, there wasn’t much protection I could give him. Anyone and everyone could be a threat to his safety. And if something happened to him...

“Hey, hey, *hey*,” Rhys twisted around in my hold, hands holding my cheeks as he tried to get my attention. “Val, you can’t growl out here like that. People will think you’re an animal.” He giggled as if it was the funniest thing but it was just what I needed to calm my nerves.

“Sorry.”

“No, you’re not. You’re a trained killer and my ex didn’t really make it easy to trust anyone.” He shrugged and then started walking toward his advisor’s office again, pulling me along with him. I was about to ask how he was so nonchalant about the situation until I realized that Rhys had somehow disassociated himself from what had happened and what he needed. He still didn’t truly believe that all of his hard work was just the product of greedy men.

Rhys thrived on facts.

I just hoped that his advisor would have some.

I followed along in silence, gripping Rhys' hand a little tighter as he stopped before a large wooden door and knocked three times. A feeble 'come in' slipped through and Rhys slid it open before stepping inside and closing the door after us.

A thin man stood by a bookshelf, his fingers running along the old books. He sighed at our entrance and then turned around, his expression like a deer in headlights. "Rhys! I didn't know you were stopping by. You should have called." It was only now that I could see that his hair was in disarray, his clothes were crumpled and the state of his office looked like someone had bulldozed through it. Twice.

Rhys stepped back, obviously unsure of the situation. "I *did* call. Seven times. You never picked up. What's going on?"

"Nothing, well *something*. Your dissertation is in a few days. Exciting, right?"

"No, it's not. What's going on? Something is off. I'm not working for the government, am I?" *Right in for the kill, Goddamnit Rhys.*

The man loosened his tie, bending down to gather a few papers, trying to avoid the question but answering anyway. "Look, Rhys. Just give them what they want. After Thursday, well... you won't have to worry about anything, ok?"

"What does that *mean*? Did they threaten you? Did they come in here? Fuck, they did. Or was it Owen?" Rhys looked around, his eyes falling on me almost as if he expected me to do something but I was a little lost for words, especially since there was a different conclusion that I was making.



In any other situation, Rhys' advisor would have said that everything would have gone back to normal after he handed over the program. But he didn't say that. He said that Rhys wouldn't have to worry about anything after that. And in my line of work, that usually translated to—you can't worry if you're dead.

I pulled Rhys behind me, stretching out to my full height as I glared down at the advisor. "Who is Hawk International?" The advisor shrieked but I wasn't here to play games. Rhys' life was at stake. "Tell me."

"They're an overseas company. Not really legal or anything but they've been looking for someone to create a statistical program. They recruited Rhys and—"

"How long have you known?" I watched his eyes flash with fear, his entire body trembling. The fucker had known from the start but as a selfish human being, had cherished his life more than Rhys'. And now Rhys had to deal with trying to stay alive. There were no other questions to ask as we exited the room, Rhys two steps ahead of me. "Rhys, hold up. *Rhys*."

He slipped into the passenger's seat, anxiously waiting for me to get in the car. It wasn't even two seconds after we got home that Rhys raced inside, bypassing Gianni, Dmitri, and Paval, making a beeline for his office.

I was still calling after him, all of us rushing to his office to see what was so goddamn important. He hadn't said one word in the car and now I was fucking worried that something had set him off. Rhys knelt on the ground and rolled back the rug

in full view of all of us, put in a code, and then ripped the door open. Inside were three small USB disks and a stack of handwritten formulas. Rhys stared at it for a few seconds before letting out a deep breath and grabbing the documents and disks and pushing past us once again.

“What the fuck is he doing?” Gianni whispered and I just shrugged, trying to swipe him but Rhys was a slippery, determined motherfucker as he rushed into the living room and set everything in the fireplace. His movements were short and frantic, a box of matches procured from the coffee table. The next thing I knew was the entire pile of papers was in flames, Rhys sitting back with a tight smile on his face. “Rhys, what did you do?”

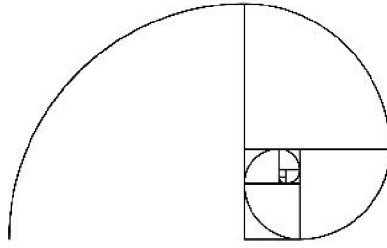
“There’s nothing to steal if they don’t have the numbers.” He stood up, the adrenaline wearing off as his lids drooped. “Now there’s no reason to come after me.”

*Fuck.* I bit my tongue, trying to reign in my fear for Rhys’ safety as Dmitri decided to explain just how much worse Rhys had made this. “Love, you realize that you are the last copy of those numbers? Sure, you destroyed all the paperwork but there’s someone who can recreate that. Right?” The realization slowly dawned on him. “You’ve moved the target from that safe to you, Rhys. You haven’t eliminated the problem. You’ve made it worse.”

The weight of Rhys’ actions had made the job a little trickier but not impossible. “We can’t stay here,” I declared. “Grab a bag, Rhys. Let’s move.”

“What about the dinner at my parents’?”

As much as I wanted to say forget it, we all knew that Rhys not showing up would cause a completely different but equally annoying issue. “We’ll cross that bridge in a few hours. Right now? This is the absolute *worst* place to stay if everyone wants that information.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### **RHYS**

The ride to their house had been silent, none of them making an effort to say anything as Dmitri unlocked the front door and let me wander into the living room. I wasn't in shock as I moved to the large windows, lifted the blinds, and then began pacing along their living room floor. In an attempt to make things better, I had made them *so much worse*. They—whoever *they* were—weren't going to follow us here, were they?

*Damnit, Rhys? Really?* I was smarter than half the people in my city, had degrees most people would die for, money that most people could only dream of, and yet I had done something as stupid as making things *more* dangerous. What should have been the start of a new relationship had turned into them protecting me from the shit I had gotten tangled in from my own stupidity. Although meeting Owen hadn't been coincidental, it had been my own stupid ass that had fallen for

his antics, thinking that I was in so much love that I invited him into my house.

A house that was no longer safe to stay at.

Someone dragged me into a hug that I didn't fight, whispering words in my ear that I could barely hear. I was too far into my head as I pondered my next steps. The program hadn't been published anywhere and 90% of the data was now gone. All of my formulas were cryptic at best and in different pieces so that until my presentation if anyone did get a hold of something, it wouldn't mean anything. The only puzzle piece left was *me*.

When I finally pulled myself out of my funk, my eyes ran around the room to find a clock. "Oh, we have to get ready for dinner." I tried to pull away from the man holding me, Gianni laughing as I fought the restraints but he wasn't letting me go.

Valentyn was poised against the wall in the foyer, Dmitri standing next to him as Paval stared at me, confused. I knew that I was the problem, that I had upended their life but I was trying to get over my own drawbacks to make this easier.

"What? I'm ok." I nodded, more to myself than them.

Gianni placed a gentle kiss on my forehead. "No, you're not. You're trying to pretend that the problems in front of you don't bother you and it's going to break you." He looked over at the two, sharing a silent conversation before he continued. "And I think it's time for ice cream."

Dmitri grabbed a pair of car keys from the hook and scooped Paval up as the kid frowned. “But it’s right before dinner!”

“Special treat,” Dmitri mumbled as he slipped out the front door, Valentyn following and leaving me in Gianni’s arms. I opened my mouth to protest the special attention he was giving me but he didn’t speak as he dragged me upstairs into a room. It was much darker than I would have thought his would have been as he laid me down on the bed and crawled onto the mattress after me, draping his body over mine. The only space between our chests was because he had propped himself up on his forearms, his face inches from mine.

Strangely, the shield he had just created gave me the safety I needed to come back to reality. It was as if his wide shoulders blocked out all the bad things in the world in a way that hugging me in the living room didn’t quite do.

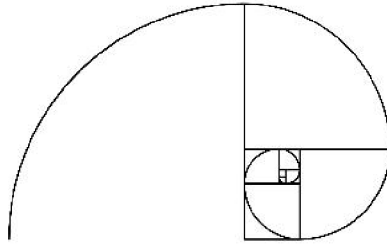
Gianni tucked his head, running his nose along my cheek and jaw before replacing it with his lips. “Thought it might help get rid of whatever you’re thinking in that big brain of yours. You can’t keep pretending that these things aren’t happening because then you’ll have to deal with all of them at the same time later.”

I reached up to tangle my fingers in his shirt, wondering what it would feel like if there was just a little more blocking out the world. I tugged on his clothing, hoping that he got the message. A few seconds later, his arms moved around my head, the entire weight of his body pressed against mine as it pushed me farther into the mattress.

*Safe. Protected. Peaceful.*

I didn't know what this was but holy shit, it was everything.

I angled my face up for a kiss, letting Gianni dominate my mouth as I was content to just taste him. He was my entire world right now, everything else falling away as he covered me, Gianni continuing to nip and kiss at my lips until I fell into a peaceful sleep without the nightmares that usually plagued me.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

### VALENTYN

With Gianni taking care of Rhys and Dmitri keeping Paval occupied, I had just enough time to answer a business call without being missed. Chester lived a few blocks away from our house, not that he knew or cared. So long as we stayed on our own side of the metaphorical fence, we kept it cordial. Unfortunately, the message he left on my voicemail sounded anything but.

“Oh my goodness! My favorite Belarusian! Whatever brings you to my humble abode?” Chester squealed as he waved away his guards and bounced up to me, dragging me inside and setting a shot of whiskey in front of me. Not taking it was a sign of disrespect so I knocked it back but held onto it, letting him know that I hadn’t come here to play.

His warehouse of crazy wasn’t somewhere I wanted to kick back and relax and while we weren’t enemies, we definitely weren’t friends. He grinned as he started up a conversation,



jumping right into business. “A little birdie told me you dropped the job.”

The next time I saw Owen, I was going to drop-kick him and give him a few bruises that wouldn't heal. If Rhys wasn't there, I'd bury the guy for good. “You heard wrong.”

Chester cackled as he reached over the counter and grabbed the full bottle of whiskey before downing a fifth. He made an exaggerated sigh as he smacked his lips together, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “See, that's what you told me last time. But then I saw this.” He snapped his fingers and one of his people slid a handful of pictures onto the surface.

Pictures of me, my guys, Rhys, and Paval. There were smiles and those stupid hairbands and in the last picture was Rhys attached to my lips. We really did look like a family and in every picture that caught us looking at Rhys, I could tell that this relationship wasn't going to end when the job did. It couldn't. I wouldn't let it.

“I'm just not convinced that you're trying to pull information out of him. You all looked a little too excited to be out there.” Chester's smile widened as he took another gulp of the whiskey and I fought my reaction to punch him in the gut for not so subtly threatening my family.

“You've got your tactics and I've got mine.” In another day or two, all of this would be over. Rhys would make his presentation and then I'd steal him away to safety. It was the only option we had at this point.

“But kissing your target?”

Chester wasn't going to fall for my upstanding business practices. I had to play his game, terrible as it was. I slid him my shot glass, letting him fill it up so that I could throw it back before I answered. "Tell me you wouldn't mind hitting that?"

A moment of silence filtered between us and then he nodded, chuckling. "You're right. He's adorable and loaded. The whole package."

To keep up with the lie I was creating on the spot, I gave Chester something else to chew on. "Besides, he doesn't respond to threats well. Owen tried a few times and scared the piss out of the kid but he never gave anything up. Probably the reason his company used him over anyone else. Genius, really." Chester raised an eyebrow, silently asking me to clarify. "Owen's trigger happy. You know that. He hired us and then tried to complete it himself, nearly ruining the whole thing. But I've got it under control."

He nodded. "So, you're taking the job?" Chester seemed almost defeated and for the price that Owen was paying, I'd be pretty disappointed missing out on that paycheck too.

"Don't see why I wouldn't. We already got the kid's trust. Just need a few safe combinations and we're on the road."

Once again, Chester's acceptance turned into suspicion. I couldn't keep up with this guy. "And this wouldn't have anything to do with why his house is empty?"

I should have known that more than just Hawk International was watching the house but fuck if we were going to stay there with Rhys' life in danger. "Had to make it seem like the world

was closing in on him. If he thinks we're his only safe haven left, he'll trust us with more than he's supposed to." These lies were to going to fucking kill me one day.

"Not sure I believe you but we're honorable businessmen. Hurry up and get that fucker to stop calling me before I kill that payday you got coming your way."

I knew a warning when I saw it, knowing that Chester was just as trigger-happy as Owen but Chester had a lot more to lose if he stepped over that line. Giving the table a good pat, I slipped out of his establishment and immediately dialed Owen. He picked up on the second ring, singing a hello in my ear that had me wanting to rip him to shreds. "Where's the money? We're out of the house."

The deal had been simple. We didn't get paid until we left Rhys' house.

Owen chuckled. "And my fiancé?"

"Safe," I barked.

"And I told you guys to leave him alone."

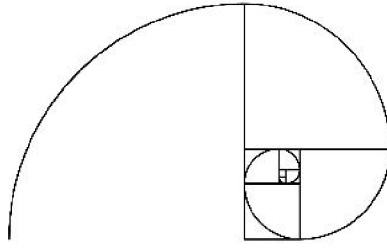
My hand tightened around my phone as I stalked toward the car, hoping and praying that Owen was nowhere within reach or he was going to die a gruesome death tonight. Breaking my usual persona, I decided it was time for Owen to hear words that he didn't usually have to deal with. "And I don't quite like the fact that you are terrorizing him with what you think is love. We'll have the program to you by the end of the week." As a professional, it wasn't my job to step inbetween them but

fuck, Rhys was more to me than just a transaction now. He had been since the moment I laid eyes on him.

“Where did you take him?!” Owen screamed, his voice barely above a whisper but I could tell that he was put out by the fact that we weren’t just going to roll over and let him freak Rhys out.

“Until he tells me that you’re safe territory, that’s none of your business. Money in the account by midnight, Owen. I don’t take jobs that can’t be paid for.”

Owen groaned. “Fine. But all of your little tactics to *save* him won’t work anyway. I happen to know that there’s a birthday party that requires his presence. I’d ask you to tell him happy birthday but I think I can just do that myself.” My eyes widened in horror as I heard the sound of a door opening and Owen greeting someone. When I heard ‘Ada’, I hung up and dialed Gianni. Goddamnit, we had sent Rhys right into that one.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

### GIANNI

I hadn't seen him sleep well in the past few days so I felt pretty proud of the fact that his cute little snores permeated the room long after I was supposed to wake him. He needed the sleep and he would have never let us keep him in bed this long had he known that it was five minutes to eight. When Rhys opened his eyes, a slight glaze covering his normally vibrant pupils, I couldn't help but kiss him. We had maneuvered around until he was sprawled on top of me like the most precious blanket and fuck, I never wanted to move.

Knowing that if we didn't make it to his parents' house in a reasonable amount of time, they'd start asking questions, I slowly let him go because that's the last thing we wanted. I stole a few more kisses along the way before we made it down the stairs, Paval devouring what looked like his second bowl of ice cream that was most certainly going to ruin his dinner. It was worth it though, seeing the smile creeping onto Rhys' face

and especially when I watched him hop over to Dmitri and grab a kiss before slipping outside.

Shocked as I was, I tried to mask it, giving Dmitri a chaste kiss as well before following our fourth to the car. The truck was gone which meant Valentyn was still out so we'd have to take the jeep. I had a mind to call Valentyn and ask for a status but he'd update us as needed.

The ride to Rhys' parents' house was silent, Rhys nervously drumming along the dashboard as we pulled into a massive driveway. I had to look at the address he had given me twice to make sure because holy shit his parents were loaded. He gave me a sheepish smile as he slid out of the car and I made my way over to him. "I think we all kind of forgot to wish you a happy birthday, Rhys." I kissed him, slowly and thoroughly until he was whining against the door and chasing my lips once I pulled away.

"As much as I love the kiss, can we forget about the birthday part? I know it's supposed to be a happy thing but it's mostly just bad memories and—shit." His gaze fell on one of the vehicles behind me but I didn't get a chance to ask as I whipped out my phone, Valentyn's number rolling across the screen.

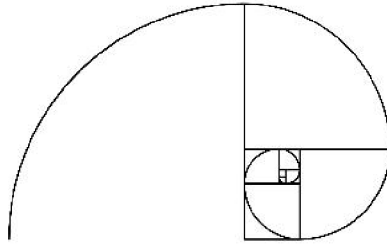
"What? Shit, yeah, I think we figured that out." The visible terror on Rhys' face told me that he had already clocked Owen's arrival. I turned back to Rhys, placing a gentle hand on the middle of his chest to calm his breathing. "Hey, we don't have to go in there. We can go back home." I shouldn't

have said 'home' but it just slipped out. Rhys didn't respond, still staring at the red Toyota Camry parked closest to the door. I grunted as Valentyn mentioned that it should be Rhys' choice but that I should be ready on a dime to leave before hanging up.

Rhys took a deep breath and pushed up off the car, all the work from this afternoon undone by a simple appearance from Owen. "No... I need to say things. I have to let him know... I..."

He wasn't thinking straight and I had no idea where this was going to leave us but I'd stand by him 100%. "You don't have to do this, Rhys."

"I... think I need to." It was the last words he spoke before we walked into the house.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

### **RHYS**

The family was cackling and laughing as Owen told a story about how I had nearly burned down the kitchen while trying to make mac n cheese, putting it on for 30 minutes rather than 3 minutes in the microwave. The worst part was the fact that I didn't make mac n cheese, in fact, it was one of the few dishes that Owen *only* made when he was trying to apologize. My entire house had smelled like burnt cheese for a week, reminding me of yet another terrible night in my life. It had been another one of those moments where he had been physically abusive and then tried to apologize with food.

It hadn't worked and I had locked him out of my room for three days before letting him back in. It was becoming glaringly more obvious that I never truly forgave him after every incident; he just found a way to worm his way back into my head and I let him stay there until he hurt me again.

Liam caught me as I walked on, "We can call the police."



I just shook my head. "I'm not staying."

Joey saw me next, greeting me at the door with a wild smile. "Happy birthday." My entire family chorused through their own greetings, Dad and my niece, Tia suspiciously absent. I suspected that they were on a grandfather/grandkid outing of their own since the festivities always ran late and Ada hated Tia around alcohol. Mom twisted around to look at me, perched right by Owen, her hands in his, a frown on her face as Gianni came into view.

Gianni tightened his grip around my waist, daring anyone to say something, which of course my mother took as a challenge. "Owen was nice enough to stop by, sweetie. Even brought you a bouquet. Who is this?"

Owen had wormed his way into my family too and I had no idea how to undo that. They all saw him as this perfect boyfriend and me as the kid who had never been able to get my act together. I hated it. "My boyfriend," I spat. Gianni leaned in to kiss my cheek, selling it as best he could but I knew that that was more for my confidence than anything.

Owen laughed and stood up, grabbing the bouquet he had bought. "You can stop the jealous act, Rhys. We get it. I made a few mistakes but I'm here now, alright?"

*A few mistakes?* I didn't want to air our dark past in front of my entire family but it was a better place than any because maybe for the first time, they'd finally understand that Owen wasn't the angel he professed to be. "It's not an act. I broke up

with you months ago.” My voice wavered but I didn’t step back so I called that a win.

Owen moved toward me, placing the bouquet in my hands. “Sweetheart,” his eyes darted to Gianni and he stepped back, out of reach. “Stop playing. It’s not funny anymore. Your family is worried. *I’m* worried.” Owen still terrified me a little but thank god for my bitch of a sister as she tried to clean up a mess that she was partly responsible for.

“Lay off him, Owen. This is his birthday and we’re here to celebrate him. You can figure out the relationship when you guys leave tonight.”

“No!” I slapped my hands over my mouth, not meaning to yell it because now everyone’s eyes were on me and my mother was standing up, wondering if I needed more help than she already thought I needed. “There will be no figuring it out. I... don’t want him here.”

Owen snorted, pointing at Gianni. “So, you’d rather choose the conquest you picked up a few days ago, instead? Ada told me all about the little family you flung in her face. Where’s the boy by the way?”

I knew for a fact that no one knew that Ada and him talked regularly for them to be sharing that kind of information. Strangely, it was Mom and not Ada’s husband, Ernest, who asked the next question. “What is he talking about?” Ada sputtered some excuse, waving her hands frantically to dispel an argument that was only going to be postponed.

Gianni shook his head, chuckling. “Is this a good time to mention that Ada and Owen have been... acquainted? Or the restraining order?” It was one hell of an entrance as Gianni puffed out his chest, standing a few inches taller, the look in his eyes darkening until they were almost murderous. Liam and Joey confirmed Gianni’s statements, silence meeting the announcement.

Mom let out a deep sigh, the house quiet except for Owen shuffling from foot to foot. Gianni was chomping at the bit, hoping to do some damage but I could still see the minor bruising around Owen’s face and knew for a fact that if Gianni let loose, he would be in jail by the end of the night.

I moved away from Gianni, hoping he’d get the hint that I’d rather leave than start up a commotion. He gave one last look around the room, that terrifying smile widening just a little. “I was really excited to meet all of you. Truly. But not if this is the company you keep.”

Not wanting to deal with whatever Gianni was going to do, I slipped back outside and raced to the car, shutting myself inside with my head in my lap. A tap against the glass had me looking up as pure horror flooded my veins. The door was yanked open, Owen tearing me from my seat and thrusting me against the side of the car so hard that I cried out in pain.

“You little fucker. Bringing him here? For what? To see me angry? I told you that I loved you, that I wanted to marry you and this is how you treat me?” He yanked me forward, ready

to thrust me against the car again when he was ripped off of me and thrown to the pavement.

Gianni growled in his face, an animalistic version of the sweet, loving man who had taken me to bed this afternoon. For some reason, I wasn't really scared of him. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? You break into his house," Punch. "And then you terrify him for hours," Punch. "And then you try to make him believe that you still love him?" Punch. "Not to mention you're not supposed to be anywhere near Rhys." Punch. I whimpered as blood splattered across the pavement and Gianni's fist, Owen groaning from the impact of his head hitting the gravel.

Mom screamed for him to stop, Joey and Liam rushing over to me to check my injuries. "Hey, what... is what he's saying true? Owen broke in again?"

My bottom lip trembled as I tried to fight the tears. "I didn't want to say anything."

Gianni stood up off Owen, moving back toward me as he looked me over, my brother and his husband stepping away. Blood droplets ran down his face, spreading across his shirt. There would be so many fucking questions to answer later. "I just want to go home," I cried.

Gianni didn't question it as he helped me back into the car. Liam and him shared a silent conversation over a handshake before my brother slipped out his phone and pressed it to his ear. "Yeah, I have an Owen Hall that violated a restraining order. Yes, the other party is safe. I'm his brother. Yes." Liam

nodded to Gianni, the man taking that as permission to leave. He slipped into the driver's seat and took off down the street.

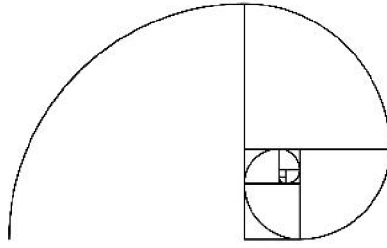
The panic in my chest was building again and if I didn't do something, I was going to pass out. Gianni reached over the console and grabbed my hand but instead of drawing comfort from him, I chose the easy way out and distanced myself from my emotions. If I couldn't feel anything, then I couldn't be scared of Owen still trying to get at me and tell me he loved me so that he could get my program.

I knew it was dangerous what I was doing, constantly pushing everything away to deal with later but it was so much easier than facing it.

By the time we made it to their house, I was a walking zombie, asking for them to put a movie on so I could mindlessly sit in one place and not think about anything else. I probably said three words before I was cuddled up against Dmitri's chest, everyone silent as something played on the screen.

“Rhys-”

Like a fucking toddler, I turned away from the voice and curled into myself, shaking my head. “No, no talking. There's a movie on. We need to watch.” The silent disappointment and concern that came from my three men was deafening.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### VALENTYN

My heart broke just a little more as I watched Rhys curl up tighter against Dmitri's chest. It only took one visit with Owen to undo everything we had been trying to do to build him back up. Then again, it hadn't even been a week since the other had met him and we couldn't expect a fucking miracle to drop out of the sky and undo all of the nightmares Owen had created.

Tearing my attention from him, I looked at Gianni, frowning at the murderous aura surrounding him, blood splattered across his face and shirt. Sometimes I forgot how much younger he was than all of us and while he was a sharp tool, he could also be a loose cannon.

He was still seething from a fight that I knew he hadn't been able to finish, which meant he was running on adrenaline that was absolutely going to terrify our boy.

“Shower, now.”

Gianni's expression broke, those big eyes looking at me, challenging me. "But-"

I shook my head and pointed to the stairs. "Don't make me say it again." He growled at me, taking one last look at Rhys before going upstairs. I was right behind him after I checked on Paval, surprised to see the kid actually asleep rather than hiding under the covers with a book or a puzzle.

I waited for Gianni to emerge from his shower, the fresh smell of coconut filling my nose. His pants hung low on his hips, the gentle designs on his chest reminding me of the many years we had spent together. His blonde hair hung around his face, bringing out the boyishness that I sometimes forgot about. Leaning against his bedframe, my arms folded across my chest, I watched him timidly step back into his room, eyes focused on me.

"Sit," I ordered.

He did and then his shoulders fell. "I just, fuck, I almost killed him."

"What stopped you?" I wasn't mad at him but I was curious.

"Rhys, fuck, he was crying. I knew Owen was a slippery fuck but I didn't think he was stupid enough to go outside and-"

I could see that Gianni was going to take this one pretty hard, that he was going to blame this misstep on himself. I hadn't been there so I had no idea what happened or how the situation transpired. I just knew that there was now a terrified

family trying to figure out why Rhys' new boyfriend had nearly killed the ex. "Mistakes happen." Unfortunately, in our line of work though, mistakes were deadly.

"But they can't. Not anymore. Not with Owen. You should have seen him. Rhys was so fucking scared..." Gianni began rambling about how he had fucked up and how we were right back at square one. He got lost in his head sometimes too and I couldn't help but smile as he started reasoning with himself and making plans when all he needed to do was take a breath.

I placed a firm hand on the back of his neck and squeezed a little, Gianni's back arching as he let out a little sigh. My smile widened at how easy it was to pull Gianni back, not to mention how fucking sexy it was when he gave in. "Look at me. Gianni. We will get through this and there will be a moment when Owen dies but not until we tell Rhys what's going to happen."

His frown was so fucking kissable but there were a few conversations that needed to happen before I went down that road because for as much as he needed to be dragged out of his head, I also needed a way to release my frustration.

"What are you talking about?"

I massaged the back of his neck, enjoying the way he squirmed on the mattress, wanting more than just the brush of my thumb along his shoulder.

"I'm saying that while Rhys knows a little about our business endeavors, he still needs to have the choice of where he'd like to be when all this goes south because it absolutely



will. Chester is done waiting because Owen doesn't know what honor means. Hawk International isn't going to just take the program on Thursday and we all know it. Rhys is a liability to them. I have an idea but you need to stay the fuck here.”

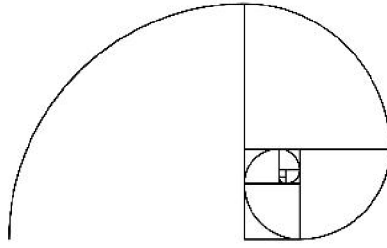
His frown deepened. “What?”

“You're wound up tighter than a spring. Right now, Rhys needs some direction and yes, I know you can be that safe space for him, but right now? You're not it. So, I'm going to speak with them downstairs and you're going to sit here until I come back.”

He bristled beneath my touch, wanting to fight, *needing* to fight.

“And then what?”

“And then I'm going to help you unwind.” This time I laid a kiss on his adorable pout, wondering what the world would do if they saw this version of Gianni rather than the murderous terror that ran around the city. Gianni choked as I squeezed his neck a little tighter before exiting the room. I could already imagine him standing up to reshift the growing pressure in his pants and fuck, I couldn't wait to watch him fall apart in my hands.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

### **DMITRI**

It was only a matter of time before Rhys broke into a million pieces. He wasn't cut out for the life we had inadvertently dragged him into. There was only so much he'd be able to take before he fell apart and I hated that he was trying so hard to be strong when we were right here. The slight trembles as he curled a little tighter against my chest paired with the grunts of frustration falling from his lips were breaking my heart.

The movie droned on in the background as I tightened my hold on him. He needed something and I was beginning to see that the lack of time we had spent together was actually working against us. I had no idea how to quiet the voices in his head or make him smile. Sure, sitting Paval in his lap would work for a little bit but that wouldn't fix the overarching problem.

And until Owen was dealt with, I wasn't sure *what* was going to work.

Valentyn made his way into the living room and he shook his head to keep me from getting up. He crouched in front of us, reaching forward to run his hands through Rhys' hair. Rhys wasn't really looking at him, eyes focused on some point along the wall, disassociating from the issues at hand. I didn't blame him but god, I needed him back.

"I need your help, sweetheart," Valentyn whispered. Rhys' gaze shifted to Valentyn as he sat up a little. "We're going to try something a little different. I need you to recreate those formulas."

Rhys shot up completely, leaning forward, eyes wide. He was still trembling and I could tell that we hadn't really gotten him back fully, but just the mention of numbers and there was a little more color in his cheeks. It took me a moment to realize that it wasn't the numbers but the fact that Valentyn *needed* him that brought him back.

A smile tugged at the corner of Valentyn's lips. "See, there's a few people that want the program and I'm not so sure that any of them should have it. It's a long shot, but can you recreate it with a handful of alterations throughout the sequences? Or however, that works. Alterations that would make them inoperable. Let's start with three?"

Creating a distraction? It could work if Rhys was up for it.

Rhys nodded slowly, still a little wary of everything that had happened tonight. I was sure Val and Gia would give me a rundown at some point when Rhys wasn't in earshot.

“That’s good. I don’t think we’ll be able to stop them from getting their hands on the program but this will allow us enough time to figure out who’s trying to do what.” When Rhys nodded again, I couldn’t help but smile as I sat up and pulled him against my chest. He leaned into the touch, something he hadn’t done since he got back, which was a good sign. “What do you need?”

“Just my computer.” His eyes darted around the room. “Where’s Gianni?”

“Cooling off.” Valentyn gave Rhys a small smile, nipping any further conversation on that matter in the bud. “He’ll be fine after I help him unwind. Now, do you want us to set you up in the office tomorrow or-”

“Can I stay right here?”

Both of us froze as we realized that Rhys meant he was going to start right now. We should have known that giving him a task would set him into action. It also meant that he wasn’t going to sleep and it was one of the few things he needed more of.

I rested my chin on his shoulder, opening my mouth to say something when Rhys cut in. “I just need to not think about it, okay? He’s been a nightmare for so long that I just... only a few more days and then I don’t have to worry about it, right? You said you needed my help. I want to help and I want to do this.”

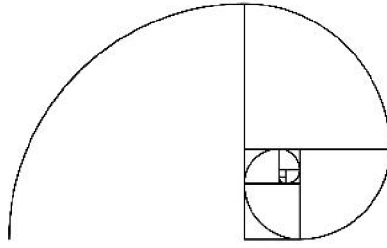
Valentyn’s eyes softened. “You need to be needed, don’t you?”

Rhys didn't answer but I could feel the subtle shift in his body that told us exactly what we needed to know. He wanted to be loved and cherished, sure. But he also wanted to be needed, he wanted someone who wanted him. I couldn't believe the luck of having him fall in our laps because fucking hell, that's all we wanted to do.

Valentyn patted his knee and I moved to get up as Rhys shot me a playful glare. "Where are you going?"

"I was going to go get your laptop so you could start working."

He frowned and shook his head. "No, you need to stay right here. It's comfortable just the way it is." He scrambled off my lap to search through his bag but I didn't miss the words he muttered. "*You help keep the demons away.*"



## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

### GIANNI

There were about fifteen ways I could successfully extract Owen from wherever he was and start a dismemberment that would be worthy of the horrors he had brought into our lives. Hell, I had already thought about two when my fists were flying into his face at the Knight Family's house. Had Rhys not been there, I was pretty sure Owen would have been beaten into the pavement.

My only saving grace was that the Knight family had finally seen Owen's true nature, including Owen's tryst with Ada. The fucking bitch had been diddling the enemy and for what? I really hoped she didn't genuinely like the guy.

Rhys was both the best and worst thing that had ever happened to us—he would be our greatest weakness aside from Paval and yet, he was mine, *ours*. I was never letting him go.

I wracked my brain for answers, trying to figure out how Owen had made it around me. It had to have been when I focused on Rhys' mother, trying to explain to her that Owen was a piece of shit but how the fuck had I missed that? Had I been a few seconds later, Rhys would have been-

The slow creak of the door opening had me whipping around, freaking out at the aura surrounding Valentyn as he stepped into my room. It had been a while since I had seen that expression on his face, the need to unwind but in an entirely different way than I needed. He was going to be so fucking rough tonight and I couldn't wait.

My eyes drifted to the obscene bulge between his thighs as he stalked toward me, his cock thickening as he dropped a hand to massage it through his pants. I groaned at the mere memory of that beast inside of me and the punishing pace that Val liked to keep when he used me. And yes, he *used* me because that was the only fucking explanation for how thoroughly fucked I felt after.

And god, it was glorious.

Between us, there was only ever one rule.

My cock was his.

I waited for the game to start, not ready for when he roughly grabbed me by the neck and dragged me into a tongue-licking kiss, his other hand dipping inside my pants and stroking my cock. He swallowed my shocked cries, his pace furious and unforgiving as my hips tried to follow his rhythm. I couldn't

fucking think as this man gripped me, the chaos thrumming through him taking me apart in mere minutes.

“Shit, Val, I’m gonna-”

I tried to tell him as he continued with his kissing, his fingers tightening around my neck and his pace picking up until I was spilling my seed in his palm, my release coating my pants. Fucking hell, this man was an animal. He pulled away long enough to tell me to strip, Val crawling onto the mattress after me as he flipped me over. His cum-coated hand began massaging my ass, my release slipping over my bare flesh before two of those fingers ran around my hole.

The shit was dirty as fuck, yet I couldn’t help but love the way Val lost himself with me. Val and Dmitri fought like animals, sharing dominance, but with me, Val let go. I gave in and Val took. It worked for us. It would be interesting to see how Rhys fit into our dynamic long-term.

I let out a long, deep groan when I heard the squelch of lube and then felt two of his digits pushing into my ass. I pressed back against him, needing more as he fucked me until I was hard all over again, rubbing against the mattress for relief. He wrapped a hand around my waist and pulled me away from the sheets, chuckling when I began whining. I needed to cum again, shit, I was so fucking hard. And Val knew that, but in these moments, I was completely and utterly his.

Those fingers were replaced by the thick head of his cock, pleasure shooting through my limbs as he slid into my hole, splitting me in two. My fingers dug into the bedspread on



either side of me as he continued to push forward, that arm keeping me from getting any friction on my cock, the other gripping my waist until he was fully seated.

I had forgotten how fucking big Val was and the fact that I wasn't going to be able to walk straight tomorrow. With just a gentle rock of his hips, his cock pressed against the sweet spot and it took all my self-control not to howl and wake up the entire house.

“Move, Goddamnit. Shit, Val, I need you to *move*.”

I wasn't supposed to tell him what to do but my ass was throbbing and my cock was leaking, neglected and angry. I needed *release*.

Val groaned as he began snapping his hips against my ass, grunting with each punishing thrust until I was burying my face in the pillows so that it could absorb my screams. He was still holding me off the bed and I knew what he wanted but I wasn't sure if I'd be able to cum without a little help. I'd end up combusting before I was able to come again.

“Come with me,” He growled out, still fucking me mercilessly. “Gianni, *come*.”

I didn't know if it was his voice or the way he was bruising my ass but I fucking shot all over the sheets, a groan deep from my soul tearing from my throat as Valentyn snapped his hips a few more times before exploding inside of me. My fingers curled a little tighter in the sheets, my knuckles turning white as my eyes rolled into the back of my head from the pure ecstasy flooding my veins.

I collapsed onto the mattress beside my mess, Valentyn following as he pulled us onto our side, his lips running along my shoulder. “Better?”

If he wasn't mine, I'd have punched him for such a cocky response. The adrenaline, the undying need to snap Owen's neck had taken a backseat—for now—and I could finally focus on something else without needing to go find the motherfucker. “Yeah,” I responded, out of breath, still adjusting to the size of Val's cock stuffed in my ass.

“Good.” Silence followed as he nestled his face in the crook of my neck, my mind drifting to the man we had somehow dragged into our little piece of heaven. It was so fucking obvious that we had fallen in love with him—fast as it was—and that we'd burn down the world for him in an instant. Val's protective mode had immediately engaged and I couldn't stop fucking touching. Looks weren't endgame for me but the pure aura dripping off of Rhys was everything I wanted, *needed*.

And Dmitri was a gruff teddy bear. He wasn't sweet with his conquests. That's not what they wanted from him but watching Dmitri cuddle with Rhys? It was obvious that Dmitri had already adopted Rhys into the family. He was already ours.

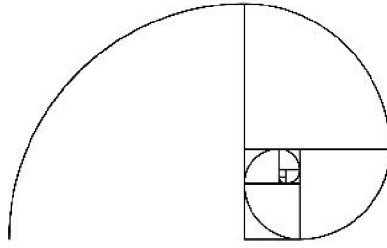
We just had to make him believe it.

And then show him the world we could bring him.

Valentyn sighed against my skin as his hips began moving again, his cock thickening and hardening, the combination of his release and lube making it an easy slide. This time was much slower but I knew it wouldn't be any less intense.

Everything with Valentyn was intense and fuck, I wouldn't have it any other way.

I wrapped my arm around the back of his neck as I twisted around for a kiss, moaning when his hand wrapped around my dick and started stroking again.



## CHAPTER FORTY

### **RHYS**

I lost track of time as I whittled away through the second version of my formula, tweaking just enough that it wouldn't work. Granted, Hawk International or whoever Owen was working for would figure out that I had messed with it but I tried to put the error far enough down the line that it would give us time to get out.

My men didn't give me much explanation as to how all of this was going to work but I had a little less than two days left to figure it out. It was also a way to give me something else to focus on than Owen, Ada, and this terrible thing that I had created. I had a feeling that it was way more dangerous than everyone let on, that my brain was just a chaotic mess of weapons ready to spill out onto paper.

I kind of hated that my life's work had become this evil entity.

Dmitri had fallen asleep next to me, not that I minded, the sounds of his soft snores keeping me going. He was so fucking peaceful like that but if I focused on his long eyelashes, chiseled jaw, or the fact that he was half-naked, I wasn't going to get anything done. Racing to the kitchen for another spoonful of honey—as that was the *only* sweet thing I found in the house—I returned, continuing to clack away on the keys.

A lightbulb turned on in my head as I thought of a different way to go about creating these versions, something that would speed up the process.

“Come to bed.” Valentyn’s voice carried through the room, making me sit up straighter and turn around. Dmitri followed, almost as if he hadn’t been sleeping at all. He stood and pulled me to my feet as I tried to protest. There was still so much to do and I was so fucking close. Valentyn and Gianni stood there, Gianni looking freshly fucked, his eyes brighter than I’d seen in a while.

“But-”

Dmitri shook his head. “You can finish that in the morning, Love. It’s nearly 1 a.m. and I’m pretty sure that when Val gave you that task, none of us thought you were going to go down a rabbit hole. But it *is* nice to see you smile.” He pressed a gentle kiss on my lips.

For some reason, my mind went into overdrive as I babbled on about my formula and all the wonderful things that it could do or predict and why I hated the fact that everyone was trying to use it for other purposes.

They all started laughing as Gianni hopped over the couch and hoisted me up, my legs wrapping around his waist. He silenced me with a kiss, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. I melted against him as I held on tight, Dmitri's large hand running down my back. "It's fucking adorable the way he gets lost in his work, isn't it, Val?"

Valentyn grunted as Gianni released my lips, his eyes burning with lust. My cock hardened against Gianni's stomach, the man grinning like a kid in a candy shop. He let me down, turning me around to face the other two as Valentyn began to talk. "Sweetheart, we said we weren't going to lie to you but there's some things we need to discuss before tomorrow." I nodded, wondering why this had to happen *before* taking me to bed because that's what we were doing right? "Owen is going to get what's coming to him, Rhys. We can't let that slide. Not just because he's a dishonorable piece of shit but because of what's he done to you. I will not let him disrespect my family."

I felt my face grow warm at the mention of family because we had barely known each other for a week and I already couldn't imagine a moment without these men.

"Second, after all is said and done and you hand over that program, your life is going to change. You know that they aren't going to just let you walk out of there, right?"

"It crossed my mind," I whispered. I had seen enough movies to know that once they had the information they needed, they wouldn't want the source walking around. We—

well, *they*—were going to be pulling some Mission Impossible shit but hopefully with a little less action.

Gianni threaded his arms around my waist and pulled me into his chest, my back resting against him as he placed a few kisses on my shoulder to settle my panic. “It’s alright. We’re here to make sure that you walk out of there just fine, but you’ve got two options.” They seemed to be finishing each other’s sentences and while it was weird, it was kind of cool watching it in action. “You can stay or you can come with us.”

My entire body locked up. “Where are you going?”

Valentyn’s look softened. “We’re in town for a job, sweetheart. We don’t usually stick around afterward. That’s how people get caught and with this job, things are absolutely going to go south. For us. Not you.”

I couldn’t fathom them leaving me here to deal with Ada and the disappointed looks on my family’s faces at our future family dinners. Going back to school would be a waste of time without a true dissertation. My house would feel empty without them and I would miss the little bundle of joy that they had brought into my life. “Do you not want me anymore?”

It was the only thing I could think of as my shoulders sagged, Dmitri chuckling as he shook his head and caged me in against Gianni. “Love, the fact that you thought that was even something to be worried about tells me that we haven’t been doing it right. Come on, let us show how much we want

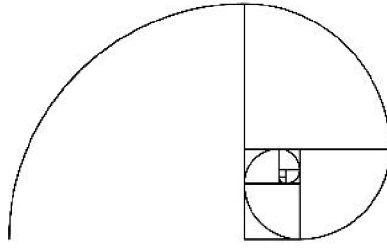
you and then we're going to ask you again whether or not you want to stay or go."

Dmitri gave me a wicked smile before he threw me over his shoulder and stomped up the stairs. I propped myself up, able to see Gianni and Valentyn following us with matching heated looks on their faces.

"What about Paval?"

The dark chuckle that slipped through Gianni's lips had me harder than steel. "His room is soundproof for a reason, Rhys."





## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

### **RHYS**

My eyes wandered as Gianni rushed toward Paval's room to check on the kid before coming back. Dmitri slapped my ass as we entered one of their rooms and I was deposited on a mattress that had to be bigger than a California King. I scooted toward the middle, suddenly feeling a bit self-conscious and a little terrified of these meaty men staring down at me.

The Greek god status had skyrocketed in the last few days since I had met them and it was like this was the final performance and I didn't know what to do with my hands or the steel rod in my pants. My breath caught in my throat as Valentyn and Gianni pulled off their shirts, a mass of muscle and skin staring back at me.

I moaned, reaching forward to drag my fingertips down Valentyn's chiseled chest. If I had been a little more undignified, I would have been drooling. "Still fucking unreal," I muttered, Gianni laughing at my reaction. I realized in the silence that they were waiting for me to reciprocate but I

couldn't do it. When it had been a one-night stand or a quickie, I had been all about getting naked. The more skin that touched mine, the better.

In front of all of them, though?

The men who had saved my life more than once?

The ones who had put up with my nightmares, my strange family, and the strange ass triggers I had discovered in the past few days?

Like who the fuck was scared of cheese?

Valentyn slipped onto the bed first, cupping my face in his hands, knowing exactly where I had disappeared into my head. "Hey, *hey*, none of that." His lips brushed against mine, my body relaxing against his. "Tonight, it's just us. Just the five of us and we're going to show you how much we care about you, how much we love you."

"Love?" I whispered.

Two more bodies crawled onto the mattress, hardened chests pressing against me on either side. "Yes, Love. It may be too soon or too fast, but this thing between us isn't going anywhere. We might have met you by mistake but you're ours for as long as you'll have us," Dmitri purred in my ear.

A heavy sigh left me as his hands settled on my waist, my eyes fluttering closed at the heat radiating between us. I was still self-conscious as fuck but three beautiful men wanted to share me and even more gorgeous cocks pressing against me, throbbing for release. I had no idea how this was going to

work but I was eager to get started, lest I explode in my pants like a horny teenager. *Again.*

“What are you doing to me?” I breathed.

Valentyn chuckled as I relaxed even further, a gasp slipping from my mouth when one of those hands slid into my pants and began stroking me. It had to be Dmitri from the angle but I didn't really care at this point, Gianni's lips attached to my shoulder as his fingers twisted my nipple through my shirt.

“Sweetheart, I've got three rules for you tonight.” My body locked up as I opened my eyes, wondering why there were *rules* when we just trying to fuck. “One, you need to tell us when it's too much. No, I'm serious, Rhys. You've been through a lot and we're not going to ruin this experience because one of us needs to get off. You need us to stop, just let us know.” I nodded, hating the fact that Valentyn even had to mention it. I knew for a fact that if one of them grabbed me by the neck right now, I'd 100% freak out. “Good boy. Two, eyes open, Rhys. I want you to see what you do to us, what we do to you. And three, sweetheart, this is the most important.”

“Yes?” My voice came out in a breathy whisper, Dmitri's hand still giving me languid strokes as Gianni's kisses on my shoulder turned into nips, the strange sensations making my hips rock forward. My fingers dug into Valentyn's waist as my head angled up, my lips parted in a gasp.

“I need you to scream for me. I need you to tell us when you like something and I need your words, sweetheart. All of them.”

I grunted, my nose scrunching up as I tried not to pump into Dmitri's grip. "Fuuuuck," I muttered, my back arching as my head fell back against Dmitri's chest. "I'm gonna cum. Stop... I can't-"

They all shared a chuckle as my body shuddered, my whimpers swallowed by Gianni who stole my lips as I came, hard and fast in my pants, Dmitri suckling on the extra skin of my neck. When he slipped his hand back out of my pants, he held it up in front of Valentyn's face, my curious ass ripping my lips from Gianni's to watch the most erotic thing that had happened in the last week.

"He's not-"

My words were cut off as Valentyn sucked those fingers into his mouth, running his tongue along Dmitri's digits, tasting my release. And then he swallowed. He let out a full-bellied groan as he looked down at me, darkness and heat mixing in his expression.

"The things I'm going to do to you, sweetheart..."

My shirt was discarded, my pants and boxers a second later, all three of them circling me like wolves until Gianni dragged me down the bed and flipped me onto my stomach, his hot breath on my ear. "I've been so fucking hard since Val took me earlier this evening, Rhys. I'm not going to last long. I'm going to cum in your ass and then let Dmitri open you up with his tongue while Val fucks your mouth. How's that sound?"

It sounded fucking amazing but the only thing that came out of my mouth was an embarrassing guttural groan as the sound

of more clothes hitting the floor reached my ears. Gianni prepped me hard and fast, the tip of Gianni's cock pressed against my ass not too soon after, shallow thrusts between my cheeks making me squirm with the bite of panic swirling in my chest. The bulbous head was thick as it pushed into me, just on the brink of too much as my fingers dug into the mattress. I had never thought that this could be so fucking hot but I guess everything about these men was off the charts.

Something warm and heavy brushed against my lips, Valentyn's voice filling the room. "Rule number two, sweetheart. Eyes open." I obeyed immediately, awarded with his cock slipping through my lips. I moaned around it, angling my head so he could slip down further until he was almost at the back of my throat. Something akin to relief made me sigh like the very thought of being owned by these men was worth everything else I had had to suffer through.

Gianni's grunts and wild thrusts tapered off as I felt him explode inside of me, the pleasurable sensation of cum shooting inside making me spring forward, which in turn stuffed Valentyn's cock further down my throat. My nose fell against his pelvis, his rich scent filling my nostrils as I began working his cock with my tongue. I hollowed out my cheeks but soon realized that the angle was wrong. Pulling back just enough, I decided to give myself to these men. Fully. Completely. "Use me," I breathed, looking up at Valentyn.

His expression softened as he slipped a hand into my hair and pulled until I yelped in pain. I didn't hate it but wasn't

ready for the roughness he provided. “You can’t say things like that, sweetheart. Not unless you mean it.”

I checked with myself, measuring my panic but couldn’t find it. With them, there wasn’t any reason not to fall apart. “I do.”

My men shared a collective groan, Valentyn gripping my hair a little harder as he slid back into my mouth and began his own punishing pace as my saliva and the cum leaking from his cock made it an easier slide.

Gianni pulled away as Dmitri kneeled behind me, my eyes widening as I felt a tongue slip into my channel. Once again, I was both shocked and turned on as Dmitri pressed his face against my ass and went to town, drinking up Gianni’s release and pushing me toward another orgasm. I writhed against the sheets, trying to get the right friction but was denied my release when Dmitri wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me to my knees. I whined at the loss of friction on my cock, my eyes threatening to close as Valentyn used my mouth.

Dmitri replaced his tongue with his cock, the glorious stretch making me scream. He bottomed out, giving an experimental rock of his hips that had me coming all over again as the tip hit my sweet spot.

“I can’t, I can’t,” I mumbled, referring to the overload of sensations running through me. My hands traveled up Valentyn’s thighs as I gripped his waist for purchase, hot lips enclosing around my cock. *No fucking way.* All three of them

were currently using me and I couldn't be more ecstatic but I was also dying a little.

It was too much and not enough as I thrust back against Dmitri to get him to move. His pace was chaotic and relentless as his hands dug into my waist, pounding into me like some kind of wild animal. The squelch of my men's combined release made this all hotter as Gianni swirled his tongue around my cock and then dragged his teeth down my length which had me whimpering all over again.

Valentyn released my hair and pulled out from my mouth, his hand gripping his cock. "I'm going to cum inside you, Rhys but not down your throat. Gianni, he's all yours."

I whined when Gianni gave my dick one last lick before rolling off, leaving me unattended. He moved toward the nightstand, grabbing a few wipes, and grinning as he caught me looking. Making a show of it, he stroked himself, my entire body responding to his show until he had thoroughly wiped himself down and his cock at my lips seconds later. "Ready for me, Rhys?" His eyes glittered with amusement, his hair in disarray, his lips coated with my previous orgasms. A hand reached up toward the back of my neck, my entire body locking up, Gianni immediately catching the fear in my eyes.

One moment I was on my hands on knees and the next, Dmitri had slid out of my ass and pulled me up against his chest, facing the other two. The panic dissipated almost immediately, my breathing a little rough as we all just stared at each other.

“Sorry, Love. I should have known.”

My brain nearly short-circuited. “How could you have known?” I panicked. Valentyn moved closer, taking my hands in his as Dmitri wrapped his arms around me. “That’s not... this-” *Fuck.*

Valentyn just smiled. “It’s not going to be perfect but we never said it was going to be. Now, sweetheart, we’re going to try something a little different, alright? I know you want this. I can see it in your eyes but we can also work at your pace.”

“I wish you didn’t have to,” I mumbled, leaning back against Dmitri’s chest.

Gianni moved closer as well. “And maybe one day we won’t have to. But one step at a time.” I nodded as Dmitri lifted me and positioned me over his cock, the slide making me groan as he filled me. It was just as fucking amazing as the very first time he fucked me but now there were two more men here for my pleasure.

Valentyn smiled as Dmitri slid down the bed, still holding onto me as Gianni positioned himself at my lips again. I greedily sucked him in, running my tongue up and down his length as I let Gianni set the pace. Valentyn’s soft hands roaming my stomach and stroking my cock were nice but it wasn’t enough. I wanted more and while I had done it once, I wasn’t sure it’d work with these fucking Greek gods.

They were fucking huge, much bigger than my last partners, and two of them...



“Love, where’s your head gone?”

I choked on Gianni’s cock, Gianni pulling back worriedly. “Maybe we shouldn’t-”

“No, I just... *more*,” I blurted out, rather lamely. Valentyn and Gianni just stared at me before they seemed to understand—or at least Valentyn did—the man sinking a finger into my ass next to Dmitri’s cock. I nearly fell apart with the extra stretch, my eyes rolling into the back of my head as I ground back against both of them.

“Like this?” I nodded frantically as Valentyn frowned. “Have you ever even done this? I don’t think-”

Oh, I could totally do this. “*More*,” I moaned. I was a fucking horny mess for these men and if I could take all three of them at the same time? Holy shit, I was going to cum just thinking about it.

They seemed hesitant to respond, although Valentyn slipped another finger in my ass, continuing to stretch me out. Dmitri growled by my ear. “Goddamn, he’s so fucking tight. You’ll never fit. Shit, I’m going to cum, Val.”

Valentyn grinned down at us, stretching me out with another finger as I all but screamed, my cock leaking furiously as I tried to ride both sensations. Dmitri gripped my waist, keeping me from moving as Gianni watched on with excitement. “No fucking way.”

Without even speaking, the three moved like a well-oiled machine as I found myself shifted to the side, Dmitri pulling

out to place himself on the mattress. He grinned up at me as he spread his massive thighs, his cock slapping against his stomach before Valentyn guided me to straddle the Frenchman. I sank back down on his cock, groaning as it filled me. A large hand on my back pushed me forward as Valentyn slipped between Dmitri's legs, once again inserting those three fingers.

Pleasure had taken over my ability to think as I whimpered and writhed between them, those three fingers soon switched out with Valentyn's cock. My breath caught in my throat, Valentyn's eyes locked on mine. "Breathe, sweetheart. I need you to fucking breathe and bear down." I complied, gritting my teeth as pushed inside me, right alongside Dmitri's cock.

"Holy shit," Gianni muttered.

Dmitri's fingers dug a little more into my waist as Valentyn bottomed out in my ass, two huge cocks stuffed inside of me. "Val," I whined. "God, I'm so full."

"I'm going to fuck you now, sweetheart. Shit, I'm not going to last long. Your mouth is a sinful place but this... is fucking heaven."

He thought *he* was in heaven? *I* was in heaven, beyond the pearly gates, surrounded and consumed by my men. I reached for Gianni, pulling him close as I opened my mouth, humming around his cock as he began using me for his own release.

I was definitely not going to be walking tomorrow.

Valentyn began moving, slowly, the stretch just short of unbearable as Dmitri held onto me, his teeth grazing my shoulder as he fought back his release. My body was basically vibrating at this point, a hand wrapping around my cock and trying to bring me to completion again. I squirmed from the overstimulation, Dmitri's grunts turning into a long, unbidden groan as he filled my ass with his seed, Valentyn still fucking through it.

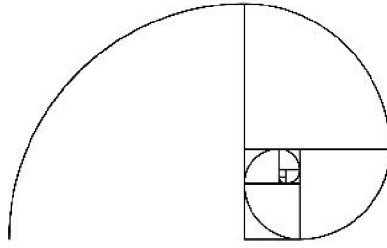
"God, shit, Val. Holy fuck, that's too much," Dmitri whined.

Valentyn just laughed, leaning down to press a kiss to his lips. It was a little awkward being squashed like this, especially when Valentyn growled and came, their cum filling me up until it was spilling down my thighs and coating Dmitri beneath me.

I collapsed against Dmitri's chest when the sweet taste of Gianni spilled down my throat, my eyes rolling into the back of my head. These men were monsters in every sense of the word, Gianni chuckling. "Hey! Rule two. Eyes open."

"But aren't we-"

Dmitri twisted my head around to kiss me. "Just getting started, Love. Just getting started."



## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

### **CHESTER**

There was no doubt in my mind that Owen was a piece of shit and the scum of the earth but he was a rich one and I was never one to pass up an opportunity at easy money. The program he wanted taken was liquid gold and I was 99% sure that he had no idea what he had been asked to steal. His employer wanted the program and had hired the biggest idiot in town to take it.

The shit didn't know his left from right and had been trying to hire contractors to get the program for the past several months but to no avail. Instead, Owen ended up a few hundred thousand dollars poorer and a little worse for wear.

However, in my little bit of research, I had picked up that the payday Owen was offering for getting the program was much less than what the program itself was worth. And now I wanted it. Valentyn had his moment to do the job and now it was my turn.

“You’ll take the job?” Owen asked, earnestly from the seat I had stuffed him into when he entered my warehouse.

I cackled, wondering where he got the balls to be as forward as he did. If only Valentyn and his little crew knew who Owen worked for... “Not exactly. We’re going to do things a little differently.”

“I don’t have any more money. I had to pay them half but they’re not doing anything. They’re protecting him and-”

I held up a hand, silencing his excuses. I hated people like Owen and every word that fell from his lips was like grating pieces my of brain. “Keep your filthy money. I’ll pay *you* to bring me that program. I don’t fucking care what happens to the kid who has it nor the men protecting him.” I’d miss Valentyn—he was one of the good ones in the business—but that payday looming in the distance was a little too sweet to give up.

“What? That’s not an option. I can’t give it to you. My employer will kill me!” He pulled against my handy dandy restraints, slowly realizing that asking me for a favor, regardless of the price tag, wasn’t a voluntary affair. I had already turned him down multiple times but he had been relentless.

So, he’d be working on my terms this time, not the other way around.

“Give me the program and I’ll set you up with a nice little payday.”

Owen shook his head, pulling harder against the ropes. He could pull all day and it wouldn't do him any good. I had learned those knots in Boy Scouts and I'd never seen someone slip out of them... well, except for myself. "I can't. Look, he's presenting on Thursday. That's less than two days. You can just—"

I threw my head back and laughed. "You must be really stupid if you think I'm going to walk my ass into your company—one that is heavily guarded—and take the program off his hands. Get me the fucking program *before* he presents and we won't have any issues."

Owen screamed out his frustration. "Just kill me or beat me like everyone else did. I'm not giving it to you. I'll just ask someone else."

A wild grin split across my lips. "See, that's the thing. We all talk and you've exhausted the people you can use, especially since Valentyn has decided to protect the boy. There's not many of us that will go up against their crew. I know how you play and it's dirty, Owen. You've been dipping your filthy hands in multiple pots and it's time to realize there's nowhere left for you to wash your hands. I've done my homework and I know what that program is. Get it to me and I'll make sure you're taken care of."

"That doesn't sound promising."

"No, Owen. It's not. You put your two cents in with the devil and then asked a demon to help you. You are going to die either way but at least with me, you'll die peacefully. I've

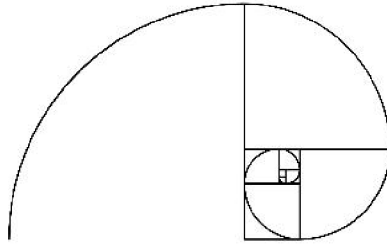
never met your boss but I've heard she's not very forgiving. Make the smart choice, Owen."

He started struggling against the ropes again as I made my way to the door. "Wait! You have to untie me!"

"Someone will. In the next hour or two. Scream if we forget." I left the room, hoping that Owen was terrified shitless by the time one of my guards set him free. He was a terror in his own right but only because he was infatuated with the boy he was supposed to be stealing from.

The funniest part about this whole tryst was that it was just one big distraction. Owen had been hired by the same company that had hired Rhys for his program. The scare tactics were merely a distraction to send Rhys farther into Hawk International's arms. And it was working, marvelously. I applauded their trickery, however, now that I wanted the program?

Owen was going to have to switch sides.



## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

### VALENTYN

I hung up yet another call, scratching details down on paper I had printed a few hours ago after not being able to sleep. Rhys had passed out after round two, something we were all more than proud of after the week he had. He had scared us a bit with what he'd been willing to try but fuck if it hadn't ended gloriously and when he whispered that he loved us, my heart exploded with joy.

He was perfect for us, in every way and I hoped that we thoroughly showed him how much we still wanted him. He'd still have to choose whether or not he wanted to come with us at the end of this job, but I wasn't going to pressure his decision, even if time was of the essence.

I had planned on gathering some extra data and then making breakfast, but the research path had taken a dark spiral as connections that shouldn't have worked started clicking. There were too many coincidences and points along the timeline that didn't make sense. Even before Owen had shown up in



France, everything had been engineered. It was all part of the plan.

Dmitri entered the kitchen, rubbing his chest in discomfort. I knew all of his wounds were still healing but the addition of multiple hickies from our fourth was fucking fantastic. “What’s got you out of bed so early?” He asked as he pressed up against my back and wrapped his arms around my waist before placing his chin on my shoulder.

“Seems that Owen’s desire for this program is a lot more twisted than just coincidence. We already knew he was working for someone but everything was engineered, down to the fucking hotel room that he was in. Everything links back to a credit under the name of Mrs. Fraser.”

“No first name?”

I shook my head as I turned around to place a morning kiss on Dmitri’s lips. He leaned in for more, both of us letting out a satisfying moan. I had missed the mornings like this—the ones where I made breakfast and everyone trickled in for kisses and little touches. Paval would run in moments later before we all just sprawled along the couch for cuddles and a relaxing day.

“The main hub is in France,” I said as I pulled away. “If we’re going to nip this shit in the bud-”

“Then our next job is in France. We have enough money in the bank to go it alone for a bit. What about Paval?”

My shoulders fell. “I don’t want to drop him off at Mom’s. She doesn’t have the time or energy to take care of him, not to

mention that he'd have a fucking target on his back. Paval's going to have to come with us but uprooting him like that is just going to make it that much harder on him."

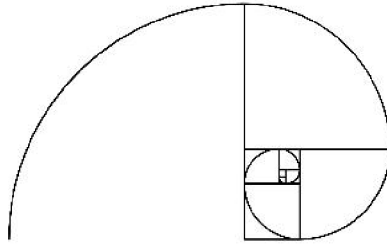
Dmitri shrugged. "Sure, but he already knows a little French. I can get him up to speed and Rhys can do the rest."

"That's if Rhys decides to come. You forget that his entire life is here."

"Not all of it," Dmitri spit out as he made his way to the fridge. "We wouldn't be here."

And while that was true, I wasn't sure that we outweighed everything he had built here. I silently prayed that it was enough. There was going to be more trouble stuck at our doorstep than usual and Rhys had had more mishaps in a week than most people had in a lifetime.

My selfish ass still hoped he'd say yes.



## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

### **RHYS**

I had woken up sprawled across Gianni's chest, completely naked and sore. Two seconds later, my face was the color of a tomato as I remembered what had happened last night, the pleasurable throb in my limbs bringing back my memories that would make the Pope have a stroke. I groaned as I slid off the mattress, Gianni carrying me to the bathroom and giving me a thorough shower before shoving me into one of his shirts and a pair of shorts. I tried to protest that I had my own clothes but he was really adamant about seeing me in his clothing.

My face brightened as I made my way downstairs, Paval pulling me into the living room where I was handed a plate of eggs, toast, and sausage. Kisses were dealt along my cheeks as pleasant conversation erupted, all three of them ignoring my plight when I looked down at my plate.

I picked at the eggs, a strange sensation running through me as I realized the absence of cheese. One single freakout a few days ago about the cheese in my eggs had been remembered. I

stared at it, trying to sift through the memories. As much as I hated Owen and his obsession with cheese, I realized that disconnecting his failed apologies and Valentyn's cooking wasn't as difficult as I had imagined.

“Sweetheart, is it okay? I didn't want to- Paval, *wait*.”

Paval held up a spoon of his eggs, cheese, and spices mixed throughout. I glanced down at my plate once more and then at the loaded spoon before opening my mouth. Paval smiled as he started up some airplane noises and then landed it on my tongue. I waited for the panic to start as I looked at the kid but it never came.

The flavors melted in my mouth, a moan slipping out into the open. I knew Valentyn could cook but we hadn't been together long enough for me to truly experience the wonders of his expertise in the kitchen.

Dmitri laughed. “Love, you can't make sounds like that. We all know Val's food is delicious, but you'll give him a big head.” I wanted to respond with ‘there'll definitely be a big *something*’, but my ass was sore and I needed a break. Knowing these men, one of them would haul me over their shoulder and take me right back upstairs without any reservations.

I gave Paval his spoon back, surprised when the spoon returned with more food. I let the kid feed me, his infectious excitement making me smile. When he scrapped the rest of his eggs and handed me the spoon for the last time, the giggles turned to words. “Does this mean you're staying?” I didn't

know how to answer that, especially when Paval seemed to be asking more for himself than his dads. “You like them all, right? You’re going to stay?”

They all looked at me, sitting on the edge of their seats. I was never going to say no but the idea of picking up and leaving one of the only cities I had ever known was a bit terrifying. Still, if it was them, I’d go. I nodded, looking back at Paval. “Yeah, I’m staying.” Paval clapped his hands and squealed as Dmitri helped him clean up the plates.

Dmitri and Valentyn left kisses on my head as they passed and Gianni plopped beside me, hugging me tight just as my phone rang. I looked at it and frowned. After yesterday, I would have thought Owen had gotten the hint to stop contacting me. Even so, calling *me* versus Valentyn seemed weird.

I took a deep breath and answered.

“Get me the fucking program and no one gets hurt.” He sounded rough and a little messed up as if he’d been through the wringer *after* Gianni had saved me last night. His voice sounded suspiciously like the nights he would waltz into my house with a black eye or cuts along his jaw and neck.

Looking to Gianni for guidance, he just nodded. “They’ll know I gave it to you,” I said. If I showed up at Hawk International empty-handed, they’d know I gave it to someone else. That must have been why Valentyn suggested making alternate programs.

“Just for once in your life, do the smart thing. I’ll be at the house at 7 pm and if you don’t hand it over, I’ll fuck up your shit. You wanted me to stop playing, Rhys. This is it. Have it ready.”

He sounded *really* desperate. I also wasn’t at home. Gianni nodded for me to keep going. “What am I supposed to tell the company?”

“Whatever you fucking want to. That’s not my problem. When I get to their house, you better have it ready.” Despite saying that he was going to fuck up my shit, somehow he knew that I wasn’t at home. The thought that he had been watching this entire time terrified me.

Owen hung up, leaving me a bit more confused than before, however—my luck had run out and I didn’t even get the chance to comment because a text rolled across my screen from the company’s number I had called a few days ago.

I recognized the number but I couldn’t place from where; somewhere other than on the business card I had been handed while I was in France. Come to think of it, the voice had been just as familiar

*<<Change of Plans, Rhys. It’s of the utmost importance to protect you and your work. We’ll be coming by at 8 p.m. to pack up your program. You will still present on Thursday. Please confirm that you will be at the address below.>>*

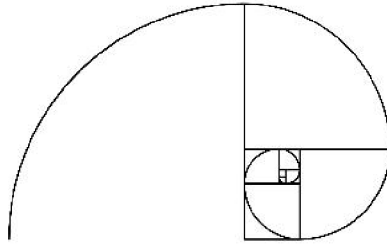
I stared at the address when it appeared, horrified when it showed Valentyn’s address and not mine. “Um... I think we’re fucked.” A text from a government company was weird in and

of itself but I knew by now that I had never been hired by the government.

Gianni stole my phone and began panic-scrolling before hopping off the couch and running to the kitchen. “Yo, Owen at 7 and the company at 8. Something’s wrong. I think we need to prepare for the worst.” My mind shot into overdrive as I reached for my laptop and began typing away to finish the second program. We were definitely going to need it. It was also one of the easiest ways for me not to panic. Numbers made sense to me. The world didn’t. “Hey, Rhys, what-”

“I don’t understand all the super secret stuff you guys do but I can do this. I can have them prepared and then whatever else happens-” I took a deep breath, trying not to think about what could happen if things went south.

Gianni leaned over the couch and dragged me close for a kiss. “Whatever else happens, we got you.”



## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

### **RHYS**

We had to play this absolutely right, like perfectly, like more perfect than just *perfect*. Owen was due any moment, Paval locked up in his room—a room that Dmitri assured me was triple locked and barricaded with extra security that would make the government drool over. Even with that information and Dmitri wrapped around me, trying to soothe the panic in my chest, I couldn't help but think we were walking into some kind of trap.

We *had* to be.

It couldn't be this easy.

The door swung open, Owen strolling in, his lips curved up in an amused smile, eyes falling immediately on my trembling form. “I guess you really weren't joking about shacking up with the handymen, eh? And in the end, it didn't help you, did it?” I refrained from saying that I had kept them around to protect me from *him* because I knew that that would start a



fight I didn't want to have. "Now, give it up. I don't have all day."

He sounded as desperate as he had on the phone, looking even worse than when we had left last night. His face was heavily bruised, as were his wrists and he seemed to be walking with a limp—something I knew Gianni hadn't done.

"Rhys, *the formula*." His eyes darted backward as Valentyn shut the door behind him. He approached me and I visibly flinched but didn't move from my spot. I was going to stay right here and stand my ground for once. Being held by Dmitri was definitely helping but I was kind of done hiding from my problems and as terrified of Owen as I was, I could do this.

Probably.

Hopefully.

He wiggled his fingers in front of me as I dropped the USB disk in his hand. He grinned and immediately shoved it in his pocket. "What about one last kiss for good luck? I'll make it good, maybe even remind you that you were also better off with me."

I had no idea how he could be so fucking delusional. Anger welled up inside of me as my fists curled at my side, the desire to make Owen choke on those words growing. He had caused me so much pain and fear over the past year that I wanted to make him feel every shred of emotion that I had experienced. "If you think for even a fucking second that I would entertain touching you again, you're wrong. Besides, you're fucking my sister." I still couldn't understand how she had married Ernest,

but *Owen*? I wondered who had been brainwashed—Ada or Owen—to let that relationship happen.

He cackled and then winced, rubbing a bruise on his cheek. “I don’t understand why I get all the hate when you fucking love Tia.”

Dread flooded my features as I realized that Owen and Ada’s ‘tryst’ went way farther back than the first night I introduced him to the family. Which meant that Ada had known him *way* longer than I had. I hated it. I hated how he had weaseled his slimy ass into my family but I hated it more that Ada hadn’t said anything when I brought him home.

I could have avoided so much heartache.

Owen leaned back, folding his arms across his chest. “She’s a lovely gal. Knew her all through college although she can be a royal pain in the ass and super strict.” I still didn’t understand how everything was connected. I could have done without this tidbit of information. So deep into my head, I only saw Owen reaching for me out of the corner of my eye and instead of dealing with it like a man, I screamed.

Full on, bitch ass screamed.

Valentyn cut off the connection before it ever transpired, catching him in a headlock. Gianni was at my side and Dmitri had dragged me behind him as if Owen was actually a threat to their triple god formation. Valentyn’s grin was a twisted bit of darkness that made me uneasy but also fucking ecstatic that that man was mine. “I told you to try one more time, Owen.”

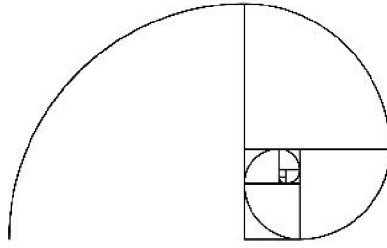
His voice sent shivers down my spine, the threat making me glad that it wasn't aimed at me.

Owen let out a nervous laugh as he unsuccessfully tried to pry himself out of Valentyn's grip. "Hawk International is going to come after you if you kill me!"

Valentyn growled at him and I took a step back, eyes wide. "You shouldn't have touched what was mine." He turned to me next, squeezing Owen's windpipe just a little tighter until the man was choking for air. "Sweetheart, I'm not going to apologize for what's about to happen. We are not saints. We're not even your guardian angels. We'll be your demons if you let us but Owen will suffer tonight, mark my words."

The promise in his words warmed my soul in a way that definitely made me every bit as sick and twisted as my men. My gaze dropped to my ex-boyfriend pleading to be let go, tears streaming down his bruised cheeks as he squirmed and fought for air. I didn't even understand what was going through my head as I uttered the next words and if Owen hadn't been here, I was pretty sure Valentyn would've bent me over and fucked me right there. "Can I watch?"

The collective groan between my men was full of way more heat than should have been okay for what was about to happen.



## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

### GIANNI

I was waiting for Rhys to fall apart as he pressed himself against the basement wall, his eyes glued to the morbid scene in front of him. He knew that our work was on the less-than-legal side of the law but we hadn't really told him about the darker parts, the ways we used to extract information out of people. Most didn't walk out of our basement. We had proper disposal procedures but never once did I think we were going to reveal this part of our life to Rhys.

Things were tangling much faster than I was comfortable with.

It didn't help that I was supposed to be the playful one, not the one who enjoyed the toys and agonized screams of those we had to drag information out of. I had been chomping at the bit to inflict pain on Owen but I was pretty sure this would break us.

Owen had been strung up, his hands keeping him upright as his feet dragged along the concrete pavement. Although the lights were dimmed, there was enough visibility to see the wounds Valentyn had inflicted with merely his fists, way more than I had last night when I had been beating him into the ground. Dmitri was brooding off to the side. He enjoyed more of the action above ground than this part but was equally intrigued when we participated.

“Gianni, you’re up.”

I gave Rhys one last look, wondering why I thought I saw the beginning of a smile tugging at his lips rather than fear. *He’s enjoying this.* It didn’t make any sense until I remembered *who* we had right here. We had the man who had tortured Rhys’ body and mind for the better part of a year, strung up and at our mercy. He was watching his nightmare get everything he deserved. Rhys was finally getting the justice that the police had never been able to give him.

He was finally getting the closure that no one else could have ever offered him.

He was staring his nightmare in the eye and silently telling him that he no longer had any power. It was a glorious moment because I recognized it in my past. It was very similar to the first body I had seen Valentyn string up, fighting my demons for me.

And now it was my turn to help Rhys fight his.

I rolled out my tools, shivers of excitement running through my limbs as I picked up a pair of pinchers. It had been a while

since we had gotten to do this. My grin widened and I knew what I looked like. I had practiced my smile often enough to know that the crazed expression on my face made grown men shit their pants. I clanked the pinchers together, laughing when Owen unsuccessfully tried to pull away.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I tilted my head to the side, falling into my role like I always did. It was hard not to when this part of the process was so much fun. Giving Owen about two seconds to deal with the idea that we weren’t playing, I reached in, clamped the pinchers on his right nipple, and ripped down. Owen howled and I smiled as blood poured down his shirt, another waterfall of tears streaming down his cheeks. Oh, what a glorious noise.

I hadn’t started out doing this part of the business but after my first, it became like a fucking addiction. A forbidden way to let off steam.

Just the thought of Rhys’ terrified expression made me turn around and I hated to say that I was a little disappointed when he was no longer against the wall. But when I faced Owen again, Rhys was right there, running his fingers along my tools. He picked up my favorite tool—a stiletto knife with a deep purple sheen. I usually reserved it for the end of our little information extractions but I wasn’t going to stop Rhys from facing his demons. In any fashion he so chose.

The room fell silent as Rhys positioned himself in front of Owen, the knife tightly gripped in his hands. Determination settled in his expression as Owen tried to gaslight him with

more lies. I wrapped my hand around Rhys', the one with the knife, and positioned it forward, inches from Owen's chest. "The power is all yours, Rhys. For once in your life, you get to make your nightmare feel the pain and terror he caused you. The first slice is always the hardest because there's no going back after that."

I could see him fighting his emotions. He was just the smart kid, the one that escaped into his world of numbers. But now, he had been lied to, gaslighted, and abused in ways that I wished I could make him forget. His life had fallen apart even down to his niece, a kid that I could tell Rhys loved with all of his heart.

Had we pushed him too far?

Slowly, ever so slowly, Rhys pushed the knife into Owen's chest, the man expelling air as blood trickled from his lips. If we didn't have another deadline at 8 pm, I would have fucked the shit out of Rhys right here. Instead, I just reached down to adjust my cock, making sure that Rhys caught the movement. He gave me a shy grin, his hand shaking when he pulled the knife out. I slipped it from his hands as Valentyn stole him farther away from the scene, running his hands all over Rhys' face to bring him back from whatever dark part of his head he had drawn into.

"You did so fucking well, sweetheart. So well. Come back to me. That's it. Breathe. Mmhm, there you go." Valentyn leaned in and kissed him, Rhys melting against his chest before

pulling away to look at Owen again. That kid was so fucking strong in ways that he didn't even know.

I turned back to Owen, deciding to use Rhys' blade of choice to continue dragging out information. There wasn't much more he gave us other than the fact that his new employer wasn't exactly Hawk International. I suspected that it was one of our rivals after hearing about the payday Owen was offering. A reminder on my watch told us that we were running out of time.

I slapped a piece of tape over Owen's mouth and tapped his cheek. "Be right back for you and then you'll understand what true pain is. It'll be nice and slow to make you fully understand just why you shouldn't touch things that aren't yours."

Owen mumbled some kind of curse but it fell on deaf ears as we migrated upstairs after I had stuffed my toolset under my arm, Rhys furiously washing his hands in the sink the moment he entered the kitchen. I just *knew* he was going to break. I fucking knew it. It had been the only thing I had braced myself for and yet I still wasn't ready for it.

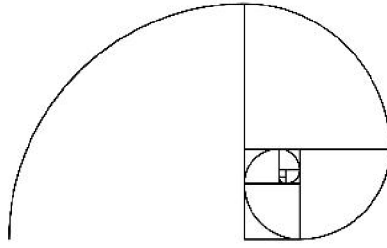
Rhys looked over at us, shaking his head. "No, I'm okay. I just..." He took a deep breath, his panicked demeanor disappearing. "I *knew* but I didn't know what you guys did. No, he deserves worse. I told people so many times and they just thought I was overreacting. I wanted him to scream, to yell, to truly cry. All those times I was fucking terrified or when he told me that everything was alright or when my



family didn't believe me." Ah, he was letting off that adrenaline. I knew that feeling all too well.

Valentyn gathered him against his chest. "Sweetheart, it's all right. He can't hurt you anymore. That wasn't exactly how I thought we were going to bring you into this but seeing you down there? Beautiful. Now, deep breaths. We've got that last handoff and then it's all over."

I had a strange feeling that it wouldn't be.



## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

### **RHYS**

Valentyn was saying something as I washed my hands again, still feeling the ick on my skin. It was going to be there a while, just the memory of the life slipping from Owen's eyes though made it worth it. I had wanted Owen dead just as much as the next guy but what they—*we*—had just done down there was some villain Hollywood-level shit.

I wasn't as bothered by it as I probably should have been.

After all, I was just the numbers guy.

My eyes fell on some of the paperwork spread across the counter, Valentyn doing nothing to shield me from it. I didn't understand half of it, much of it was just Owen's whereabouts over the last few years. I garnered from it that nothing had been a coincidence and I hated to think that I had fallen in love or believed that I had with someone who had been planted in my life.

I flipped over a few of the papers, frowning when I saw a photocopy of a credit card. I held up the paper to them. “Why do you have a photocopy of my sister’s credit card here?”

Valentyn stared at me like I had lost my damn mind. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Fraser. It’s my sister’s married name. Ernest Fraser is her husband.”

Dmitri cursed. “Seriously? Fraser is Owen’s boss at Hawk International.”

I didn’t even have a response for that because that wasn’t fucking possible. I thought back to the personal phone call I had made about my program and the text that I received earlier today. The reason I recognized it was that it absolutely had been familiar. I rarely saved numbers in my phone because of the work that I did and I had never had a reason to call Ernest. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it very well could have been Ernest Fraser, the businessman that Ada had met, on the other side of that phone.

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway stole my attention as I peeked around one of the curtains covering the kitchen windows. I had really hoped that I wasn’t going to have to deal with that kind of revelation. *Everyone* had lied to me. Well, maybe not my brother and my parents but Ada?

Her car stilled, the lights still on as I turned back to my men. Valentyn had already caught on, throwing his hand out to me. “I need you to trust me, 100%. Questions come later.” I nodded as I took his hand. “You can choose where you go

afterward but if Ada is truly Hawk International's plant in the U.S., you won't be safe if you open that door."

Valentyn dragged me toward Dmitri, the Frenchman pulling me to his chest as he dipped his lips to mine in a quick kiss. "Just remember one thing. *Breathe.*"

And then the lights went out, my body tugged down the hallway. We turned a few times down hallways that I didn't remember existing, footsteps running up the stairs as Dmitri dragged me farther into the darkness before a door opened and we were running through the grass. I hadn't been at their house long enough to even know that a backyard existed. I had questions, *so many questions*, but I knew that I'd have time to ask later.

Hopefully.

Dmitri turned around and picked me up before we kept moving toward a car hidden by a few trees just outside of their property. This felt all very high tech but I wasn't complaining. He yanked the door open and deposited me on the seat, Gianni and Valentyn showing up a few minutes later with Paval who crawled onto my lap. Dmitri nodded to Valentyn as the door closed behind him, the car taking off at a crawl, the lights still off until we hit a cross street and sped off.

"How is running going to help anything? That's my sister!" I finally blurted out, unable to hold my tongue anymore. We had left the second program on the table—mostly because I forgot—but I assumed that was by Valentyn's design.

Valentyn sighed as I wrapped my arms around a sleepy Paval. He seemed rather unbothered by how fast his life had just been packed up and thrown away. “Sweetheart, she might be your sister but she’s also the head of one of the most dangerous companies on this side of the planet. Hawk International makes way more than just that one program. They hire lots of bright kids just like you, promising them international recognition but they’re trying to strongarm the world piece by piece. If your sister is tied up in that, we need to know how deep before we do anything else.”

That made sense but there were still loose ends. “What about Owen? He was still breathing and-”

Dmitri chuckled as he pressed his lips to my temple. “Breathe, Love. Ada won’t keep him alive. He’s failed his mission. And the house isn’t registered in our name. We keep everything on us in the event of something like this happening. They’ll find the house well lived in but won’t be able to tie it back to us.”

“And Paval?” I looked down at the sleeping kid in my arms. I wished I could be as unbothered as him.

Gianni sighed. “Unfortunately, he’s used to this.”

Silence fell between us as we sped on down the highway, Valentyn picking up the conversation again when the signs for the airport started popping up. “That program you made, Rhys. People are looking for it and to figure out what’s going on, we have to go to the source.”

“France?” I asked. That was very far away.

Gianni nodded. “We can set you up in a safe house or something but we have to finish this. You won’t be safe until we stop it completely.”

The thought of them leaving me in a foreign place was terrifying, not to mention that I had just found out I had the strength to hurt someone and that wasn’t something I wanted to figure out on my own. “No, I think I want to go with you. I made that program and if it gets into the wrong hands, it’s going to hurt a lot of people and if I can save someone else in the process from making the same mistake that I did? No, let’s go.”

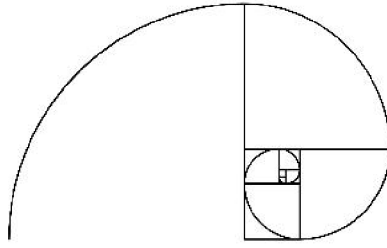
My men gave me varying versions of tight smiles as we pulled into a small carport that looked very, *very* illegal. They grabbed a host of different bags from the back and began walking to a small plane. The only thing I was carrying was Paval. “Wait... you have a plane?” I whisper-yelled.

Gianni chuckled. “Underground hitmen for lack of a better word pays pretty well.”

“Where’s the pilot?”

Gianni puffed out his chest. “You’re looking at him, Reeces.” My nose scrunched at the nickname, causing Gianni to laugh a little harder. “No? I kind of liked it. You’re sweet as candy and I fucking love the way you taste.” His eyes heated as he stole a kiss and then headed for the cockpit.

“Aye aye, captain,” I muttered. My life was about to turn upside down and while I wasn’t ready in the slightest, it made it easier to digest with these men surrounding me.



## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

### **ADA**

Rhys actually thought running was going to save him. I didn't even care about my little brother—the program came first. That and my daughter, whom my father had conveniently kidnapped. Granted, the government wouldn't look at it that way but waking up to an empty child's room in my parents' house had told me all I needed to know.

Apparently, dear old dad had seen a few documents he wasn't supposed to—courtesy of Ernest not cleaning up—and now, I not only needed to retrieve the goddamn program and hand it off, but I also had to go retrieve my daughter from a man that thought he was saving her from evil.

I wasn't evil. Not entirely.

It was just that, some very important people wanted this program, and if I didn't deliver, selling out my brother was going to be the least of my worries. I kicked at the limp body

that I had untied a few seconds ago. Owen couldn't fucking die on me without telling me what I needed to know.

Since he was stupid enough to throw his hat in someone else's ring, I knew he was absolutely stupid enough to get himself strung up in the Kolas Crew's basement. He probably had tried to touch Rhys right in front of the men who had 'stolen' his heart.

"Get up you little shit," I kicked Owen again, a low groan bouncing off the walls as he rolled over. He looked like he'd been through a meat grinder and survived. "You couldn't even do one job right and then double-crossed me for money. Seriously? And then you *still couldn't do that.*" I cackled, the sound bouncing along the basement walls, looking to Ernest for backup. He merely smirked before I turned back to look at Owen.

"That's your little brother," Owen whined.

"Like I give a shit. This program was supposed to change so many goddamn things. Rhys just happened to be the man for the job." It would have been better had it *not* been Rhys but that's who Hawk International had hired. "Besides, if you weren't so fucking obsessed with my brother, the company wouldn't have sent you to France. Shit, you were supposed to be *mine.*"

"You just kept taking. Always had to follow your rules like the one where I can't even see my own daughter."

I laughed again at the dying idiot on the floor. "You knew you were never going to meet her. Ernest is a much better face



at my side, aren't you sweetie?" I glared back at him, daring him to fight against my words. He didn't. He was a fucking pushover, which is why I was now Hawk International's standing CEO on this side of the water. Ernest was the stand-in and we hadn't so much as kissed if we weren't at our parent's house.

Pretending was so fucking easy even though I hated doing it.

"What now? You came for the program and they took off," the shit on the floor whined again.

"Oh, you sweet little boy." I saw right through Owen. He was a weasel through and through. "I already have what I need." I held up a little disk that I had swiped from the table. "You're literally fucking useless."

"You can't kill me," he wheezed.

Had he not watched enough TV as a kid? Of course, I was going to kill him. He was of no use to me and sure, we had shared a few romps in the sheets but it was getting old. "I can and I will. If not for being such a little bitch, you fucking terrified my brother and still couldn't get the job done. Now when I need answers, Rhys is going to be halfway around the world because you instilled that kind of fear in him. I don't need pathetic people like you in my or my daughter's life."

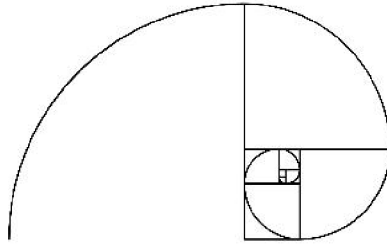
He tried to speak again but I stole his words as I stomped on his chest with my heel, enjoying the way he wheezed, blood joining the dried crimson stains on his chin. Too soon, I found the sound grating on my nerves and whipped out my gun before putting three bullets in his head. *Ah, much better.*

“Where do you think Rhys is now?” Ernest asked, completely unbothered by the blood pouring out of Owen’s head. See? Better choice already.

“Who the fuck cares? That’s HQ’s problem. First thing is to get this program into the hands that paid for it. The second is to get my fucking daughter back.” Ernest raised an eyebrow as we made our way back upstairs and to the car. “Dad thought he was funny by taking Tia to *protect her* from me. He saw some letterhead that he wasn’t supposed to and got spooked. I laughed it off as a joke but it’s not funny anymore.”

Ernest nodded as he sat in the passenger seat, and we pulled out of the driveway. “And Owen?”

“Leaving him so that whoever he sold his soul to understands who they’re dealing with.”



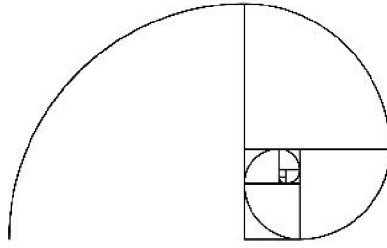
## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

### **To Be Continued...**

Craving Vengeance, the second installment of the Sinful Surrender Series, comes out in early 2024!

*If you're brave enough to suffer through another cliffhanger, read on to find out just how twisted things truly are...*

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## CHAPTER FIFTY

### *EXCERPT – CHESTER*

I KICKED AT THE limp form on the basement floor, grimacing at the destruction that had swept through this basement level. When Owen missed his 10 p.m. check-in, I figured out that something had gone awry. There had been entirely too many threats for him to try and backstab me, which led me to the Kolas residence just shy of an hour later. By the looks of it, Ada, the true mastermind behind Hawk International's US location, had swept through here as well if the bullet holes in his forehead were anything to go by.

The funniest part about this whole situation was the fact that Ada wasn't the only one running the show. There were several moving parts and I had only scrapped the surface. For one thing, Ada wasn't the only Hawk International employee after the program. Each person had their price, their own payday dangling over their head should they produce it. I had no idea why a company would pit their employees against each other unless, of course, Hawk International was hiding something.

Something far more sinister than the need for this program.

“You fucking idiot,” I mumbled as I kicked at his body again before crouching down to inspect him. Fear was etched into his dying expression and for that, I could be grateful. I hoped he died knowing how much of a failure he was. One of my minions sauntered up as I waved for someone. I pointed at Owen, “Search him. See if he’s got anything useful.”

It wasn’t that I couldn’t do it but I didn’t feel like getting dirty. I was wearing the good outfit today and blood was not part of the design.

A few seconds later, the minion produced a flash drive and a smile overtook my face. It couldn’t possibly be that Ada had left without the very thing she came for, had she?

“Guess you’re not a total fuckup, after all.” A giggle poured from my lips. *Jackpot.*

Though, at first glance, Rhys Knight leaving behind his copy of the program didn’t make a lick of sense. Unless of course, the Kolas crew had dealt with him as well. I resisted the urge to break out in maniacal laughter as I swiped the disk and wiped it off on the minion’s shirt before holding it up. Had Valentyn been telling the truth and that their only desire had been to get the program and run?

No, that didn’t make sense anymore.

They had taken Rhys and left behind Owen and the program. Unless they didn’t know Owen *had* a copy of the program. Oh, the conspiracies that began to unfold in my head were

merciless as I tried to make connections. I would delve into that later after I handed this piece of knowledge off.

I was one step closer to the payday of my life because the employee I had stumbled upon after all my research was providing a much larger payday than Ada had offered Owen. Whipping out my phone, I gleefully typed in his number and began dancing around the basement. It smelled like death in here but it didn't matter. I was about to be a rich man.

"I've got it," I spoke into the earpiece the moment the dial tone ended.

"Got what?" Heavy breathing followed and I wondered if I had interrupted something naughty. Did it matter? No. Money was more important.

I wiggled my fingers as I danced toward the stairs and back up into the hallway. "The program. Pay up."

"Not until that shit is in my hands. I've been disappointed one too many times. Where the fuck is Owen?"

I cackled at how pissed off the man on the phone sounded. "Dead. Apparently, your sister killed him." I left off the fact that the Kolas Crew had gotten to Owen first. This was definitely the handiwork of Gianni, that crazy motherfucker.

"Too bad." There was no emotion in the man's voice, no remorse, no sorrow that Owen was dead.

I didn't find any problem with Owen losing his life, though. He had worked every angle he could to get the program, working for two different people, while trying to best them

both. It made sense that this was the only way he'd end up. "I'll have it sent to you within the hour." *By midnight.* I didn't want to promise that shit though, just in case something happened.

"I'll be watching for it."

"Just one question before you go." I didn't wait for his answer. "Why the fuck would you insist on a restraining order? That just made it harder for Owen to get to Rhys and the program." I had thought through three hundred different options and not one explained the restraining order.

"Easy. I had to pretend to be the good brother. Rhys is too much of a sweetheart to enforce it and as long as I called every now and then, he thought I was doing my due diligence. It got me the program, didn't it?"

Oh, the Knight family was full of crazy people. *How wonderful,* I thought as a wicked grin replaced my smile. "You're a sick bastard. Probably worse than Ada."

"Thank you."

He was also a heartless individual. After all, he had all but let Owen's terrifying assault on his brother continue. I did not want to be in the room when Rhys realized that he had so many people around him who couldn't be trusted. I let out a sigh, feeling almost deflated at the man's response. "That wasn't a compliment, Liam."

"Didn't need to be. Have that program to me by midnight and you get paid. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a husband

to finish fucking.”

The line went dead, an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach growing. I liked chaos just as much as the next person but knowing how tangled this family was all up in one process made me worry. And I didn't worry. Not in this business. I destroyed and lit things on fire at the request of my clients. However, this was just a bit too convoluted, even for me.

My eyes dipped to the USB disk in my hand. Was one program really worth this much betrayal?

***BOOK TWO, CRAVING VENGEANCE COMES OUT***

***EARLY 2024***