

AUTHOR OF THE GOLDEN SKULLS & THE VALENTINETTI CRIME FAMILY

REBECCA JOYCE

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and dark suspenders, is seated in a large, ornate, dark-colored chair. She is holding a black hat in her lap. The background is dark and appears to be a library or study with bookshelves.

ILLYRIA

THE VALENTINETTI CRIME FAMILY

GOD HELP ANYONE WHO HARMS THE FAMILY

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ILLYRIA

The Valentinetti Crime Family

Rebecca Joyce

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ILLYRIA

The Valentinetti Crime Family

A Dark Mafia Series

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DEDICATION

To all the women in the world who saw red.

This book is for you.

SPECIAL THANKS

To my Ravenous Ladies ~ What can I say? You ladies Rock. To take time out of your days to read my books, something I'll never be able to repay. Your kind words, suggestions and words of encouragement help me do what I love most.

Jayne ~ To my beautiful friend across the pond. Thank you for being there for me, listening when I needed to vent, cry, or just laugh. Mostly, words cannot express the love and compassion you showed me over the last few months regarding the passing of my mother. Just being there while I talked, cried and wanted to disappear into the void. You helped me so much. I can't thank you enough, Jayne. You are truly one of my greatest and most loved friends and I pray that one day, I can stand before you and give you the hug you truly deserve.

Jenni ~ Oh my eagled eyed friend. Your attention to detail and gentle nature is beyond words. You truly are a remarkable woman, and I am blessed to know you.

Tracy ~ When I embarked on this '*universe*' I created, I never thought where it would lead me. Nor did I ever think I would need someone to follow behind me and keep me in check with facts, dates, and loose ends. It's not very often an author finds a reader who immersed themselves in a created universe so much that the author seeks the readers help to ensure viability. All I can say is boy howdy, am I glad I found you, Tracy. Your keen sense of the world I created boggles my mind. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for keeping me in check.

Kelly ~ What can I say about my sister from another mother? This year we both lost so much and yet we are still standing tall. Whether you are keeping on track grocery shopping or stopping me from going overboard with ideas for books, you've always been there for me. You've believed in me when others didn't and never let me give up on my dream. You are my best friend.

My ride or die bitch.

I love you, Kelly. Always.

Rose ~ Oh my sweet Rose. You've taken on a tremendous task with me and my books and have handled every obstacle with grace and perseverance. Thank you for persistence, keen sense of detail, and your ability to understand what I was trying to write. Thank you for everything you do.

To enjoy the full story of the world I've created, I highly suggest reading my books in order, as characters overlap and interact with other series.

Suggested Reading Order:

REAPER (Golden Skulls M.C.)

GHOST (Golden Skulls M.C.)

BULLSEYE (Golden Skulls M.C.)

GIOVANNI (The Valentinetti Crime Family)

PLAYER (Golden Skulls M.C.)

LORENZO (The Valentinetti Crime Family)

SAVAGE (Golden Skulls M.C.)

ANTONIO (The Valentinetti Crime Family)

THE GOLDEN WEDDING (Golden Skills M.C.)

PHANTOM (Golden Skulls M.C.)

DYLAN (Golden Skulls M.C.)

INK (Golden Skulls M.C.)

VICIOUS (Golden Skulls M.C.)

KING (Sons of Hell M.C.)

KANSAS (Diamondback M.C.)

SHADOW (Golden Skulls M.C.)

SINNER'S REDEMPTION (Soulless Sinner M.C.)

GUNNER (Sons of Hell M.C.)

ILLYRIA (The Valentinetti Crime Family)

MAXIM (Bratva of NYC)

SANDMAN (Golden Skulls M.C.) ~Coming Dec 2023

ILLYRIA

The Valentinetti Crime Family

Rebecca Joyce

Special Note from Author:

Dear Reader,

When I embarked on Maxim and Illyria's story, I knew it was going to be wrought with some hard lessons. Some are harder to swallow than others. As their story evolved, I knew the lessons they learned would leave a lasting impression.

With that in mind, there are elements of this book that push many societal and romantic boundaries. It's with that knowledge that I felt compelled to give you fair warning.

Illyria's book and Maxim's will not be easy reads. My characters are stubborn and strong-willed. Throughout the book, they learn hard lessons that will forever change who they are. There are many triggers in this book, from forced sexual gratification, savage captivity, BDSM, edging, to physical and psychological abuse to rape.

If you suffer from any triggers, I implore you to take caution before reading these books. Your mental safety is more important than my fictional characters.

Hugs & Lots of Love,

Rebecca Joyce

Prologue

Five years ago, at the Foundation Charity Ball in New York City.

I didn't understand these people.

I never would.

The only thing that seemed to matter to them was money, and it appeared to be their top priority. That and their fancy houses, fast cars and social standing. None of them would last five minutes in my homeland. Good old Mother Russia would chew them up and spit them out. Didn't they realize that none of that shit mattered?

Power ruled the world.

There were two groups of people, the ones who possessed it and the ones who desired it.

"Boss?"

"I know, Vladmir."

My second-in-command and trusted friend had been trying to get me the hell out of this place for the last hour. I didn't know why I was dragging my feet, but every time I got ready to leave, something inside me told me to stay.

"Maxim."

Looking up, I spotted Montana Stone, the President of the Soulless Sinners. The Soulless Sinners were an institution in the city I called home. Like the Statue of Liberty or the MET, it seemed they'd always been here. Standing, I greeted the man.

"Montana, my friend. It's good to see you."

"Uh huh," the shrewd man narrowed his eyes. "And just what brings you to this event? You never pegged me as the charity type."

I chuckled. "I'm not, but for this good cause, I made myself available."

"I'll let Malice know you approve and to expect a yearly donation from now on." The shrewd man grinned.

Shaking my head, I sat back down, motioning him to do the same. "Have you considered my offer?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Come by the clubhouse tomorrow and we will finalize the deal."

Smiling, I nodded. "I look forward to tomorrow, then."

"No date tonight?"

I roared with laughter.

"No. I wanted an uncomplicated night."

"I hear ya," the man said, looking around the room before narrowing his eyes. "God, I hate these functions. Nothing ever interesting happens."

I wholeheartedly agreed but said nothing when a soft, warm body fell into my lap. Reacting quickly, I grabbed the young woman before she fell onto the floor. Holding her tight to me, she giggled as she removed the curtain of blonde hair from her face and smiled.

Montana laughed boisterously, which had the woman growling at him. "Damn, Max, and here I thought tonight was going to be boring."

"Ignore the tattooed buffoon," she muttered before turning to me and saying, "I do apologize. I lost my footing."

As soon as her gaze met mine, I felt a jolt of excitement rush through my body. A feat few women could achieve, and yet she did so effortlessly.

Electrified, as if lightning struck its mark, images of her writhing under me as I pounded into her delectable body had my dick firming in my pants. She was stunning. The most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. When she wiggled her tight little ass against my crotch, my grip on her tightened, holding her still as I leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "I usually prefer dinner before dessert. However, I will make an exception in your case."

The beautiful woman pulled back and narrowed her eyes. "Anyone ever tell you that you have a nasty mouth?"

"All the time." I smirked. "Maxim Fedorov, and you are?"

"None of your fucking business," the beautiful, smart mouthed woman snarked, extracting herself from my grasp. Holding her head high, she turned and walked away as if nothing was amiss, giving me the perfect view of her backside before she disappeared into the crowd.

Fuck me.

She was a feisty little thing.

Montana howled with laughter as he stood, slapping my shoulder. "Fuck me. That was fucking priceless. Thanks for cheering me up, Fedorov. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Montana," I said, stopping the man. "Who was that woman?"

"That was none other than Illyria Valentinetti, the Ice Princess of Chicago, and the baby sister to Giovanni Valentinetti. Whatever you're thinking, forget about it. That girl is nothing but trouble. She's mean as hell and doesn't take shit from anyone. Plus, she's still in college. Too damn young for your old ass. No one can get within five feet of her before her brothers appear out of nowhere."

"Giovanni Valentinetti? The Chicago mafia boss?"

"The one and only."

"I've never had the pleasure."

"And you won't want to either if he knows you're interested in his little sister. Take my advice, Maxim. Run. Run far away and never look back. Illyria will chew you up and spit you out."

Grinning, I replied, "Sounds promising."

Chapter One

Illyria

One year ago,

I should have known better.

I wasn't some simpleton.

I knew what he was.

I wasn't blind. He told me many times.

Why I thought he would be different, I would never know. Maybe it was my stupid fucking heart. That had to be it. What could I say? I was romantic at heart. Maybe I thought I would be the one to tame the bastard that dwelled beneath.

Boy, was I fucking wrong. In retrospect, it was clear that there were countless warning signs that I should have paid attention to, but regrettably I ignored them all. It's amazing to think that everything happened just because I wanted him to love me back.

I wanted him to be the one.

My one.

It's unfortunate that I never listened to reason, and now I was suffering the consequences.

When it came to him, my heart refused to say no.

Well, it was saying FUCK NO right now.

“That two-timing mother fucker.”

Slamming the front door of my penthouse, I headed upstairs to my bedroom, shutting the door behind me. Thank God I lived alone, because if I saw anyone right now, I would rip them apart.

I needed to get ahold of myself fast. I knew I was spiraling. Who wouldn't after what I witnessed?

I was a Valentinetti.

We didn't allow our emotions to take control.

We controlled them.

I refused to be like every other broken-hearted woman.
That would never be in the cards for me.

My family raised me to stand on my own two feet.

To be strong.

To never show defeat.

To never cry in front of anyone.

I was the only daughter of Nicoletta and Valentine Valentinetti. The apple of my parents' eye. The adored baby sister of five brothers. The Princess of the Valentinetti Family.

My family sheltered me my whole life, hiding me away from anyone who could use me as leverage in my father's business. When my father died, my oldest brother, Giovanni, took over.

Despite that, he still handled me with kid gloves.

Well, I wasn't a kid anymore.

I hadn't been since I was nineteen and found love for the first time in my freshman year of college. I should have known then none of it mattered. No matter how hard I tried, no matter what I did, men were all the same. All they wanted was an in with my family.

Over the years, I've been used for that very thing.

All my relationships started out the same. The loving platitudes, the sincere concern, the undeniable allegiance to me alone. In the end, I got my heart broken, and they secured a meeting with my brother.

I should have known that rat bastard wasn't any different.

He was his own man.

His own boss.

He had everything he could ever want, except me.

I kept him at arm's length until I couldn't anymore. That was my first mistake, giving into him. My second was allowing him to worm his way into my heart.

No one understood.

They wouldn't get it.

Hell, I barely understood, but there was just something about him. Something that made him different from all the others. Maybe it was his ability to command a room. Maybe it was because he didn't want my money. Maybe it was because he was a selfish prick, who knows.

But what was done was done. There was no going back.

God help me though, because when my brothers found out, it would be war.

My big brother Giovanni was preparing to hand over the family business to Salvatore. I kept my opinion on that matter to myself. None of them cared what their baby sister thought. I understood why Gio was doing it. He'd had enough. His wife, Layla, was currently pregnant with their second child, and Gio wanted to watch his children grow up. This business, our family business, wasn't like most families. While most of the world knew Valentinetti Incorporated as a world class business from entertainment to consumable goods, my family was a bit more than that.

Those who knew the truth, knew the Valentinetti name by one word... Mafia. In our hometown of Chicago, the Valentinetti name was synonymous with respect.

No one went against the family.

No one.

Regardless, the family name didn't stop certain individuals from trying to take what didn't belong to them. Over the years, we'd lost so many. Now the family name meant death. And while Giovanni tried his best to distance the family, we got sucked into a war that was not of our making. A war that started long before our grandparents left Sicily. A war that still raged on today.

When we lost Dwayne and Luciano at the Golden Skulls Wedding, Giovanni broke. He went into a deep depression, refusing to see anyone for months. Those were the dark days for the family. Not only did we lose a beloved brother, but we

also lost a cousin we all respected and adored. The whole family did. There were times I thought of them, wondering what they would think of the family now. Their deaths broke something within the family. We all felt the change. We were no longer the strong, resilient Valentinetti's.

Now, we just existed.

With everything still going on, Giovanni refused to lose another family member and when his son was born, he started the process of handing over the family to Salvatore. I wasn't sure if Sal even wanted the responsibility, considering he removed himself from the family long ago to protect his own son. I knew Antonio would flat out refuse. With Grace pregnant with their third child, Tony wouldn't do anything that would harm his family. As for Lorenzo, after the showdown with the Society, he whisked Donatella away. He checked in once a month, but the family had no clue where they were at.

Then there was me.

The one member who didn't have anyone but the family. For a while, I submerged myself in the company, needing the distraction. For a time, it worked. Unlike my brothers, I found myself living again, representing the family when my brothers couldn't.

Then one night, my life turned upside down.

All because I fell in love with a man I shouldn't have.

Now I was going to have to deal with him myself. I couldn't go to my family with this. No. This time, he was going to understand exactly who he screwed over and I knew just what to do. If he fucking thought he could get away with this, that was on him.

Revenge was a dish best served cold.

Son of a bitch dug his grave. Now he could lie in it.

Kicking off my heels, I stripped out of my clothes and walked naked into my bathroom. Stepping into the shower, I turned the knobs on as hot scalding water sprayed my body.

If I could wash every fucking memory, I had of him out of my head, I would. Happily.

Fucking bastard.

I balled my fist tight as I reared back and punched the ceramic tiles, watching the tiles shatter. Ignoring the pain resonating up my arm, I welcomed the burn of the hot water as it washed over my bloody knuckles. I stood there under the spray, seething.

If I had half a fucking brain, I would have ended his ass at that moment.

Law enforcement would fucking thank me.

Women around the world would rise and rejoice.

Watching the blood drip into the shower basin, trailing in thin strands down the drain, blind red fury filled my veins. Never in my life had I ever wanted to eviscerate a son of a bitch. I considered myself a pacifist most of the time.

Not anymore.

I wanted his fucking heart stapled to a dartboard and hanging on my wall.

No matter what I did, I couldn't get the image out of my head.

I wanted to kill him.

Out of every man I dated, he was the one I gave my whole heart to, and the son of a bitch crushed it. He fucking knew I didn't play games. I made myself perfectly clear from the beginning.

Fucker thought I wouldn't find out.

He wanted to know why I put the brakes on our relationship. Well, all he had to do was look in the damn mirror. I knew what he did for a living. That shit didn't bother me. What I cared about was the volley of women he had been with. The man was a fucking womanizer, a gigolo, a fucking man whore.

I knew it and so did he. When he pursued me, he swore to me I would be the only one.

No one told him no.

I was the first.

I knew the bastard was lying.

Yet, I ignored my brain and went against my better judgement.

I gave him a chance.

He enjoyed the chase and I'll at least admit I enjoyed being chased. It was fun while it lasted. I thought he was the one. Someone I could spend the rest of my life with.

I thought wrong.

He was like all the others.

A two-timing whore.

Closing my eyes, I could still hear the sounds. I could still see his men's shocked faces as I showed up out of the blue. I should have known something was wrong then.

My mind shouted at me to leave, but I didn't listen.

I never did.

"Illyria?" Vladimir said, jumping to his feet, looking around as I walked into his penthouse. It was the night of the Foundation's Charity Ball. A global charity which catered to exploited and traumatized children. Run by a member of the Soulless Sinners, the charity event was the first ball of the season and everyone who was anyone would be there. As the family representative, I was required to attend. I was having a good time until he showed up and everything went to shit. I said stuff, he said stuff. In the end, I slapped him and ran away. A childish move, but the big bastard really pissed me off. When I thought about what I did, I felt sorry and wanted to apologize.

I should have stayed away.

When Vladimir Ivenok, his personal bodyguard, best friend and the man who knew him best, saw me, I knew something was wrong. All the others deferred to Vlad, not wanting to bother their boss. I got it. My brother Giovanni had Marko. They were thick as thieves until they weren't. Yet the shock and worry on Vlad's face set off warning bells in my head. Something wasn't right here.

"What are you still doing in New York City?"

"My plane doesn't leave till morning. Where is he?"

Vladimir cleared his voice, looked around at the other men who stood silently, all looking to Vladimir for guidance.

That's when I heard it.

I knew what that sound was.

I wasn't stupid.

Turning towards the noise, I took a step when Vlad grabbed my arm. "You don't want to see, sweetheart."

I looked at the hand wrapped around my wrist and snarled, "Get your fucking hands off me before I cut it off."

Vlad quickly let me go.

Gone was the happy feeling of spending the weekend with him. Gone were all the thoughts I had of a future with him. Instead, all I saw was blinding red fury. Making my way up the stairs, I took each step intently, methodically slow, letting the sounds fuel my rage. I knew what he was doing, but I refused to believe it until I saw him with my own eyes.

A picture was worth a thousand words they say. Well, I needed it imprinted in my head. I needed the reminder that no man was trustworthy. I need a word. Something to remember when the next asshole came knocking.

I didn't know what those words were yet, but as I made my way down the long hall to his bedroom, several started forming in my head.

Placing my hand on the doorknob, I opened his bedroom door to find him on his back, his eyes closed in ecstasy as a

woman rode his dick into the mattress, moaning and panting. His hands gripped her hips as he moved her over him, grinding himself into her.

It was at that very moment, my world turned upside down as thoughts of his blood dripping from my hands gave me solitude. Standing there, watching him, I never wanted to kill anyone more in my life.

For years, this mother fucker tried and got me to love him and for what? So, he could continue with his life and fuck whomever he wanted. I was crystal clear with him. I refused to be a kept woman. If that was what he wanted, then he needed to find someone else. Even with all my warnings, he still chased me.

And God help me, I let him catch me.

Standing there, I couldn't take my eyes off him as he pumped his dick into her. I smirked as the woman cried out on top of him, gasping for air.

I knew what she was feeling.

I, too, had been in the same predicament.

The man was a beast in the sack. I'll give him that.

He was a good fuck.

Too bad that was all he was good at.

"Illyria?"

Hearing my name brought me out of my stupor as I blinked, my new reality coming into focus as fifty shades of red filled my vision. Throwing the woman off him, he jumped from the bed.

Sweat dripped down his perfect flesh, his cock still hard.

Like I said. A beast.

"She doesn't mean anything."

They never did. Yet it didn't stop him. Lightly shaking my head, I growled. "I warned you. Now you're going to reap what you sowed."

Turning, I left him standing there, unsatisfied.

I made it downstairs to find the penthouse door open and waiting. I looked at his second, who nodded.

At least he got it.

He knew there would be no fixing this.

Walking into the elevator, I stared at Vlad and stated clearly for all his men to hear. "He comes near me. I will kill him. Make him understand."

"Illyria!"

I shook my head as the elevator doors began to close. "He dug his grave. He can lie in it."

As the doors shut, I heard him scream my name.

Closing my eyes, I refused to shed a tear. If any man on this planet could ever get me to cry, it would be him, but I refused to give him the satisfaction.

I walked out of his building with my head held high to my waiting car. "Illyria? You okay? What happened? What did that son of a bitch do?"

My bodyguard and best friend, Maria Valentinetti, was my cousin. We grew up together. There wasn't anything that we didn't know about each other. I knew she would see the pain in my eyes. Maria was too damn observant.

"Nothing that I wasn't already aware of. Take me to the airport. I never want to see this fucking city again."

I wanted to go home.

There was no reason for me to stay longer.

My business was done.

I wanted my family.

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. Visions of him filtered into my head, only to be drowned out by what I just saw.

I seared it into my brain.

I will never forget.

Turning off the water, I grabbed a towel, wrapping it around me. Leaning against the bathroom counter, I hung my head, trying to forget the images in my head.

It was useless. I seared those images into my brain for all time.

There would be no forgetting.

No forgiving as a red haze surrounded those images.

After throwing on some pajamas, I crawled into bed, knowing tomorrow was going to be a busy day. I didn't have time to fall apart. In fact, I barely had time to do anything. The company needed me, and Giovanni requested my presence at a family dinner. I had to get my head together, because one slip and he would know.

He always did.

Closing my eyes, I rolled onto my side, sinking deeper into my pillows. I whispered, "You just fucked with the wrong woman, Maxim."

Hell, hath no fury like a woman scorned had nothing on me.

I didn't know when or how, but when I was done with him, he was going to wish his father came down his mother's throat.

Chapter Two

Illyria

Present day,

“Ms. Valentinetti?”

Looking up from my computer, I smiled. “Come in, Olivia. What can I do for you?”

Olivia Smith was my personal assistant. She had been with me ever since I started working for Valentinetti Corp. after I graduated from Loyola University with a degree in Business Management.

God, that felt like eons ago. I thought it funny how life never really turned out as I planned. When I graduated college, I had planned on working for the family business, not becoming its CEO.

Then the sudden death of my brother Luciano and cousin Dwayne at the Golden Skulls wedding in California a few years back changed everything. When the dust settled, Giovanni transferred the entire company over into my name without a second thought.

I owned it.

All of it.

While the family mourned, Giovanni sank into a deep depression. As the head of the family, he blamed himself for their deaths. He closed himself off from everyone, refusing to talk. It forced Salvatore to step in and take over the family business. My Aunt Daniella was inconsolable, condemning Giovanni for the death of her beloved son. A major rift had appeared in the family, and I was uncertain if it could be repaired. While some still believed in the family, most of them walked away, refusing to be fodder any longer.

The consolation was when Reggie, Giorgio and Lorenzo returned home with Donatella, Catarina and Colin. Reggie refused to talk about Dwayne. The loss of his brother hit him hard and weighed on him heavily. Lorenzo became a shell of

his former self with the loss of his twin, Luciano. He rarely smiled anymore. I thought when Donatella gave birth to their son, Luke, it would make him happy. Instead, Lorenzo sank deeper into his thoughts.

As for me, there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think of Luciano and his beautiful smiling face or Dwayne and his funny jokes. My brother and cousin were the best of all of us in my book. Kind, gentle and nothing like the rest of the family. Both men lived by their own set of codes. Luciano, the artist of the family, preferred his paintings, showing the world that there was still beauty to be had. As for Dwayne, when he left and joined the Golden Skulls, he did so to protect Reggie. Dwayne never left his brother's side. He was funny, strong and real. So unlike most of the people I knew who were fake and only cared about themselves. Mostly, I missed their smiling faces and the laughter we shared.

“Mr. Jackson Deveroux is here.”

“Send him in.” I smiled as I quickly tucked a lone strand of hair behind my ear. Sitting up straight, I ran my hands down the front of my shirt, trying to look presentable. Not that I wasn't. It was just that Jackson Deveroux had an uncanny way of throwing me off my game.

There was something about the attorney that unsettled me.

The former law partner in my brother Antonio's firm had done well since he arrived in Chicago. He even weathered the death of his partner, Suzanna Thorpe, with grace. After my brother Antonio signed the law firm over to Suzanna, it was a shock to all of those in the community that the police found her dead in her apartment. The police ruled her death as a robbery gone wrong. They never found the murderer. After Suzanna's death, Jackson took over the firm and built it up into one of Chicago's leading firms in the city. Not bad for a man from Alabama.

It also helped that the man was fucking gorgeous.

His face alone could seriously be on the cover of every GQ magazine. He was that handsome. Not to mention the man

was tall, standing over six-foot six and filled out his perfectly tailored suits to perfection.

I looked up just as the door opened and in walked Mr. GQ himself, closing the door behind him.

Standing, I extended my hand and smiled. “Mr. Deveroux.”

“Ms. Valentinetti,” the sly southern charmer grinned wickedly, as his eyes left my face and traveled south. Clearing my throat, I released his hand and sat back down. Mr. Deveroux smirked, taking his time as he sat. His deep, sapphire blue eyes never leaving mine as he unbuttoned his suit jacket.

“I was in the neighborhood, and I thought I’d stop by.”

“I see,” I smiled, leaning back in my chair. “So, you’re bored.”

I expected a witty retort. Instead, Jackson stood, then walked around my desk to stand before me. He had a grin on his face and there was a distinct bulge in his pants that told me he definitely wasn’t bored. “Not bored, sweetheart.”

Licking my lips, I whispered, “I see that.”

Jackson grabbed me out of my chair and kissed me passionately, full on the lips. His left hand wrapped itself around my waist as his right held the back of my head so he could kiss me as deeply as possible.

Locked in his passionate embrace, I gave into the swarming lust that was bubbling up to the surface while I kissed him back as hard as he was kissing me. With one forceful move, Jackson lifted me onto my desk, knocking my files and papers to the floor.

Releasing my lips, Jackson stared at me, his desire evident in his eyes. “Fuck woman, you drive me crazy.”

“Sounds like a personal problem.”

Jackson growled as he ripped open my blouse, sending buttons flying everywhere. His eyes focused hungrily on the sight of my firm heaving breasts as my breathing became

heavier. I knew what he was seeing. I saw it every day when I dressed. I worked hard to keep my body firm and ate all the right things. Perception was everything in my line of work. It wasn't just my intelligence that served me well, but my ability to look desirable as I devoured men left and right.

I wasn't known as the succubus of Chicago for nothing.

I learned the hard way what could happen when I gave my heart to someone.

That was a mistake I wasn't ever going to make again.

Jackson was an excellent lover. Well versed in how to pleasure a woman. I made myself perfectly clear that there would be no romantic serenades for us. What we had was just sex alone. I wasn't in the market for a husband, and he didn't want to be bothered with the hassle of a relationship.

We were a perfect match.

I moaned as he slipped the dark lacy material of my bra down to reveal my stiff, hard nipples. I knew he couldn't resist such a treat as he began to work on my right breast, licking and sucking on it, biting it so softly. The man was a connoisseur in bed as he took his time, enjoying every moan and cry, demanding my response.

A flash of memory surfaced.

My body stiffened.

“What's wrong?”

Shaking the wayward thought from my head, I replied. “Nothing.”

He looked at me for a quick second before grinning again as he lowered his mouth back to my breast. My body shook a little from feeling his teeth clasp on to my sensitive nipples. I felt no pain as I closed my eyes and took in the sheer sensation of pleasure I was feeling through my body. Still kissing me, Jackson moved his hands down to my hips and slid down along the soft fabric, moving around to my ass, giving it a firm squeeze before continuing his way down to the end of my

skirt. With another forceful move, Jackson lifted the skirt over my hips and left it there, bunched up around my waist.

I was feeling so turned on at the moment. Jackson had taken complete control, and I loved it. He dropped to his knees and slowly pulled down my panties, which by this stage had become quite wet. I tried to picture how I looked right now. I was leaning up against my office desk with my blouse ripped open, my breasts hanging out of my bra, my skirt bunched up around my waist and my wet panties hung around my ankles, as this man I hardly spent time with other than in the carnal kind, navigated through my pussy lips with his tongue.

I felt so slutty, so wanton as I pictured myself this way, and it turned me on even more. My knees shook in anticipation. I knew what was coming. Something I craved, needed more than air and I had the perfect man between my legs to give me the relief.

I decided to help my seducer and stepped out of my panties.

I sat up on my desk and spread my legs, giving Jackson full access to my soft, wet lips in front of his face. I smirked when I watched him stare at my core. The man was defiantly singular in nature. That I could always count on. When it came to sex, Jackson gave his all and I reaped the benefits.

Jackson knew what I wanted him to do and I knew he was up to the task.

He delved his tongue into my hot cunt, moaning as he licked my cream. His hands stroked the inside of my thighs, pushing my legs further apart so he could get closer to my pussy. I loved being in this completely exposed, submissive position. I was completely giving my body to this man and although I had never realized it before, I loved not being in control.

My life was arduous enough, with schedules, meetings, dinners and family. This moment. This part of my life, I allowed myself too just be me. All my walls came down and I just felt. Allowing the feeling, the ecstasy of his touch take over. Time would catch up with me soon enough, but in this

moment, I could be the woman I kept hidden, locked away from everyone.

Jackson's hands roamed higher up my body as he caressed my breasts, softly at first, then more vigorously as I moaned in sheer ecstasy, all the while as he continued to lick and suck at my clitoris. The stimulation I was receiving was all too much as my whole body began to shudder and shake. I had to bite my lip to keep from screaming as Jackson continued his assault through my intense climax.

With my head still spinning, I returned to the real world and looked up at the tall, broad figure towering over me. I saw the look on Jackson's face and knew he wasn't finished with me. The thought of what might be yet to come sent further shivers cascading down my half naked body. Jackson unzipped his fly, never taking his eyes off me. I leaned forward and licked my lips, hungry for what was being unveiled before me. I got hot at the very thought of having his monster inside of me. I wanted to feel the stretch of pain as he thrust deep. I needed to feel the bite of pain from his hard grip as his fingers gripped me tightly.

Quickly donning a condom, Jackson leaned forward, rubbing the head of his dick up against my now sopping wet pussy. Just this sensation alone felt so good as I moaned, letting my head fall back. "Please,"

I begged, wanting to feel Jackson's dick inside me, filling me.

He thrust himself forward suddenly, giving me what I needed so badly.

"Oh God, yes!" I moaned, as Jackson picked up rhythm, pumping his cock inside me. I lifted myself up and kissed him hard on the lips before I returned Jackson's earlier favor and ripped open his shirt. Jackson's chest was more muscular than I had given him credit for, and I enjoyed the feel of his firm torso as my hands explored his body while he continued fucking me.

Increasing his tempo, I bit down on his chest as a sheer animal nature took hold of me. I drew blood as my second

climax of the afternoon washed through me. My pussy clenched his cock in quick waves as I came, as his hands gripped my hips hard, slamming his cock fast and deep into me. The added stimulation pushed Jackson over the edge. With one last thrust, Jackson shot his load inside of my cunt. I felt every pulse, every twitch as warm jets of cum filled the latex covering.

Breathing heavily as my legs shook, I moaned when his semi-flaccid cock slipped from my pussy as he removed and disposed of the condom.

His juices dripping from the head of his cock.

Smiling, I sat up. "Now that's a beautiful sight."

He chuckled, plopping down in my chair. "Glad you think so, sweetheart, because I came here to ask for a favor."

Not bothering to cover up, I tilted my head. "I thought I just gave you a favor?"

He smiled. "Well, another favor then."

"And what is the favor?"

"How do you feel about pretending to be my girlfriend for the weekend?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Because we get along and I know with you by my side, there won't be any romantic problems."

"What's going on this weekend?"

"I have a meeting in New York City with a new client. This client is throwing a weekend party and has insisted I bring a date. Something about seating arrangements being even. We would stay at his country estate for the weekend. We'd leave this Friday and return Sunday afternoon."

Fixing my bra, I stood and shimmied my shirt back into place. Pulling my shirt closed, I sighed when I noticed the missing buttons. There was no hope for my shirt, so I walked over to my personal closet and took out a clean one.

"Illyria?"

Saying nothing, I removed my ruined shirt and quickly put on the new one. Tucking it in, I ran my fingers through my hair and said, "I'm sorry Jackson, but I will never step foot in New York City again. Find someone else."

"Is it the city in general or the man who broke your heart?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I muttered, walking back over to my desk, motioning to him to get out of my chair. He slowly did as I asked, tucking his now flaccid cock back into his pants.

"Lie to me all you want Illyria, but even I can see the walls you've erected. Look, what we have is fun. It's easy and let's face it, with both our schedules, neither of us has time for romance. All I'm asking is for a weekend in the country. You won't even have to step foot in the city."

"I'm sorry, Jackson. My answer is no," I stated firmly, as my office line began to ring. "Nothing on earth could ever induce me enough to return to New York. Now, if you don't mind, I need to get back to work."

Jackson shook his head, getting to his feet. "You know, one of these days, Illyria, you are going to have to let someone in."

"When hell freezes over."

Watching Jackson leave, I sat down before picking up my office phone. "Illyria Valentinetti."

"Hey beautiful, it's Montana. Wanna explain to me why you are running skin and drugs out of the warehouse district near my turf?"

"What?" I gasped, sitting up. "I don't know what you're talking about, Montana. I've scheduled those warehouses for demolition in two weeks because I want those places torn down and used for scrap metal, so I can shove them up Maxim's ass. The company I hired for security has assured me they are empty."

Snapping my fingers to get Olivia's attention, I cupped the phone and said, "Get me the file on the security firm I

hired in New York and then call Renaldo Ramono and tell him I need a fucking favor.”

Putting the phone back at my ear, I heard Montana say, “Well, I’m standing on pier eighty-three looking right at warehouse nine and there are people moving in and out of it.”

“Shit,” I sighed, as Olivia hurriedly rushed in handing me a folder. Flipping it open, I scanned the documents. “Do what you have to, Montana. You have the backing of my family. I’m catching a flight and will be in the city by nightfall. Burn the place to the ground if you must, preferably with the Russian bastard in it. If not, I’ll find another way to get even with the fucking son of a bitch Russian asshat.”

Hanging up the phone, I started barking orders. “Call Stephan and tell him to get jet ready. Then call Maria and tell her that her vacation is over. Time to earn that paycheck. Call Mr. Davenport and tell him I need a penthouse for my stay. Then call Advantage Security. I want to speak to with the motherfucker in charge.”

Chapter Three

Illyria

It was raining when the driver pulled up in front of Davenport Tower in downtown Manhattan. I needed a place that was off the radar. A place where I could do what needed to be done with no interruptions. Davenport Tower not only gave me the peace of mind I needed but also the protection I required.

One of the city's most exclusive apartment buildings, Davenport Tower catered to a select group of individuals. It also helped that Davenport Tower was owned by Caleb Davenport, the Vice President of the Soulless Sinners, also known as Mercy.

I dared anyone to go up against that son of a bitch.

Sitting in the backseat of the rental car, I twirled my hands as an uneasy feeling washed over me. I didn't want to be here. This city was his playground. His domain. I knew the longer I stayed, the faster he would know I had returned.

I didn't want to think about that happening.

"You don't have to do this, Illyria," Maria, my cousin and one of my closet friends said. "We can tell the driver to take us back to the airport and let Montana deal with the Russian bastard himself. He never needs to know you were here."

"I know," I muttered, looking up at the tall building.

"Call Renaldo. Take him up on his offer, then. You will be safer there."

"His family is in mourning. They just lost their parents. They are in no position to host a guest. Besides, he's already doing me a favor."

"You are not a damn guest," Maria sighed. "And you know it."

I knew she was right. Renaldo and my brother Giovanni were long-time friends. Both were raised to take over their

families from birth. Like my family, Renaldo was the head of the Romano Family. When his father died a few months ago, Renaldo stepped up to fill the role as the head of the Romano family. My brother Giovanni was there for the transfer of power and to deliver our family's condolences personally.

Few people knew of the Romano Family's secret alliance with the Soulless Sinners. A motorcycle club composed of highly influential businessmen from New York's elite society that lived outside the laws of the common man, doing whatever was needed to ensure the safety of their city. While some people believed in the police and local governments to protect them, a small few knew the truth. It was organizations like the Soulless Sinners, the Romano Family, and yes, even the Russian bastard, that kept the city clean.

Well, they tried at least.

"I won't burden anyone with my personal problem."

"He's not a personal problem. He's a scourge on society. I say tell your brothers everything and let them deal with the bastard. Hell, let me tell the cousins. We've never liked the *Bloodletter*, anyway."

"I don't want anyone to know, Maria. Just keep your promise. I mean it."

"Fine," my cousin sighed. "But you better be damn careful. That fucker sees too much. One slip and he will know, and God help you if he ever finds out. In the meantime, if that bastard shows his face, I'm putting a bullet between his eyes, and you can't stop me."

I smirked at that.

My cousin Maria was not a forgiving woman. A little bloodthirsty herself, she never hid her feelings about anything. She was what I affectionately called my *ride or die bitch*. No matter the circumstances, I knew Maria had my back. It also helped that she was an expert marksman and good with a knife in hand-to-hand combat.

"Miss?" the driver muttered, just as the back door opened.

Looking to my right, I grinned as a man held out his hand for me to take. Doing so, I stepped out of the car and came face to face with Mercy. “Hello, gorgeous.”

Kissing his cheek, I smirked. “Hello, Mercy.”

“Let’s get you inside before you drown. It’s been raining all damn day.”

Huddling close to Mercy, I allowed him to escort me into Davenport Tower under the safety of his umbrella. Once inside, he stepped back and shook out the umbrella before closing it. “How was the flight?”

“Uneventful,” I muttered, as Maria walked through the rotating doors. “Thank you for putting me up. Was Montana able to do what he needed to do?”

“Yes. Tessa is back home and recuperating. The club and Fedorov’s men took care of all those who were in the warehouse. Montana fired the old security firm and hired another. The owner is awaiting your call. After you get settled, Montana would like a meeting with you. It’s non-negotiable. He has questions.”

“I figured he would. Tell him I’ve made arrangements for the warehouses to be demolished in the next few days. We can talk after.”

“That’s what he wants to talk to you about. He wants to buy the warehouses.”

“We can discuss business later, Mercy. I’m tired and want to go to bed.”

“I understand,” the handsome man said. “Follow me. I believe I have everything you requested. I’ve put you in one of the penthouses. Your secretary, Olivia, called and made all the arrangements. Your housekeeper, Mrs. Rushton, arrived earlier today and is already upstairs. The club has ensured you complete anonymity for your stay and Montana has personally assured that you will not be disturbed.”

“And the other matter?”

Mercy grinned. “Taken care of.”

“Good.” I said, walking into the elevator.

“Some advice, Illyria,” Mercy sobered before saying. “Be careful. He isn’t like the others. You, of all people, know that. I will keep your secret, even from Montana, but if that secret endangers my club, I will tell Montana.”

“I understand.”

I knew the penthouse would be opulent. I didn’t expect anything less. Davenport Tower didn’t just have a high reputation for privacy, they also boasted top of the line luxury. As one of the largest buildings in the city, Davenport Tower catered to the uber rich but even that wasn’t enough to get you in the door. The application for a penthouse was rigorous and thorough. From my understanding, the selection committee had denied some of the wealthiest families around the world. Status and bank accounts didn’t matter here. What the criteria was, was a mystery. All I knew was that Davenport Tower was the most exclusive building in the city, if not the world. The security was top-notch and without an invitation, no one was getting into the building.

When the elevator door opened, I walked forward as Mercy began, “Okay. There are five rooms. Each has its own personal bathroom. There is a living room, a rec room, kitchen and dining room. The kitchen is state-of-the art. There is also an office and a library. I had Shame set up your office. Everything you’ll need is there, along with a new laptop. The penthouse is motion activated. Only my security has access. No one will have access to enter this floor but you and me. Not even Montana can get up here without your explicit permission.”

“Hello, Ms. Illyria,” Mrs. Rushton smiled, walking over to take my bag. “How was your trip, dear?”

Deborah Rushton was my personal housekeeper and had been since the moment I moved out of my family’s compound. Almost like a second mother to me, I loved Mrs. Rushton dearly.

“Uneventful.”

“Good. Now, I’ve already prepared your room, so go change. I have prepared a light meal, since I know you don’t eat well after traveling. Nothing special, just a light pasta fagioli and some garlic bread. Will your guest be staying for dinner?”

“No, Mrs. Rushton, but thank you,” Mercy quickly spoke before handing me the keycard to the penthouse. “I need to get going. If you need anything else, you know how to reach me.”

“Thank you, Mercy.”

“If you follow me, Ms. Illyria, I will show you to your room.”

Doing as Mrs. Rushton requested, I didn’t bother with looking about the penthouse. I wasn’t going to be here long enough, anyway. As far as I was concerned, this was just temporary lodging.

The room Mrs. Rushton put me in was beautiful, I will say that. The large king size bed looked divine and the view was stunning. Walking over to the floor to ceiling windows, I looked out over the city as the rain clouded it in a darkness I was familiar with.

He was out there somewhere, lurking in the shadows. Watching, waiting for me to show my face. I knew he was. I felt him close the second my plane landed at LaGuardia.

I wasn’t stupid.

I knew he knew I was here. He always knew.

Reaching into my suit jacket, I pulled out the small picture I always kept with me. A reminder, I told myself. So, I would never forget.

Running my finger gently over his face, I tried to hold back the visceral emotions that wanted to swamp me as a lone tear fell onto the picture.

It was a happy time.

One of many.

I was running late. Nothing unusual for me. I had just graduated college at Loyola University and my brothers were throwing me a party. My mom was so happy. She invited everyone. The party was nothing special, just a small summer barbeque at the family compound. Last I knew, there would be close to a hundred people.

“Illyria! Let’s go!” my cousin Maria shouted from the living room of my small apartment. “I’m not getting my ass handed to me by Aunt Nicoletta!”

“I’m coming!”

Checking my make-up one more time, I turned to leave when he stepped out of the shadows. Turning quickly, I looked towards the door, then back at him, whispering, “What the hell are you doing here? If Maria sees you, she will lose her shit.”

He smiled as he walked over to me, lightly caressing my face. “You look beautiful, Moya Lyubov. I wanted to give you this on your special day.”

Reaching into his suit jacket, he pulled out a long, thin black velvet box and handed it to me. My hands were shaking as I carefully opened the box to find a simple string of delicate black pearls. They were stunning. “The second I saw them, I knew they belonged to you.”

Looking up at him, I whispered, “They’re beautiful. Thank you.”

Taking the pearls from the box, I stood still as he bent closer and placed them around my neck before gently kissing my cheek. Sparks raced along my skin from his touch. It was always like this with him. One touch was all it took. One look. One smile and I was his. He had this hold over me that I couldn’t explain. When I was with him, I felt loved, protected, adored, as if I was the only woman in the universe.

“Come to me tonight, Moya Lyubov.”

“Maxim,” I sighed regretfully. “I can’t. My mother is taking me on vacation after the party.”

“I understand,” he barely said, his thumb softly caressing my bottom lip. “I’m going to miss you.”

I didn't know what to say. He looked heartbroken. We'd only been seeing each other for a few months now. It was all hit and miss, but when we spent time together, it was as if nothing around us mattered. Not my family nor the world he lived in. He was upfront with me from the beginning and I appreciated that. I couldn't change who I was any more than he could. I wasn't sure what was going on between us, but I wanted to find out. There was something about Maxim Fedorov, the head of the East Coast Bratva family that called to me on an elemental level. And though I wasn't ready to admit it, I knew my future belonged to him.

"Illyria!" my cousin shouted loudly, making me jump.

"I better get going before she marches in here."

Maxim nodded solemnly, taking me in his arms before he lowered his lips to mine. It was a tender kiss. A promise of more that curled my toes and electrified my body. Releasing me, he stepped back and whispered, "Have fun, Moya Lyubov."

"Thank you for the pearls."

He bowed before me before disappearing into the shadows, right before Maria stormed into my room. "What the hell is taking you so long? Gio is blowing up my phone. He said if your ass isn't at the compound in twenty minutes, he's sending the cousins to haul you there kicking and screaming. Let's go!"

Grabbing my bag, I turned to the shadows and mouthed, "Thank you," before letting Maria pull me from my room.

Of course, with the good came the bad.

In our case, there was too much bad. I would have given him anything. All of me if he asked. All I wanted in return was to be loved unconditionally.

That didn't happen.

It never would.

I couldn't trust him.

The pain of that night still felt raw as my heart shuddered a beat.

He broke me.

I didn't think and allowed myself to succumb to his charms. I don't think he ever realized the depth of my devotion. Because if he did, he wouldn't have done what he did.

No matter what I did, who I fucked, I could never get him out of my system. The man had a hold on me like no other. Almost like a compulsion. It drew me to him.

I craved him.

He was my drug of choice, and no one came close.

It was only when I was alone that I allowed myself to think about him. No one knew what happened, not even Maria. All she knew was that he hurt me. Just not to what extent.

I kept it that way.

It was my business alone and though I hated him with every fiber in my being, a small, tiny, minuscule part still wanted him.

I knew I always would.

But no amount of longing and pain could ever make up for his indiscretion. I meant what I said that day when I left his penthouse.

Maybe Jackson was right.

Maybe I needed to get away.

Maybe a weekend in the country would do me a world of good.

For the last year, I'd been singularly driven, not only to make Valentinetti Corp the best company around, but to destroy everything Maxim Fedorov held dear. I waited, took my time until the moment was right. When it was, I pounced. I was systematically and methodically buying every piece of property he owned. I was taking his financial backers and brokering new deals that would destroy him. His business

partners were slowly ending alliances and forging new ones with me and when he found himself barely hanging on by a thread, I was going to take his shipping company and bankrupt him.

I wanted to watch as he returned to his beloved Russia a broken man. Then and only then would I tell him I was the one who ruined him.

I was going to destroy him.

I wanted him to feel the pain he caused me.

I wanted him on his knees, begging me, pleading with me to stop what was coming.

I wanted to break him as he broke me.

Chapter Four

Maxim

The rain pelted the window as I looked over the city I claimed, knowing she was out there somewhere.

So damn close, yet so far away.

I'd received the message the second her plane landed. I knew she would come. For the last year, she'd been trying everything within her power to destroy me. Buying up my companies, business, holdings little by little. She always was a determined woman. Once she put her mind to something, nothing, not even me, could stop her.

All because I fucked up.

There was no excuse to be had.

The night she walked away, I knew I would never see her again.

I saw the pain in her eyes.

Pain I purposefully put there.

From the moment we met, our relationship was nothing but a game of cat and mouse. The funny thing about that game. The cat never won and the mouse always got away.

Yet, it didn't stop me from trying.

And I did try.

We both did.

For four years, we tried everything.

In the end, there was only one thing I could do to protect her. My life had spilled over, and because of me, she was now on his radar. So, I did the one thing I knew she would never forgive.

“Vladmir, make sure the others stay away tonight.” I said, handing him my coat. It was a long, boring night, and I was glad it was over. “And see that a fresh bottle of Crystal is

brought up along with fresh strawberries and cheese. Moya Lyubov will be arriving later tonight.”

“Already took care of everything, boss.”

Slapping my trusted friend on the back, I smiled. One of the few times I did as I headed up to my room to shower when my cellphone rang. Sighing, I reached into my pant pocket and stopped, seeing the caller I.D..

Whistling loudly, Vlad rushed over. Showing him my phone, he nodded, running from the room. I knew where he was going. I gave him a few seconds to get set up before I answered the call.

“Mr. Fedorov. I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” the familiar grating voice chuckled, mocking me.

“What do you want, Petrovitch?”

“An Italian whore, really?”

Spinning around, I looked at Vladimir, who looked as surprised as I was that Petrovitch knew about Illyria. No one knew. Vladimir and I made damn sure we kept my relationship to Illyria under wraps. If word got out about us, it would put her life in danger, not to mention create a war between the Italian mafia and my Bratva counterparts.

As it was, we were skating a very fine truce.

“I must say, Maxim, I am disappointed. Have you learned nothing? Does she know what you’ve done? Does she know the truth?”

Vladimir whispered something to Nikandr, who quickly left with Dmitry.

“What do you want, Boris?”

“What I’ve always wanted. What is rightfully mine.”

“You have the West Coast. Be happy you have that.”

The fucker laughed. “Not good enough. Not anymore. I know what you and your friend, Montana Stone, have done. Did you think I wouldn’t figure it out? That I’d just walk away

and let you get away with it? Oh, Brat. That's not how this works. Did you learn nothing?"

"Don't call me that. We are nothing to each other."

Boris bitterly laughed. "You will never learn, Maxim. But you will when I take her from you. Maybe I will do to your woman what I did, to Dominika. Would you like that, Maxim? Can you still hear her screams? I can. They made me hard just thinking about her."

"You sick motherfucker," I growled angrily, balling my fist tightly as I tried to lie my way out of this conversation. "She's nothing to me. Just a means to an end."

Boris tsked. "We've been having a wonderful conversation, and you had to ruin it by lying. Shame on you."

"What do you want? I won't ask again?"

"I want to destroy everything and everyone you care about, of course."

"Good luck with that. I don't care about anyone."

Boris laughed as I disconnected the call.

Throwing it across the room, I roared. "FUCK!"

"Boss, how does he know about her?"

Sitting on the sofa, I hung my head, raking my hands through my hair. "I don't know. We've been so careful."

"A mole?"

Looking up at my second, I challenged. "Is there someone you don't trust and didn't inform me about?"

"No," Vladimir muttered. "Boss, he knows about the deal you and Montana made two years ago with that biker club. How? If she finds out the truth before everything is done, she can unravel years of planning."

"She won't find out."

"Your woman is smart. Too smart."

Sighing, I got to my feet as every emotion I had evaporated, returning me to the shell of a man I was before I

met Illyria Valentinetti. There was only one thing I could do to protect the alliance I formed with Montana Stone and the Golden Skulls. All of us had worked too hard for it all to fall apart now. We were so close to the finish line. To do what needed to be done, I had to destroy the love of my life and pray that someday, she could forgive me for what I was about to do.

“Boss,” Vladmir cautiously whispered, backing up. “I don’t like that look on your face. What are you thinking?”

“What I should have done. There is no room for love in my world. I knew that from the beginning. There never will be.” Removing my shirt, I headed towards the stairs. “Cancel the champagne and shit. Tell the maid I need servicing. If she can’t do it, then find me someone else.”

“Maxim, don’t do this. We can find another way to defeat him.”

“There is no other way. He knows about her. The longer she is with me, the more danger I put her in. She is young. She will recover. Get me a whore. Now.”

“Boss, she will never forgive you. You know that?”

“I don’t care. I don’t care about anything anymore.”

“Do you want me to call her and tell her not to come?”

I turned to my second, my best friend, the man who knew me best, and slowly shook my head. “No. She needs to see the real me.”

And she did.

I knew there would be no coming back.

There would be nothing I could say.

No reconciliation. I had made my bed and now I had to lay in it.

For a small time, I was happy with my decision. She was safe. I tried to tell myself we would never work. We were too headstrong, too independent. Neither of us wanted to give an inch. But the truth was, the second I met her, I knew I would give her anything, do anything to make her happy.

The passion between us ignited a fire so dangerous, the only recourse was to douse it before she got hurt. And she would have. I barely stopped the coming destruction.

If it was just me, I wouldn't have thought twice about it, but there were my men, brothers who meant more to me than my own flesh and blood and she had the same. Then there were the alliances our families shared. No one would be unaffected by the coming slaughter.

So, I did what I had to do.

“Maxim?”

Turning, I saw Mercy standing in the doorway. Saying nothing, I stared at the man, waiting for him to say what he came to say.

“She made it safely to Davenport Tower. I attended everything, per your request. I just wanted to stop by and wanted to give you this.”

I said nothing as Mercy walked over and handed me the black key fob. Only two people would have access to my private penthouse. Illyria and me.

“Does Montana know?”

Mercy shook his head. “No.”

“Good,” I muttered, pocketing the key fob. “Let's keep it that way.”

Mercy nodded before walking away, only to stop at the door. “Max, are you sure this is how you want to play this?”

“I don't have a choice.”

“Yes, you do. Come clean to Montana. If anyone will understand, it's him. He will help you.”

“No one can help me now. What I did...” I said, shaking my head. “There is no coming back from that.”

“The offer still stands. When you're ready to end this, let me know.”

“Thank you, Mercy.”

“She’s hurting too, Max.”

Narrowing my eyes, I stiffened my shoulders and stood straight. “Thank you for your help, Mercy. I will call you if I have further need of you.”

Mercy shook his head but said nothing more as he walked away.

Alone once more, I turned back to the window and stared out into the dreary city. Rain slowly fell on the glass like tears before me. Closing my eyes, images of her beautiful face filled my mind of a time when we were truly happy.

I thought I knew happiness.

Growing up in Mother Russia, I had everything I thought I needed. I had my family, friends, but more importantly, I had the blessing from my father to further my education in music. Growing up, all I wanted was to be a pianist. I lived and breathed the Grand Steinway my mother bought me at eight years of age. My father encouraged me to practice as he believed I had the gift, knowing one day I would play at the Great Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. A dream that never came to fruition.

I learned much later that happiness was an illusion because in my life, happiness meant death. When I learned that truth, I never looked back. Until her.

She changed everything, Moya Lyubov.

How she quickly wrapped herself around me, still confused me. From that fateful day when she fell into my lap, she consumed my life. I thought I knew what I wanted, but I was wrong. She wrapped everything good and joyous in the world up in her smile. In the time I’ve known her, she showed me that there was more to life than work, blood and death. She understood me when others didn’t. She got what I was feeling and accepted me for who I was. She didn’t try to change me, allowing me to be the man my past created.

More importantly, she showed me that even in the dark, there was always a light that shined brightly, showing me the path to redemption.

“Come dance with me, Max!” Her laughter surrounded me as I soaked in her joy. She was everything I never wanted. I learned early in life that allowing love to seep in only brought heartbreak.

“I enjoy watching you, Moya Lyubov.” I replied, watching her dance in the backyard of my home in upstate New York as my fingers slid along the keys of my piano. She was the first woman I ever brought here, and she would be the last. My private residence was my sanctuary. A place I could forget the man I became and remember the boy I was once.

The joy of life eluded me until she reminded me of what I was missing. Before her, I spent my days solidifying my grip in the city I claimed. I ruled everything with an iron fist. I gave no second chances. When I decreed something, I expected it to be done. Those who knew me only knew me by one name.

The Bloodletter.

If they only knew how I came by that name, they would cower in fear. I never stopped to see what beauty laid before me until Illyria Nicoletta Valentinetti.

Rushing over to me, she wrapped her arms around my neck, kissing my face as she laughed joyously. “Moya Lyubov, you can’t dance if I can’t play.”

“I don’t want to dance anymore,” she smiled, slipping onto my lap. Holding her close to me, I kissed her nose. “What would you like to do, then?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

“I want what your heart wants.”

“I can work with that.”

Chapter Five

Illyria

Three days later...

I'd been in the city longer than I wanted and it was time for me to go home. There was nothing more I could do here. After a long negotiation, I sold the warehouses to Montana. Bastard refused to budge an inch. I acknowledged his business acumen, as it matched mine and I knew when I was defeated. In the end, I relented first and now I was ten million richer.

In two hours, I was getting on my plane and leaving this vile city. I'd been lucky so far and refused to risk staying any longer. Grabbing my travel bag, I headed into the living room when Mrs. Rushton announced, "Ms. Illyria, Mr. Stone, is on his way up to see you."

"Did he have an appointment?"

"No, dear. He did say it was urgent, though."

Sighing, I nodded just as the elevator doors opened and I walked Montana. "This better be good. I'm leaving in two hours."

"Got a business proposition for you," the big man grinned, walking in as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"Not interested."

"Even if it means you get to lord over a certain Russian bastard and make his life a living hell?"

Slowly turning to look at him, I narrowed my eyes. "Don't fucking toy with me, Montana. I'm in a killing mood."

"Not joking, beautiful. Let me take you to lunch so we can discuss the details."

Looking at the man I respected and trusted, I nodded. "I'll give you one hour. If I don't like what you offer, I'm leaving."

Montana clapped his hands together, smiling happily. "Agreed."

Reaching for my purse, I followed him out of the penthouse.



When Montana said he was going to take me to lunch, I didn't think it would be at the Gentleman's Club. While I didn't mind a little entertainment occasionally, this was an odd venue to eat at.

"Well, you fed me. We covered all polite society requirements. So, why am I here?" I asked, looking around the gaudy place.

Barney really needed to update the décor with the times.

"I want you to run this place." Montana said flatly.

"You can't be serious," I said, leaning back in my chair, pushing my plate away from me. "The Gentleman's Club? It's a strip club, Montana. What the hell would I do with a strip club?"

"It's not just a strip club."

"I know Barney. He won't sell. This place is his baby. So why don't you cut the bullshit and tell me why I am really here?"

"Barney's dead."

"Excuse me?" I muttered, caught off guard, which wasn't easy to do, but I'd give Montana props for throwing that at my feet. Looking around the place, I wondered who Barney pissed off this time.

Last I heard, he had his hands in a lot of pots.

Montana sighed, leaning forward, reaching for his glass of wine. "I'm going to lay it all out for you, Illyria. If you were anyone else, I wouldn't but if you agree to do this, you'll need to know the truth and what you would be getting yourself into. So here it goes. Barney's been laundering cash through his club. He then funneled it to Benson Graves in West Virginia, who deposited it into an offshore account."

I chuckled. "Benson Graves is dead. Your club killed him years ago."

"He's alive and well. Last known location was West Virginia."

"Where your Tessa is from, correct?"

Since word spread of a woman from Montana's past resurfaced, everyone has been clamoring for any information on her. From what I learned, she was a former piece that he kept on the side for years until she up and bolted on his ass. Not that I blamed her. Montana Stone wasn't an easy man to be with. Not that I would know. I had enough common sense to keep him and his associates at arm's length.

I learned a lot growing up, not only from my father, but also from my brothers. Certain men couldn't be or just flat out refused to be contained. Too bad I didn't apply the knowledge before I gave my heart to the worst of them.

"That's right. Fucker watched my woman grow up. Even knew who her biological father was."

"Snoopy, right?" I smirked at Montana's shocked expression. "You're not the only one who has eyes and ears to the ground, Montana. Continue."

"We just learned that Benson was stealing from everyone."

"Shocker," I deadpanned. "That man did not discriminate. That's why my father helped your father kill him. Guess someone dropped the ball and didn't make sure the asshole was dead. You know a single shot to the head would ensure that, right?"

"Yeah," he chuckled, then sobered. "It gets worse."

"It always does. So, what has Benson done now?"

"He's been compiling information."

"Information on what?"

"He's gathered information on all of us, Maxim and his crew, the Romano and Valentinetti Families, even information on my brother Kansas' club, the Diamondbacks. Illyria, he knows that you and Maxim were seeing each other."

I shifted in my seat, not liking where this conversation was going.

“There is nothing between me and that asshole. Not anymore.”

“Lie to me all you want, sweetheart, but you and I know the truth. I’ve never hidden the fact that Maxim is a friend. We talk. After the warehouse fiasco, he told me what we’ve all suspected, and I know what the bastard did. Not saying anything in that regard, but I am telling you that you are now on the radar.”

I huffed. “I’ve been on everyone’s radar since I was born. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Benson and Barney were working for Boris Petrovitch, Illyria. They were syphoning information to him so he can take over the East Coast.”

I stilled.

I knew who Boris was. He was the head of the West coast Bratva. If I thought my Russian bastard was evil, Petrovitch made him look like the Easter Bunny. There wasn’t a single person in the underworld that didn’t know of Petrovitch and what he had his hands in. My family steered clear of the fucker, giving him no room to weasel his way into Chicago. Giovanni met with the other families long ago and they all agreed Petrovitch was not welcome in Chicago. I knew from my time with Maxim that he kept a firm hand on the East Coast Bratva families, containing Petrovitch to the West Coast. I’d heard rumors that Petrovitch wanted to branch out, but I never imagined the vile fucker would have the balls to go up against Maxim.

He wasn’t called the Bloodletter for nothing.

“There was a meeting last night. The heads of all the major families in the city came together. Your family included. There is a war coming.”

Twirling my glass in my hand, I watched the red wine swirl around. This was a lot of information to take in. Considering I was a female, I found it odd that Montana was relaying

everything so clearly for me. “Why are you telling me this? I’m not the head of my family.”

“No, your brother Giovanni is and he’s in the process of turning that honor over to Salvatore, as I am sure you are aware.”

I nodded. I was aware. What concerned me was that Montana knew. Mafia and Biker rarely, if ever, discussed the internal workings of their groups with each other. It just wasn’t done. For my brother to discuss family business with Montana meant only one thing.

Giovanni knew war was coming, and he was protecting me again.

“We all agreed to keep the Gentlemen’s club open for business.”

“Then hire someone to run it. Don’t see why you need me? If what you said is true, then I’m a liability.”

“Because we all respect you, Illyria. There is no one on this planet that is more protected than you. Every single one of the families in this city would kill to protect you. You are the one woman in the city that no one will ever go against.”

Smirking, I took a drink. “Not so sure about that, Montana. There is someone in this city who has no problem hurting me.”

“Sweetheart, look at me,” he breathed.

Looking up at him, he carefully continued, “I wish there was something I could say to make everything better for you, but there isn’t. We’ve all made mistakes, me included. What I can tell you is that you are not the only one hurting. He fucked up. He knows that. Let me ask you this. Why did you refuse his claim?”

“Because it would never work. We are from two different worlds and my family would never allow it.”

“Sweetheart, you can’t live your life straddling the line. You have to pick a side. Either you are in or out. You can’t spend your life living up to the expectations of your family. It’s your life, Illyria. Your brothers will never like who you end up with. You know that. So why are you holding back?”

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t trust him.”

“Like he can trust you?” Montana countered cautiously.

“What do you mean?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

“Jackson Deveroux.”

“He’s just a friend.”

“Well, I’m letting you know Maxim knows about the attorney you’ve been fucking on the side.”

“So what?” I shrugged nonchalantly. “He’s got no say in who I take to my bed anymore.”

“Think that if it makes you feel better, but you and I know the truth. Some advice, Illyria. Stay the fuck away from Mr. Deveroux. Maxim will only allow so much.”

I knew Montana was telling the truth. Maxim Fedorov was many things, but understanding wasn’t one of them. The man took what he wanted and didn’t give a flying fuck who he hurt in the process. He was maniacal, cold-hearted and deadly when it came to something or someone he considered his. And though I’ve been avoiding him like the plague for the last year, even I knew I belonged to Maxim.

“He knows I’m in the city, doesn’t he?” I muttered, looking at the exit as I drummed my expertly manicured nails on the table.

“He knew the second your plane landed. Like you, that man has eyes and ears everywhere. And baby, his eyes are locked on you.”

“So, he knows about this meeting, then?”

Montana nodded. “The second we entered the building his men surrounded the place. He is leaving nothing to chance when it comes to you.”

Sighing, I placed my napkin on the plate and stood. “Thank you for the offer, Montana, but I will pass. I have other obligations that require my attention.”

Montana shook his head. “Sal told us you’d say that.”

Turning to look at him, I asked. “What does my brother have to do with this?”

Montana picked up his fork, moving the remnants of his lunch around on his plate as he looked everywhere but at me. “Sal said you’d do as you were told.”

Balling my fist tightly, I seethed.

I wasn’t some fucking errant child.

“He also said that you were off limits to everyone, unless vetted by the family.”

Motherfucker!

“I own the place outright. I say what goes on here and I get the final say on who works here. Non-negotiable,” I quickly said, when Montana was about to speak. “I also get to keep the penthouse at Davenport Towers, which you will pay for.”

“What?” He said, sitting up.

“I know Sal didn’t say that shit, asshole. You wanted me, well now you’ve got me. All of me. And you can tell that Russian bastard if he ever steps foot in my club, I will personally rip his dick from his body and shove it up his ass.”

Montana cringed before saying, “That’s not going to work Illyria. We want to use this place as a neutral zone.”

“Vlad can attend. Maxim Fedorov is persona non grata. Take it or leave it.”

Standing my ground, I waited patiently as Montana milled over what I said and when his shoulders relaxed, I knew I was going to get everything I wanted. Gathering my purse, I turned to leave when I stopped, looked around and clearly said, “And one more thing, Montana. I will have a seat at the table for every meeting. If I’m going to be a target, then I have the right to know all the players.”

Holding my head high, I walked out of the Gentleman’s Club, smiling.

Chapter Six

Maxim

She was fucking fabulous.

From the second she walked into the Gentleman's Club I couldn't take my eyes off her. She looked more beautiful than I remembered, and that cunning, wicked mind of hers was going to get her ass beat once I had her in my clutches again.

It had been a year since I'd physically seen her and she didn't disappoint. She was everything I remembered and more. Her hair, still golden like the sun. Her beautiful face controlled and determined. Her body, a fraction fuller, more rounded in all the right places. She was a fucking knock out and my dick took notice.

Shifting in my seat, Renaldo Romano chuckled next to me. "Damn, Max. What the fuck did you do this time?"

"Shut up." I growled.

This experience was novel to me. I'd never been on the receiving end of my friend's ribbing. Generally, they were the ones with female problems. For years I'd avoided that entanglement like the plague because of this very instance. Now, it seemed it was my turn in the hot seat. I have to admit, I didn't like it.

I wasn't young like the rest of them. At forty-seven, Montana was younger than me by five years. I was the old man of the bunch. The one who was supposed to be levelheaded, knowledgeable. Instead, it seemed even I was not immune to the frivolities of female drama.

While the young pups around me laughed and joked at my expense, I looked at Vladimir, who seemed to agree with them.

Fucker.

I couldn't wait until a woman turned his life upside down and sideways.

“Oh, dipshit really stuck his dick in it this time,” Lorenzo Valentinetti laughed boisterously. “I thought for sure she was going to kill Montana for being the messenger. Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to piss off a stubborn woman, Fedorov?”

Ignoring the fuckers, I watched as the love of my life and the bane of my existence strut her little ass out of the club she now owned.

I knew this was a bad idea from the moment Montana suggested it. If I had half a fucking brain, I would have squashed the idea before it took root. Now, I was stuck.

How the fuck could I conduct business if I wasn’t allowed in the damn building? No. I was going to have to intervene and let the chips fall where they lay. Illyria Valentinetti may be a mafia princess, but she was my Queen, even if she refused to acknowledge me.

“Boss,” Vladmir whispered. “You want the boys to follow her?”

I simply nodded.

She was in my city now. I needed her protected. With Petrovitch running free, her life was in more danger than before.

She knew it and so did I.

The door to the club’s office opened as Montana walked in, looking a little pale. “Jesus, fuck, Fedorov. That woman is fucking scary. Take my advice and do as she says. Stay the hell away from her.”

“He doesn’t and I’ll kill him,” Giovanni growled, stepping away from the wall. “I warned you years ago to leave my sister alone. Now, you will reap what you sowed. If one hair is out of place, I will bring the full weight of the Italian families down upon your head. You wanted my sister. Well, she’s your problem now, Fedorov.”

“That’s gonna be hard, Gio,” Lorenzo muttered. “She’s threatened to make him a eunuch.”

“Not my problem.”

Ignoring the bickering brothers, I looked at Montana. “What’s the word on Petrovitch?”

My friend took a seat and sighed. “He’s in the wind. So is Graves. Malice took care of Barney last night. The club is ours until we sign it over to Illyria. I’m starting to think Salvatore is right about involving his sister. She may be more than we can handle.”

“I will take care of *Moya Lyubov*.”

“Are you deaf, man?” Renaldo sighed. “She just threatened to cut your dick off and shove it up your ass. I know you’re from Russia, but here in the United States, that means step the fuck back.”

“He steps away from her, it’s war,” Giovanni growled, getting my attention. “I don’t know what the hell you did to piss her off, Fedorov, but you better fix it, and fast. Your life is now aligned with hers. Anything happens to her, and I kill you.”

“Don’t threaten me, Valentinetti.”

“Then fix what you broke!” Giovanni shouted, slamming his hands on the desk. “This has gone on long enough. Five years, man. For five years, you’ve chased my sister. For five years, my family has dealt with the drama between the two of you. No more. What the hell did you do because everything I’m thinking doesn’t warrant the treatment she’s dishing out? So, tell us. Why is my sister so hell bent on fucking killing you?”

“He’s got a point, Maxim,” Montana carefully said, looking at me. “If they are going to back this play, they need to know what they’re dealing with. This isn’t just about protecting her anymore. We all have a vested interest in her safety, but she wants your dick on a platter. Tell them why?”

Glancing at Vladmir, who stoically stared at me, expressionless. He didn’t have to say anything. I knew what he was thinking. He never liked what I did to her. He made that clear on more than one occasion. For several months

afterwards, he barely communicated with me, and when he did, he was curt.

The problem with telling them the truth was telling them the whole truth. A truth I wasn't ready to tell. I still wasn't sure what Petrovitch was up to and until I knew everything, I couldn't in good conscience involve the others. It was a gamble. I knew that. Because when the time came and I did come clean, I wasn't sure any of them would be around to help.

This life wasn't for everyone.

Alliances broke all the time.

I hoped when the dust settled, I could still call these men my friends. The fact of the matter was Montana only knew part of my story. I told him what I wanted him to know, so he could understand Illyria's hatred towards me. As for the why, well, I wasn't ready to say.

Getting to my feet, I buttoned my suit jacket and said, "Gentlemen, as always, it's been a pleasure. I will leave you to handle the transfer of property to Ms. Valentinetti."

Montana growled, getting to his feet. "Tell them, Fedorov."

Taking a deep breath, I sighed.

Fine. If Montana wanted to play peacemaker, who was I to stop him? I had things to attend to. Turning to Giovanni, Salvatore and Lorenzo, I clearly spoke. "Your sister wants me dead because a year ago, the night of the Foundation Ball, she walked into my penthouse uninvited and saw me fucking another woman."

"You motherfucker!" Sal roared, punching me in the face.

Taking a step back, I held up my hand to stop Vladimir, who had his hand in his jacket. "It's alright, Vlad."

"How could you?!" Sal roared angrily. "She loved you!"

"Dude," Lorenzo sighed, shaking his head in disgust. "What the fuck?"

Turning to Giovanni, he stood rooted in his spot, glaring at me.

“You wanted to know why she wants me dead, now you know.”

“Everyone leave. I want the room,” Giovanni ordered sternly. Saying nothing, I watched as his brothers left, along with Romero’s men. Montana never moved as he sat shaking his head. When Vlad shut the door, leaving me alone with the family heads of New York, I braced myself for what was coming.

“You’re lying,” Giovanni growled. “I’ve seen you two together. You would never purposefully hurt my sister unless there was a reason for it.”

“I was tired of the fighting. I needed to end it fast,” I lied easily. There was no fucking way I could tell her brother that my past was coming for his sister. If I did that, my secret would be out and everything I’ve worked for since I left Russia would evaporate. That was something I wasn’t willing to chance. No. The only way to keep her safe and ensure my livelihood continued was to stay the course. The fewer people that knew the truth of who I really was, the better.

Giovanni shook his head as he chuckled. “God, you’re an idiot. Lie to yourself all you want, Bloodletter, but I know what I saw. You’re hiding the real reason. I know it and so do you. There is only one reason to do what you did. You did it to protect her.”

I stiffened.

“He’s right,” Renaldo Romero added, leaning against the wall. “Men like us make decisions like that when there is no other choice. To save the one that means the most, we do the unthinkable to protect them. Even if it means we lose them forever.”

Montana said nothing as he glared at me, lightly shaking his head.

If Renaldo and Giovanni only knew how right they were.

Montana and I had watched from the sidelines as that very scenario played out. There was one other, one of us who did the unthinkable, and the fallout of his actions still haunted me to this day. While I knew it was a shit move, like my counterpart, I would do anything, become anything, to save the woman I loved. That was something I would never apologize for.

Pulling a chair towards him, Giovanni unbuttoned his jacket and sat. “You know my story, Bloodletter. We are a lot alike. We both love headstrong women who do whatever it is they want. Women who’ve spent their whole lives in danger because of their affiliations with the world we live in. You helped me when Capribella kidnapped my *Tesoro*, your niece, along with Illyria. You didn’t blink. You didn’t ask, you just helped. So, I am going to do what you did for me. I am not going to ask. I am going to help. So, tell me, Maxim. What do you need my help with?”

Chapter Seven

Illyria

Entering the penthouse, I dropped my bags and kicked off my shoes. “Mrs. Rushton!”

“In the kitchen, my dear.”

Heading that way, I sighed as the wonderful smells of authentic, home cooked Italian food surrounded me. Placing my hand on my heart, I smiled. “This place smells wonderful. Almost as if my mom was cooking herself.”

Mrs. Rushton smiled warmly. “Thank you for that, Illyria. Your mother was the best of the best. I loved spending time in the kitchen with her. I think she would be happy to know that I’m filling her daughter’s belly with the food of her homeland. How was your lunch date with Mr. Stone?”

I sighed, slipping onto a bar stool, watching as Mrs. Rushton moved about the kitchen. “It was okay. It went as expected.”

“He offered you the club?”

I secretly grinned. “Yes, ma’am, he did.”

Mrs. Rushton laughed. “Men are all alike, my dear. They only see what they want to see. And was your man there?”

I cringed at her words but nodded. “Yes. My guess is he was in one of the offices, watching and listening to everything.”

Raised in this life, I knew when I was being played and when someone was being honest with me. My father always told me I had a keen sense when it came to deception. Over the years, honing my skills as I watched and listened as my father, then my brothers, talked, made deals, even how they interacted with members of the underground.

Everyone had a tell.

My mother taught me that. She also taught me that as a woman, I wouldn’t be perceived as a threat. I was nothing more than a beautiful ornament that my father, brothers or future husband would bring out occasionally to show off.

The lessons I've learned over the years have served me well, and now it was time to put what I've learned into action.

“So, we will be staying in the city then?”

“Yes. Which means everything will need to be moved from Chicago as soon as possible. The Vanderveer Cancer Research Ball is in a few days and I will need a dress.”

“And the other thing?”

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. “Yes. How is everything in that regard?”

Mrs. Rushton smiled happily, reaching into her apron, producing her phone. Sliding it towards me, I picked it up and looked at the screen, smiling as I ran my finger over the screen.

“Clara says everything is well.”

Deleting the photo, I placed the phone back on the counter and sighed, looking around the opulent penthouse. “Good. You know she can't stay here, right? It's not safe.”

“I've been making discrete inquiries. There is a place on Fifth that faces Central Park that will work. I've already contacted the realtor, and the master penthouse will be ready next week. It's perfect. There is even a garden on the balcony.”

“Good. Tell me the cost and I will take care of everything. In the meantime, it looks as if this place will be home for the foreseeable future. So, call the cousins and have them pack up my apartment in Chicago. If I'm going to be in this damn city, I want my things around me.”

“Already did, my dear. Everything will arrive in a few days. In the meantime, I've called Valentino and Dior. They are sending over a few things in the morning.”

Smirking, I looked at Mrs. Rushton. “You've thought of everything, haven't you?”

“Of course, my dear. This isn't my first rodeo. There was a time, long before you were born, that your mother needed my help. And as I'm helping you, I was there for her. Your mother and I became close friends after that. The night after you were born, she asked me to protect you if anything ever happened to

her. She loved you so much, Illyria. Her baby girl. She would be so proud of the woman you are becoming. I know I am.”

Quickly wiping away a lone tear, I sniffed. “Thank you for that, Mrs. Rushton.”

“Now,” the older woman straightened her shoulders. “I’ve got things to take care of, and so do you. I suggest you hop to it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”



With the deed to the Gentlemen’s Club in my hands, I wasted no time with the remodeling of the club. The place was outdated and a complete mess, so I hired an interior designer to redesign the entire building from top to bottom. If the Gentlemen’s Club was going to cater to the rich and unsavory, then I wanted it to be the best damn club in the city.

I didn’t believe in doing anything by half measures.

It was all or nothing.

Everything was going according to plan and within a few short months, I would open the doors again and everything would be business as usual. Sitting behind my brand-new desk in my sparsely decorated office, I was going over the quarterly reports from Valentinetti Corp. when there was a knock on the door. Looking up as my cousin Maria walked in.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes. I thought you would like to know that Mrs. Rushton called. Clara arrived safely and is now ensconced at the Harbor on 5th Avenue. Shall I make arrangements for you to visit later this evening?”

“Please. And tell Mrs. Rushton I will stay with Clara tonight after the Vanderveer Gala.”

Maria grinned. “Already did, cousin. You can leave straight from the venue, and no one will be the wiser.”

“Is there anything else?”

“You have a visitor,” she frowned.

By the look on her face, I knew she wasn't happy with who was here. Turning to my computer, I clicked over to the newly installed security feeds and saw who she was talking about. Sighing, I leaned back in my chair. “Did he say what he wanted?”

“Nope. Only that he needed to talk to you. Don't you think it odd that he shows up the exact day Clara arrives?”

I shrugged. “Possibly, but it could be a coincidence.”

“I don't believe in coincidences Illyria, and you know that.”

I concurred. My cousin didn't believe in anything but cold, hard facts. “It's nothing.”

“Well, I don't like it.”

I chuckled at that. “Maria, you don't like anything.”

“That's not true. There is a hotdog vendor around the corner. I like him.”

Rolling my eyes, I sighed. I was not going to sit around and debate with Maria about what she liked and didn't like. I'd be here all damn day.

“Show him in.”

Moments later, Vladimir, the second in command of the Fedorov Bratva Family walked into my office looking more dashing than the last time I saw him. Vlad was a big man, like his boss, but a tad shorter. Wearing his standard tailored to perfection dark gray pinstriped suit, Vlad looked more like a CEO than the right-hand man of the biggest Bratva Family on the east coast.

“Vladmir.”

“Illyria.”

“What do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“As you know, there is a meeting coming up soon with the heads of the families.”

“I’m aware.”

“He needs to attend this meeting.”

“No.” I curtly said. “I was perfectly clear when we last saw each other. I reiterated that fact to Montana before I agreed to take over this club. The Fedorov Bratva is welcome to use my club as a neutral zone for meetings, but he is to have no contact with me or this club. Only you may attend the meetings. Now, if that is all, I need to get back to work.”

“Illyria, please. This meeting is important. He has to be here.”

“Then I suggest holding the meeting at another venue because if he steps one foot inside this club, I’ve ordered Maria to shoot his ass on sight. And trust me. She has impeccable aim.”

“*Uparyamaya zhenschina.*” Vladimir muttered, and I grinned. “You have no idea how stubborn I can be, Vlad. He chose this course. Not me. Now he will have to deal with the repercussions.”

Returning to my computer, I expected Vladimir to get up and leave, but when he stayed seated, I sighed. “Is there something else?”

“It’s not what you think.”

“What isn’t?”

“That night. It’s not what you think.”

Narrowing my eyes, I leaned forward, placing my hands on my desk. I took a deep breath, I clearly said, “Oh, I think he was pretty fucking clear. His dick was in another woman. I saw them together with my own eyes. He knew the rules. Hell, he insisted upon them.”

Vladimir rubbed his face and sighed. “I know.”

“Then there is nothing more to say.”

Vladimir got to his feet and started pacing the room. He paced the room in agitation. I could clearly see him struggling with something. Whatever was bothering him, I could clearly see he didn’t want to tell me.

Sitting back in my chair, I watched him intently as he warred with himself internally. I'd never seen him so conflicted before. Vladimir was always the calm one. The voice of reason. He had the innate ability to quell the monster that was his boss. Not even I could get that bastard to see reason when he went off the rails, but Vladimir could.

“Do you know the story of how he became the boss?”

“Only stories. He killed his father and took over.”

“It's more than that. Maxim was eighteen when he took over the family. A boy, really. He was attending University when his world changed. The Russian mafia, Bratva, differs from your Italian mafia. In your family, they hand the succession down from father to son. In mother Russia, to become the new leader, one must kill the former.”

“So he did kill his father.”

Vladimir sighed. “Yes, but it's not how you think. A war divided the families back then. No one got along. It was a bloody war that few survived. The night Maxim killed his father, he did so to protect his sister. Anton, Maxim's father, knew he wasn't going to live much longer. The war was long and it was coming to an end. He knew his oldest son was coming for him.”

“I never knew he had a brother.”

Vladimir nodded. “Yes. There are only ten months between the boys. Anton was determined to have a house full of boys. His mother, Polina, died in childbirth one year after giving birth to a set of still born boys.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't know that.”

“There were only three of them. The oldest is Bogdan, then Maxim, and finally their sister, Dominika. Bogdan was an evil child. He hated the fact that he had a brother so close in age. A brother who could challenge him when the time came. Bogdan wanted it all. He was a greedy, evil bastard. Bogdan aligned himself with another family, angering Anton. Those years were horrible. In the end, Anton did what he had to and protected Maxim and Dominika as best he could, but it wasn't enough. Maxim was returning home from dinner with his father the night

Bogdan stormed into the house. He went straight for Dominika.”

Vladmir’s face paled and my breath stilled, waiting for him to continue. “He raped her. He raped his own sister. She was only fourteen. When the car pulled up to the house, Maxim and his father heard Dominika’s screams. They rushed in and saw Bogdan on top of Dominika as others stood by and laughed. Maxim didn’t think. He attacked Bogdan and would have killed him if it weren’t for Anton. But it was too late. Maxim was in a killing rage when his father got between him and Bogdan. Before anyone could stop him, Maxim struck a killing blow to his father, ripping out his throat.”

“Oh God,” I whispered in shock.

“When Maxim realized what he’d done, he turned that rage on Bogdan, but the bastard had already fled. Those who watched and did nothing to stop Bogdan never left the house alive. Maxim killed them all, then sent their heads back to their families with a warning.”

“What happened to Bogdan?”

“He disappeared. Back then, Russia was reorganizing. The government was trying to put an end to the families. Eventually, Maxim was forced to flee Russia,” Vladmir said while looking away. “The night Maxim killed his father, he changed. He became hard, unmovable. He closed himself off and refused to let anyone in. Then he met you. For four years, I watched as you slowly peeled away the scars of his past to reveal the boy I once remembered. Maxim was a wonderful boy, Illyria. Full of life and hope. He wanted to be a concert pianist. Did you know that?”

I shook my head.

“His love of music he got from his mother. Polina was a gifted pianist. When she died, some part of Maxim did too, but he still cared.”

Leaning back in my chair, I looked at the wall behind him and sighed. “He didn’t care enough, Vladmir. Because if he did, he wouldn’t have done what he did.”

“That’s what I’m trying to say, woman. He cared too much.”

Shaking my head, I groaned. “I don’t understand. You’re not making sense.”

Vladimir shook his head, getting to his feet. “I’ve said too much already. I will pass along your message to the boss. Thank you for seeing me.”

Turning to leave, I stopped Vladimir by asking, “Vlad. Where is Bogdan now?”

Vlad stiffened, then slowly turned his head to look me straight in the eyes and saying, “Closer than you think.”

Chapter Eight

Illyria

It was the night of the Vanderveer Cancer Research Gala.

Everyone who was anyone would be in attendance.

The Vanderveer Cancer Research Center held the annual ball to raise funds for cancer research. It was a cause I stood behind and supported wholeheartedly. The money made from tonight's ball would go to lung and bronchus cancer research, the deadliest cancer. Lung cancer was responsible for the most cancer deaths worldwide. Nearly three times higher than colorectal cancer. While every cancer was bad, none was more so than lung cancer.

It was going to be a night of fun, dancing, good food, and money.

Too bad I wasn't going to enjoy the festivities. No. I needed to talk to Montana.

I wanted his reassurance that he would back me up at the meeting if Maxim showed. I was unequivocal in my statement that scumbag was not authorized on the premises.

It was my club now, and I made the rules.

Taking one last look in the mirror, I sighed.

It was now or never.

I knew Maxim would be at the Gala. He never missed an opportunity to corner me in public, knowing damn well I wouldn't fight him or cause a scene.

Society decorum and all that shit.

My goal was to get in and get out before the big Russian bastard arrived.

Leaving my room, I grabbed my clutch as my heels clicked on the marble floor.

"Mrs. Rushton, I'm leaving," I said, just as I entered the living room. "I will be staying at the Harbor on 5th tonight, so don't expect me until tomorrow evening."

“Have a good night, dear, and give Clara a kiss for me.”

“I will,” I muttered, checking my clutch to make sure I had everything I needed.

Reaching for my wrap, I left the penthouse.

The Gala was in full swing by the time I arrived. The paparazzi were out in force, clamoring for a juicy tidbit, picture, or inkling of gossip they could splash across any of the nasty rags they worked for. Ignoring them, I rushed past the flashing lights and into the building. After handing my wrap over to the coat clerk, I accepted my ticket, placing it in my clutch.

Entering the ballroom, I quickly scanned the room and found the person I was looking for. The quicker I got his reassurance, the faster I could get the hell out of here. Making my way towards him, Mercy turned and winked just as I said, “Montana.”

Placing my hand around his shoulders, I quickly leaned forward and planted a kiss near his lips when I heard a woman say, “Oh yeah. Now it’s getting interesting.”

Ignoring the comment, I quickly said. “Montana, when you have time, I need a moment.”

Before he could respond, a beautiful blonde grabbed his arm, pulling him towards her.

“He’s taken, bitch.”

“I beg your pardon,” I smiled.

“Baby, it’s not what you think,” Montana quickly said.

The clearly drunk woman ignored him. “He’s mine. Go find another fuck buddy.”

“Told ya,” a cute woman chuckled, slapping her date’s chest.

“Baby,” Montana pleaded, trying to calm the drunk woman as she slapped his hands away as she stepped closer to me. “Go away.”

“Oh shit,” I heard Kansas chuckle. “Is she really taking on Illyria Valentinetti?”

“Shut up, Kansas,” Montana growled. “This isn’t funny. Tessa’s had too much to drink. She doesn’t know what she’s saying.”

So, this was the elusive Tessa Jackson. The woman who had been causing so much trouble for Montana lately. She was stunning. I got why Montana was head over heels for her. Too bad I didn’t have time to watch their lovers’ quarrel. The quicker I got out of here, the happier I would be.

“Oh, I think she knows exactly what she is saying,” the cute woman laughed.

“Montana, he’s here,” Mercy shouted, as he ran over, looking towards the entrance as Kansas winked at me, trying to hide his smile.

Shaking my head, I smirked.

“Shit,” Montana cursed. “Alright everyone. Party’s over. Illyria, I’d get out of here now, if I were you. Kansas, there are waiting SUVs out back. Get Kali and get the fuck out of here now. Everyone else meet back at the clubhouse. It’s going to be a miracle if we get out of here unscathed.”

Quickly turning around, I spotted who entered the Gala. For once, it wasn’t who I was expecting. Only it was worse. Quickly scanning for the nearest emergency exit, Malice inadvertently pushed me to the side as he ran into the crowd, just as total pandemonium broke out.

Ducking, I raced for the nearest exit when a powerful arm wrapped around my waist, lifting me off my feet. I didn’t need to ask who it was. I should have known. Where there was trouble, he was always there in the thick of it. I could smell his expensive aftershave, feel his familiar chest, hear his resonating growl as he barked orders fluently in Russian.

Before I could utter a damn word, a large black SUV raced towards me, skidding to a stop as the back door flung open as I stared in abject horror.

No motherfucking way.

“Get in!” Jackson Deveroux, my friend and part time fuck buddy, shouted. “He’s tearing up the place looking for her!”

Maxim wasted no time as he threw me into the SUV and climbed in after me, just as the vehicle sped off into the night.

Ignoring the fact that Jackson was sitting in the front seat as Vladimir drove off like a bat out of hell, weaving in and out of traffic, my hand slid under the slit of my dress as I reached for my gun, I had strapped to my thigh. I may be a woman, but I wasn't stupid.

Pointing my gun at the Russian bastard, I sneered. "I fucking warned you."

"Fuck!" he growled, moving quickly, knocking my gun from my hand. Grabbing me, he hauled me into his lap, anchoring me in his grasp as I kicked and fought him as best I could. I tried desperately to get away from him. I didn't want to be anywhere near him. He was the fucking enemy. I wanted him dead. I wanted to watch his life drain from his soulless eyes. I wanted to dance over his grave.

"I am going to whip your ass, *Moya Lyubov*."

"You touch me and I'll rip your dick off."

The bane of my existence grinned. "At least you still want to touch my dick."

"I hate you!"

"I know, *Moya Lyubov*. In time, you will forgive me."

"The hell I will! Stop this fucking car, Vlad!" I screamed, trying to get as far away from Maxim as I could.

Slapping his hands, I pushed him away from me.

Reaching for the door, I tried unsuccessfully to open it.

Growling, I turned to the lying, cheating bastard and sneered, "When I get out of this vehicle, I am going to castrate you."

"So you've said," he deadpanned, as he completely shut down. I fucking hated when he did that. I didn't exist. Nothing did. When he shut down, he became single-minded. Nothing, and I mean no one, could snap him out of it until he got exactly what he wanted. The man was a machine, driven, a fucking bastard with something he wanted.

Turning my attention to the fucking bastard in the front seat, I roared. “What the fuck are you doing here, Jackson?”

My former lover and friend sighed. “He’s my new client. The one I told you about in Chicago and before you ask. No. I didn’t fucking know you and the Russian were seeing each other.”

“Bullshit. It’s been in all the papers.”

The annoying attorney said. “You know I don’t listen to rumors. I believe in cold hard facts. When Fedorov approached me, I didn’t think anything was out of the ordinary. I thought he needed an attorney, and I offered my services.”

“Your first mistake.” I muttered.

“I know,” he huffed. “He’s going to kill me, isn’t he?”

“What do you think, Jackson? You agreed to work for the head of the east coast Bratva. You fucked me several times. Once you’ve outlived your usefulness, he’s going to put a bullet in your head. You should have told him no. Didn’t you learn anything from dealing with my family?” I said just as the SUV came to a stop. The second it did, Maxim opened the door and stepped out, yanking me with him.

“Go inside and stay there.”

“Fuck you, asshole. I’m going to kill you.”

Maxim leaned forward and whispered. “I look forward to the challenge. Now get inside.”

Turning on my heels, I headed for the door when I stopped and turned around.

“Don’t kill him. He didn’t know.”

“Inside. Now.”

Knowing not to push him further, I walked into Davenport Tower.

The second I saw the SUV pull away, I raced back outside and hailed a cab. There was somewhere else I needed to be tonight.



It was close to midnight by the time the cab pulled in front of the building on 5th Avenue. Looking out the windows, I surveyed the building. It was nice, clean, and extremely expensive. I should know. I paid an obscene amount of money for the master penthouse in this building. When Mrs. Rushton told me the cost, I thought she was joking with me. I mean, I knew what penthouses went for in this city. Some were more than others, but there was reality and then there was this fucking place. Not to mention there was the three-hour interview and a background check that was so damn thorough, it put the CIA to shame. Apparently, the owners of the building had the right to refuse any applicant, regardless of who the hell they were.

To say the place intrigued me was an understatement.

But what sold me on the place was the one thing this building offered that no other in the area had. An anonymity clause enforced by a specialized security firm comprised former military veterans. To even get in the building, a person needed to provide a thumbprint and then a retinal scan. The security guards permitted only those who lived in the building past the concierge desk, where four very bulky and hardened men sat stoically.

The moment I entered the lobby, a man stood. “How may I help you?”

“Illyria Valentinetti.”

The man said nothing more as the guard next to him typed my name into a computer. When he nodded, the guard standing reached for a thumb pad. Not needing to be told more than once, I removed my gloved hand and pressed my thumb to the pad.

“Thank you.”

Another guard walked around the desk with a hand-held device in his hands. “Please remove your sunglasses.”

Quickly doing as he asked, the man held the device up to my eyes as a green light flashed. Blinking several times, I winced. “My apologies, ma’am.”

“She’s clear.”

“Ms. Valentinetti, welcome to the Harbor. My name is Matthew Law. I am the head of security for the building. The men beside me from left-to-right are Shane West, Zach Walsh, Jonathon Savage and Ace Franks. We are the owners of the Harbor. We prefer to meet all the new residents before they move in. However, we’ve made an allowance in your case, as you well know. I want to assure you that no one will be able to enter this building without getting past us.”

“Thank you for that, Mr. Law.”

“We’ve provided you with all of your requirements. Will there be any of your family members allowed into the building?”

“No.”

“Associates?”

“No.”

“Very well,” Mr. Law nodded, adding. “Just so we are crystal clear, Ms. Valentinetti. I know who you are. I know about your family and your affiliations. The Harbor is a highly exclusive building. The other residents will never know you are here. The elevators are designed to take you directly to your penthouse. Once you enter the destination on the keypad, the elevator will not make any stops until it reaches your penthouse. You will have complete anonymity while you are in the building. The building is completely off the grid. My security team controls all servers and wipes them clean every twenty-four hours. If anyone other than you or your guest upstairs tries to gain access to your penthouse, the building will go on lock down. No one. Let me reiterate that. No one will be permitted to enter or leave until my security team removes the threat. If that happens and you are not in the building, I will notify you.”

“I understand.”

“Ms. Valentinetti,” Mr. Law said, motioning his arm to the side for me to follow him. Away from the others, he whispered, “I’m very good at my job, ma’am. Some would say, I’m the best. So, I feel obliged to inform you I know who you have

upstairs. In case of an emergency, if something were to happen to you, who would you like me to call?”

Shit.

I hadn't thought about that.

Mr. Law was right. If something happened to me, I needed to be prepared for every inevitable outcome. I didn't want to think about any other recourse. I couldn't but I needed to pick someone. Someone who wouldn't think twice about killing everyone on the planet and smile doing it. There was only one person who fit that bill. My only problem was that he was the one person I hated the most.

Sighing, I knew there was no other choice.

“There is someone.”

Mr. Law handed me his tablet, and I entered the name and personal number. When I handed it back to him, Mr. Law looked at the name and quirked his eyebrow at me. “Are you sure?”

No, I wasn't.

I silently nodded.

“Very well, ma'am. I'll enter his name into the system.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, if you follow me, I will walk you to the elevator.”

Chapter Nine

Illyria

The sun was rising over the city as I stood before the wall-to-wall windows overlooking the city. For the first time in my life, I felt safe.

I couldn't explain it. Maybe it was this building and knowing that no one cared that someone like me was living here, but it felt freeing. From the moment of my birth, I'd been surrounded by men who sheltered me, protected me, ordered me to do this or that. Standing in this penthouse, knowing no one gave a damn about who I was or who my family was, was liberating. I could be anyone I wanted. Do anything I desired. I never had that option. I knew from a young age what my role in life would be. All because of the family and life I was born into.

I never complained. In fact, I embraced my life and made the best of it. Now, I was in the middle of it all. The new owner of one of the most exclusive clubs in the city that not only catered to the uber rich but to the heads of the underworld. Men who controlled the city. Men who didn't think twice about ending lives to gain prestige, honor or respect.

Those men never learned that they couldn't gain those things at the end of a gun. The only thing they instilled was fear. One had to earn things like honor and respect. And none of them, not even my family, earned what they had. They only had respect because of the blood on their hands.

This life wasn't for everyone.

Only the strong survived.

I filtered and maneuvered my way through it all to be standing where I was right now. I knew the game. I played it well and now I was in the game.

"Illyria?"

Turning, I smiled at the young and beautiful woman who looked so much like her mother. The only child of Mrs. Rushton, Clara Rushton, was a sweet girl. So caring and

innocent of the world. “Good morning, Clara. How did you sleep?”

“Good. This place is unreal. It’s like a mansion here.”

I chuckled. “Well, it’s home for the time being. Do you have everything you need?”

“Oh yes. Momma thought of everything. Did you get any sleep last night?”

“A few hours.” I smiled as she came to stand beside me.

“Illyria, are you sure about all this?”

“No,” I sighed, shaking my head. “No, I’m not.”

“We can leave, Illyria. No one ever needs to know. If you are unsure, then let’s just pack everything back up and get the hell out of here. We can disappear and no one will be the wiser.”

“It’s too late for that now. He knows I’m here. He’s out there watching. Besides, I couldn’t leave now, even if I wanted to. The game is now in play.”

“Maybe this isn’t a game you should play.”

“The second I stepped foot back in this city, I knew I wouldn’t be able to leave.”

Clara sighed, looking out over the city. “Then play to win, Illyria.”



The club was empty as I stood in front of a mirror, trying to calm my nerves. Tonight, was the first meeting of the family heads and the first time I would sit at the table.

To say that I was nervous was an understatement.

Tonight, the game changed for me.

Tonight, I would have a voice.

“You look beautiful.”

Turning, I smiled as I spotted my brother Salvatore leaning against the door.

“You’re biased.”

Shaking his head, he pushed off the door and walked over to me, gathering me in his arms. Out of all my brothers, I loved Sal the most. I knew I shouldn’t have a favorite, but there was something about the big, overbearing oaf that called to me deeply. He was my confidant, my biggest supporter, and the one who knew me best.

“I never wanted this life for you, baby.”

“I was born into this life, Sal. I know no other way.”

“Still, it isn’t right. I should have protected you better.”

Hugging him tight, I whispered, “You protected me just fine.”

Sal sighed, releasing me as he looked around the building and all the new renovations. “You’ve done a wonderful job with this place. It will look amazing when it’s done.”

“Did you expect anything less?”

He chuckled. “From you? Hell no.”

“Have you heard from Gio?”

“He took Layla and the kids to the island.”

“So, it’s all yours now, then? It’s done?”

He nodded.

“How do you feel about it?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be this way. So much has changed. We’ve lost so much. I don’t know how to move forward.”

I’d never heard Sal talk this way before. Reaching for his hand, I said, “Just keep moving forward, brother. That’s all we can do. Is Lorenzo going to be here?”

“No. Once Giovanni transferred the family over to me, he took Donatella and left. I do not know where they are.”

“What about Antonio?”

“Last I heard, he and Grace were heading to an undisclosed destination. Grace is pregnant again and Tony doesn’t want his family anywhere near this life.”

“So, it’s just us?”

“Just you and me, kid.”

The doors to the club opened and in walked Renaldo Romano, the head of the Italian Mafia in New York City, along with two of his men. Renaldo was a stunning man. Tall with broad shoulders and jet-black hair, with piercing dark chocolate eyes that saw everything. Walking over to us, Renaldo smiled, leaning down to kiss my cheek. “You look ravishing, Illyria.”

Sal growled.

I laughed, slapping his chest as I smiled at Renaldo. “And you, sir, are a flirt.”

“Only with you.” He winked before shaking Sal’s hand. “Valentinetti.”

“Romano,” Sal said gruffly, as Renaldo looked around the place. “You’ve done this place a great service, Illyria. I can’t wait to see it finished.”

“Thank you.” I nodded, moving over to the table I had set up in the middle of the main room. “If you two would like to take your seats, the others will arrive shortly.”

Just as the words left my mouth, the doors opened and in walked Montana Stone, the President of the Soulless Sinners motorcycle club, along with his V.P., Mercy, and his enforcer, Malice. I heard what happened to him and the others after the Gala last night. To say it was a shock seeing him here was an understatement. I would have thought he would be beside his Tessa.

Montana quickly greeted Salvatore and Renaldo before quickly kissing me on the cheek. “Hey, beautiful,” he muttered, his voice hoarse and strained. He looked tired. Worn out. I had a feeling before this mess ended, we would all be feeling the same way.

Hugging him, I asked. “How is she?”

“Breathing. She hasn’t woken up yet. As soon as I’m done here, I’m heading back to the hospital.”

“If there is anything I can do?”

“Just get me out of here quick.”

Nodding, I pointed to the table before motioning to Maria.

“As soon as the last guest arrives, have the waiter serve dinner.”

Maria nodded and left, heading for the kitchen.

Standing, I watched as three of the most influential men in this city all sat at one table, talking as if they didn’t have a care in the world. It was a strange sight to see.

“Ms. Valentinetti.”

Turning, I smiled up at Vladimir, noticing he was alone. I didn’t know why, but some part of me thought Maxim would try to force my hand, especially after what happened last night. Looking over his shoulder, I asked, “Is anyone else accompanying you tonight?”

Looking over his shoulder, Vladimir looked worried, but said nothing more. I’d never seen him this way. Any other time, I would be concerned, but now was not the time.

“Since we are all here, we should begin,” I muttered, before heading towards the table, only for Vlad to reach for my wrist. Looking down at where his hand was, I slowly looked up at him, questioning his indiscretion. “We need to talk before you start the meeting. It’s important.”

I slowly shook my head.

“If this is about what we discussed the other day, there is nothing more to say.”

“Illyria, he’s outside.”

“He steps one foot in my building, and I will...” my words trailed off, as the doors opened and in walked the head of the Fedorov Bratva Family, Maxim Fedorov, surrounded by several of his men.

The air in the room evaporated as he slithered towards me, determined, fierce, and unmovable. He looked pissed. I could see the fire in his eyes as he glared at me, daring me to challenge him. It had been hours since I was in such proximity to him and still the man could unsettle my nerves and make my palms sweat.

Salvatore, Montana and Renaldo immediately stood, each reaching for their guns as their own men did the same, stepping closer to their bosses.

“Max?” I heard Montana say, as my eyes never strayed from his, and when he stopped before me, he growled, “If you don’t remove your hand, I’ll cut it off.”

Vlad instantly let go of my wrist.

“Boss, I...”

“You need to leave.” I glared at him, standing my ground.

Maxim smirked wickedly, his eyes boring into mine, daring me to challenge him. “No.”

“Oh, my night just got a hell of a lot better,” I heard Maria say, right before the click of her gun resonated around the room. Before I could blink, everyone of Maxim’s men, including Vladimir, had their guns out and pointed at Maria.

Knowing this wasn’t going to end well, I whispered, “Don’t do this, Max.”

He glared at me. “Remove the order.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Then what happens next is on you,” he threatened.

“Illyria, come. Now,” my brother ordered firmly from across the room. I wanted so much to run to him, but I couldn’t get my legs to move. The man standing before me cemented them in place.

“You move one inch and I will order my men to shoot.”

I knew he would, too. Maxim Fedorov didn’t make idle threats.

The steel tone of his voice was very clear.

“Why are you doing this?” I whispered, cringing at the wispy tone of my voice. Even after everything he put me through, he still had the innate ability to make my world crumble around me.

He took a step closer and said, “You know why.”

Slowly shaking my head, “I don’t belong to you anymore.”

“Think what you want, *Moya Lyubov*.”

“What the hell is going on?” Montana shouted angrily. “We don’t have time for this shit. I left my woman to be at this meeting. What the fuck happened?”

“I got word an hour ago that Petrovitch is looking for someone in this city,” Maxim said clearly, never taking his eyes away from mine as fear trickled down my spine. For a few small years, I was part of his world. I thought I knew the underworld growing up. Max showed me I knew nothing. There were layers, depths of depravity and destruction that still gave me nightmares. Through it all, Max shielded me as much as he could, but I saw too much, knew too much. And now the doors of hell had opened and Satan himself was running free in the city.

Every cell in my body screamed at me to run. To get the hell out of this city and never look back. I knew it was the only way, but I couldn’t. No matter where I disappeared to, I knew that vile son of a bitch would find me. Max knew it too.

“Who?” Renaldo asked.

“My informant didn’t know. Only that Petrovitch is determined to tear apart the city to find whoever it is.”

“Shit,” Renaldo cursed.

“Sister,” Sal sighed. I knew that tone.

I knew what he wanted me to say. I couldn’t do it. If I did, I would be going back on the first order I ever gave. It would make me look weak. Everything I’ve worked for, everything I’ve done until this point, would be for nothing.

“Say the words, *Moya Lyubov*.”

I slowly shook my head when Maxim grabbed my arms, yanking me to him as he roared loudly, “Say the fucking words, Illyria!”

Crumbling before him, a tear rolled down my face as I whispered the words they all needed me to say. “You can stay.”

Chapter Ten

Maxim

She was never going to forgive me.

I accepted that.

I didn't need her forgiveness to protect her. I would protect her, no matter what. Under any other circumstance, I wouldn't have challenged her, but when I got word that Petrovitch was in the city, I had no choice. No one would ever harm a hair on her head as long as I lived. She would always have my protection. Even when she hated me.

I never wanted to fall in love.

Love didn't have a place in my life.

Love was a distraction.

Love got men killed.

I wasn't called the '*Bloodletter*' for nothing. The only thing I loved more than her was my way of life. I was married to it. Wanted nothing else. I enjoyed having different women in my bed, all vying to become my queen. Too bad, I already had a Queen in my life and she wanted my balls on a silver platter. Too bad for her because they were going to stay permanently attached to my body.

Still, after everything she'd done to make my life a living hell, I still wanted her. I silently laughed at her efforts to destroy my world. I could have told her that her efforts were in vain, but I loved her fire. Her determination to eradicate me. Any other woman and I wouldn't have thought twice before putting a bullet in her head. But Moya Lyubov wasn't just any woman.

She was my woman.

My equal.

Twenty-Eight years younger than me, Illyria was nothing more than a child. She did childish things. Cried when things didn't go her way. Fought to the death when she was angry.

Loved like a seasoned woman with her whole heart. She was conniving, manipulative and the fucking love of my life.

She was the very fucking reason I never allowed myself to get attached. Women were a pain in the ass on a good day. Throw in some Italian blood and fuck it all to hell. A man would go fucking crazy trying to figure that woman out. I tried and failed many times. Just when I thought I knew what she wanted, she changed the rules on me, and I was back to square one.

From the moment I laid eyes on the beautiful vixen, she captivated me, aggravated me, enthralled me so much I was helpless, useless to anyone else.

More than anything else, she scared me.

Then the night of the Foundation Charity Ball happened, and everything changed. It was supposed to be a wonderful evening of drinking, dancing, and laughter. It was one of the few times that we could relax and just be us. Instead of happiness, I destroyed every vestige of joy she had all because of one fucking phone call.

A phone call that changed everything.

The news I learned that night changed the course of my life and hers. I wanted so much to gather her in my arms and whisk her away in the dead of night. Instead, I chose another path. When she arrived later that night... the devastation I caused was insurmountable. A rift quickly formed and there was nothing I could ever do to repair it.

In the end, I told myself it was the only way.

The only thing I didn't plan for was the look of devastation in her eyes when she walked into my bedroom and saw me fucking that whore.

When she fled, I tried to reconcile with myself that what I did was for the best. That with her out of my life, she would be free to live and do as she please. Then her little vendetta against me began and, though it was a nuisance, it gave me a pang of hope.

When I left Russia at eighteen with my sister and moved to America, I made a new life for us both. I'd built my life up from nothing. I wasn't a businessman in the normal sense. Far from it. If I wanted something, I took it. I didn't let anyone get in my way. Blood flowed around me daily. I ruled my world with an iron fist. I controlled all in my domain.

I was the boss.

The Bratva King of New York City.

There wasn't a soul who didn't know of me.

Men and women who saw me coming ran the other way.

When my eyes landed on an individual, that person knew they were going to die. And they did. I didn't believe in second chances.

Second chances only got someone killed.

Yet, looking at the angry woman across from me, I prayed she gave me one. Not that I deserved one. If she was smart, she would kill me because that was the only way I was ever going to leave her alone.

My phone vibrated. Swiping my thumb across the screen, I read.

Vladmir: You made her look weak.

Me: She doesn't have a weak bone in her body.

Vladmir: What do you want me to tell the boys?

Me: She's protected at all costs. No matter what happens to me.

Turning off my phone, I placed it in my coat pocket and leaned back in the leather chair and listened as Montana spoke.

"The Sinners will cover the docks. Until we know who he's looking for, I say we all continue business as usual."

"Agreed," Renaldo nodded. "The Romano family will continue to cover the Burroughs. Maxim, what do you think?"

My eyes drifted to hers as she sat stoically at the head of the table, looking at her phone. "According to the files he left behind, he knows everything about us. It doesn't matter what I think because until we learn who he's after, we're in the dark.

We've all had run-ins with him. Me, more so than any of you. We will know soon enough what his play is, then we can form a plan."

"Any word on Benson Graves?" Salvatore Valentinetti asked.

"No. Fucker's in the wind. However, I think I might know who Petrovitch is looking for." Montana sighed, looking directly at me, before he turned to look at Illyria.

Silence reigned until she looked up at him in annoyance.

"What?"

"When Storm and Pippen started going through the files left behind by Graves, they needed more manpower. They brought in Sypher from the Golden Skulls. Fucking kid found something interesting,"

Narrowing my eyes, I said nothing as my woman glared, waiting. I didn't like the stern look on Montana's face and wondered what the fuck he was up to.

"What did he find?" I asked, my eyes glued to hers once more.

When Montana didn't say anything, Salvatore growled, "Well?"

"It was a footnote. Handwritten on a document Graves left behind. He tried to erase it, but Sypher's too damn good. The kid figured out what Graves erased."

"Well!?" Illyria growled, annoyed.

"Graves knew about your visit to Russia two years ago."

Illyria jumped to her feet, slamming her hands on the table as she turned her anger on me. "You motherfucker! You said you took care of it!"

Leaning back in my chair, I slowly shook my head and sighed as I saw Montana glare angrily at me.

I was going to get the fucker for this if it was the last thing I did.

My second, Vladimir, was on the phone, yelling in Russian at someone, demanding answers. I could have told him he wouldn't find anything. I made sure of that. How Graves found out, well, that was a question I planned on asking when I had the son of a bitch in my clutches. In the meantime, I needed to do damage control because the shit was about to hit the fan. Fast.

Illyria turned to Montana and growled, "You couldn't come to me first? After everything I've done for you. This is how you repay me?"

Montana shrugged his shoulders. "What can I say, beautiful? It was a shock at first, then when I thought about it, I knew the only way to fix the problem was to expose it."

"There is no fucking problem!" she screeched.

God, she was fucking stunning. Like a flaming Phoenix ready to rain down hell fire on all she saw. My dick was so fucking hard, I quickly adjusted myself.

"Baby," Salvatore said carefully, reaching over to take her hand. "Calm down and tell me what Montana is talking about? What were you doing in Russia two years ago?"

"It's nothing," she quipped, shaking her head, her eyes daring me to challenge her.

We both knew it would stay a secret forever.

I still remember that weekend fondly. It was one of our better times when we stupidly gave into our baser instincts and did the one thing, we vowed we'd never do. Then, like everything good in my life, shit hit the fan, and I went and ruined everything.

Now, everything was so fucked up.

For the first time in my life, I truly didn't know what to do. If I came clean, I would put her in more danger. If I said nothing, it wouldn't be long before her family found out, causing a war I was not prepared to fight.

My focus was on Petrovitch.

I didn't have time for a family squabble.

“Illyria, just tell me. What is it?” Salvatore pleaded with her.

Getting to my feet, I sighed. “Leave her alone, Valentinetti.”

“Fuck off, Fedorov. She is my sister.”

“You’re making it worse,” I said, walking towards her as she turned to me, anger permeating all around her.

“Please don’t,” she begged. “You promised. You always keep your promises.”

“*Moya Lyubov*. We knew this day would come sometime. Montana knows and he doesn’t do discretion.”

Montana growled, affronted, “I can be discreet. But you know I’m right about this, Max. This changes everything. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Ignoring the brooding fucker, I looked at the fiery woman before me. “I’m sorry. I promised to do everything in my power to protect you. That was my ultimate vow.”

“Someone better start fucking talking now!” Salvatore roared, slamming his hands down on the table.

“You say it and I will never forgive you,” she threatened, as angry tears rolled down her face. She knew as well as I did. Our time was up. The second I uttered the words, her life would forever change.

If she hated me before, the fallout of this revelation would seal my fate.

“Don’t say it. Please.”

I looked at her brother and clearly said, “Illyria is my wife.”

Chapter Eleven

Illyria

The second he uttered those words, a rage I never knew existed boiled over inside me as I kned Maxim in the groin. He doubled over, breathing heavily, as I ranted, “You stupid fucking Russian bastard! I hate you!”

“I’m sorry, *Moya Lyubov*. Too many know,” he said, trying to take a deep breath.

“You’re sorry!” I screamed. “You’re sorry! You fucking ruined everything.”

“Illyria?” Salvatore whispered behind me.

Turning to my brother, I couldn’t look him in the eyes.

Instead, I closed my eyes, knowing that when I opened them again, my world would never be the same. Everything I’d been working towards, everything I’d been planning, was now void.

A new game was about to start.

One I was sure I wouldn’t win.

Turning my head towards the offices, I opened my eyes to see Maria lightly nod as she whispered into her phone before running from the building. I knew who she was calling. I knew where she was going. She had one job now and it was no longer me.

We’d planned for this day for the last year on the off chance my marital status became public news. I just never thought it would be this soon.

My brother stepped close, reaching for my hands. “Sister, please tell me he’s lying. Please tell me this is some joke?”

Pulling away from him, I wiped my eyes, taking a step back as I rattled off curses and threats of bodily harm in Italian. When I refused to answer, Sal took my condemnation as verification and did the one thing I knew he would do. He punched Maxim in the face before tackling him to the floor.

Montana sat back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest, shaking his head as he winked at me. Renaldo raised his wineglass in a salute.

Yeah, I knew I'd get no help from either of those two.

They were Maxim's friends.

Knowing Salvatore was just gearing up, I walked around the table, grabbing a chair to sit between the two smirking idiots. Instead, Montana pulled me onto his lap, wrapping his arms around my waist as he whispered, "God, beautiful. I knew you were a thrill seeker, but the Bloodletter? Really? Does he know what he's gotten himself into?"

Renaldo snickered. "Hell no! The Russian bastard only saw her pretty face and thought she'd be amiable. I can't wait until he realizes what he signed up for."

"Why did you do it, Montana?" I asked softly, looking at my hands. His arms tightened around me. "Because you need to be protected. I wasn't playing around when I said I believe Petrovitch is here for you. Now that the truth is out, we can prepare. Besides, secrets never end happily. You and Max belong together. You know it, he knows it, we all fucking know it. Only the two of you are too damn stubborn. He told us all what he did."

"It doesn't matter. It's over."

"Nothing is over until you're buried six feet under. Look, I'm probably the last person to give relationship advice. I can barely keep my Tessa safe. But I know one thing. Your man will do anything, and I do mean anything, to ensure your safety. So, before you condemn him to hell and back, ask yourself this. Why would a man who worked for four years to gain your trust and love, all of a sudden throw it all away? I don't know about you, but that's not the man I know."

Watching as Salvatore and Maxim rolled around on the floor, fighting each other, cursing each other up one side and down the other, Montana's words took root in my head and started to grow. There were a lot of things I knew about Maxim Fedorov, some stuff I wish I didn't.

But Montana had a point.

The man I knew and married would never betray the vows he made to me that night in Russia. His oath, the creed he lived by, wouldn't allow for it. Once Maxim made a vow, it was a done deal.

He never went back on his word.

Ever.

Vladimir kneeling down next to me, brought me out of my thoughts as he whispered, "Are you going to stop him?"

"Stop who?" I whispered.

"Your brother," Vlad growled.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because the boss is about to kill him."

I threw my head back and laughed loudly, which drew the attention of everyone in the room, including Salvatore and Maxim, who were both now glaring at me as if I'd lost my mind.

Montana stiffened under me, his arms loosening. "Uh, beautiful. Your man is looking at me funny."

Shrugging my shoulders, I glared at the son of a bitch and sneered. "You lay another finger on my brother and I'll castrate you in your sleep."

The Bloodletter smirked. "For that to happen, *Moya Lyubov*, you'll need to be in my bed."

"Well, that is never going to happen," I huffed.

Renaldo cleared his throat and stood. "As fun as tonight's been, I think it's time we parted ways. Unless there is something else we need to discuss?"

When no one said anything, Renaldo Romano took my hand, kissing the back of it before taking his leave.

"I need to get back to the hospital and check on Tessa," Montana said, helping me to stand as he got to his feet,

stretching his back. “Max, come see me tomorrow if you’re still breathing.”

Left alone with my brother and Maxim, Sal walked over to me. “Tell me the truth. Did you willingly marry him?”

“It wasn’t one of my finer moments.”

“Shit,” Sal moaned, running his hand through his hair. “You know I will have to inform the families.”

“I know.”

Hugging me, he placed a kiss on my forehead before gathering his coat and leaving. Taking a seat, I didn’t say anything as Maxim stared at me. What could I say? He’d already said enough. Too bad for him, if he thought his announcement would change anything.

I didn’t give a damn if we were still married.

It was an issue I planned on resolving immediately.

Until then, he could stay the fuck away from me.

Sitting there, each of us at opposite ends of the table, he never took his eyes off me as he shouted, “Leave!”

Maxim’s men scattered, vanishing fast.

“Yelling at them will only make them think you are a bigger asshole.”

“I don’t give a fuck what they think,” he said, wiping away blood from his split lip.

Damn, Sal hit him good.

I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Did you kill Jackson?”

“You want the truth, or a lie?”

“Why are you still here?”

“I wanted a word with my wife.”

“Not your wife for long. Besides, we have nothing to say to each other,” I said, getting to my feet. “The meeting is over. You can let yourself out and Jackson Deveroux better answer

his fucking phone when I call him tomorrow, if you know what's good for you.”

Walking away from him, I quickly made my way to my office, knowing he would follow. Fucker didn't believe in boundaries. I couldn't breathe around him. He was fucking everywhere. There was nothing he had to say that I needed to hear. I just wanted him to be gone from my life forever.

Entering my office, I shut the door behind me when he kicked it open. The door slammed hard against the wall.

“Get out.”

“We're not done.”

“Oh yes, we are or have you forgotten already?”

“I haven't forgotten anything, *Moya Lyubov*. Just like the fact that you are still my wife!”

“A technicality I am trying to fix.”

“Don't push me on this, Illyria. I gave you your space. Now our secret is out. It's time for you to take your place at my side.”

“You gave me space?” I narrowed my eyes, glaring at him. “You were fucking another woman! In our bed!”

Maxim shouted, “I did it to protect you!”

“You did it to punish me because I refused to be your docile wife!”

“I never asked you to be docile!”

I laughed.

Oh God, did I laugh.

So much so that I grabbed my stomach to stop the pains. From the moment I met Maxim, it was his way or no way at all. He didn't want a partner. He wanted a feeble woman. A woman he could control and order around while she popped out his kids. He wanted the life he lived without any complications in the bedroom.

“Petrovitch knows about you. Or did you miss that part?”

Sobering, I glared at him. “No. Montana’s men figured it out because Benson is an idiot and wrote what he learned in pencil then erased it. That doesn’t mean Petrovitch knows we’re married.”

“If a nosey kid can figure it out, how long before Petrovitch does? You are no longer safe.”

“Safer away from you than with you.”

“Don’t push me on this *Moya Lyubov*. I vowed to protect you at all costs.”

“Too bad that didn’t include my heart.”

Maxim growled, yanking me against him. “I will never apologize for protecting you. I will do whatever, whomever, I must if it means you are safe.”

“I fucking hate you!”

“That’s good enough for me,” he growled, right before he claimed my mouth in a crushing kiss. Without missing a beat, his hands groped to my ass, squeezing my cheeks tightly as he swiftly lifted me off my feet, turning me until my back hit the wall of my office. Growling into my mouth, he took the kiss deeper as I pressed my body against his. Grabbing a handful of his thick, silky black hair, I yanked hard, biting his lip.

Blind fury flamed in his gray eyes, mirroring my anger.

“Bastard.”

He chuckled, grinding his hard cock against my wet pussy. One fucking look was all it took, and I was putty in his hands. He fucking knew it and so did I. The man was dangerous. A caution I heeded for the last year. What we were about to do was a massive mistake. There would be no going back if I allowed myself to fall victim to his charms again.

“Wife,” he growled, his eyes never leaving mine, challenging me to deny him.

This was such a bad fucking idea.

Good thing I never listened to my inner conscience.

Reaching between us, I cupped his hard cock before squeezing hard, eliciting a groan from him. Max cursed, grabbing my face brutally kissing me with the fierceness and anger he felt.

I don't know how I fought him as long as I did, but it was over now. I knew that as sure as he ripped my silk blouse from my body and was nipping at my neck.

Gone was the imaginary veil separating us.

Kicking off my heels, I moaned as his mouth trailed down to my breast, sucking and biting my tender flesh. Maxim was always a very oral and detailed lover. Fucker knew just how to touch me to elicit a maximum response.

Moving his mouth back up to mine, he forced his tongue down my throat as my hands deftly removed his belt, undoing his dress pants. As our tongues danced, I hooked the band of his boxers with my thumbs, yanking him towards me.

“If you think you're sticking your cock inside me, think again, asshole,” I growled angrily, daring him to fight me on this. I was resolute. There was no fucking way in hell his dick was getting anywhere near me.

“Challenge accepted,” he growled, forcefully turning me, pushing me towards the wall. His breath, hot on my neck, sent goosebumps across my skin as he added, “You are my fucking wife. And I am going to fuck what is mine.”

“You touch me and I will kill you.”

Ripping my slacks from my body. He didn't waste time before grabbing my silk thong, removing the offending item. Gripping my hips tightly, he kneeled behind me as his mouth clamped over my swollen clit and sucked.

I screamed out, smacking my head against the wall as he made a meal of my pussy.

His grip tightened as his ravenous hunger took over, consuming my body, heart and soul. When my dam broke, I cried out, not caring who heard, as one of the most intense orgasms I've ever felt ripped through me, shattering my very existence.

I didn't have time to come down as he moved behind me, his full-length plunging inside me.

"Fuck!" I screamed out, as my head fell back against him, my eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. My whole body spasmed in pure ecstasy as wave after wave of ecstasy washed over me.

Leaning against him, I could feel his hunger as he wrapped a muscular arm around my waist and, in one swift motion, turned me, bending me over my desk.

I felt his strong hand push on my lower back, preventing me from moving as his feet kicked my legs wider. His other hand reached around, roughly squeezing my breast. Heat spread throughout my body, emanating from my begging pussy.

With another forced thrust, Maxim had his cock buried inside of me, his balls slapping against my clit.

"Fuck!" I screamed as I felt his thick, long cock push into me repeatedly.

My pussy was so wet that his enormous cock had no problem reaching the deepest depths of my body. He ran his hand along my body, up my arms before finally gripping my wrists.

Pulling my arms over my head, he bent over me, holding me down while pumping his cock into me harder. Maxim was a driven lover. Demanding and insistent. The man didn't believe in boundaries. He gave everything and then some when he fucked.

An aficionado, the man truly missed his calling.

He would make bank with his sexual appetite and desires.

My loud screams echoed throughout my office as Maxim fucked me with focused intensity until he pulled himself from my swollen pussy. Turning me once more, he picked me up and placed me on my desk, forcing me to lie back. Grabbing my legs, he aimed his dick at my entrance and thrust forward, making me moan. Wrapping my legs around his hips, I tried desperately to force his shaft deeper. "Fuck me harder!"

He fucked me relentlessly. Claiming my hands once more in his frightening grip.

I did everything I could to get more of him inside of me. I bucked my hips, meeting his rhythmic thrusts as best I could. His occasional graze of my sensitive clit forced me to let out a gasp, interrupting my uncontrollable moans. I struggled to free my arms from his firm grip, trying to wrap my arms around his neck and press my body against his, but my useless flailing did nothing to shake me free of his almost inhuman grasp. The feeling of knowing that I couldn't stop his vicious assault on my pussy only made me hotter.

Without breaking his furious pace, Maxim leaned over and took my nipple into his mouth, his soft tongue rolling it around in a slow circle. The sensation of his cool, soft tongue against my burning hot flesh was too much for me to handle as I arched my back high, forcing my chest into his face. He could tell that I was getting close to cumming again as his ferocious pumping quickened and he bit my nipple.

The second I felt the sharp pain in my nipple, I let out a guttural, animalistic scream. The sharp sensation sent me over the edge as my body spasmed uncontrollably as my second orgasm of the night washed over my body. My legs tightened around his hips as my whole body seized, letting the tidal wave of pleasure rock through my body.

“You are mine,” he growled, in between thrusts.

Without thinking, delirious and in a haze of euphoric bliss, I nodded. “Yes. I'm yours.”

My words must have sparked something in him as he released my breast and fucked me harder. He abandoned any rhythm and was now ramming his cock into my pussy hard and fast. Each mighty pump of his thick dick forced pleasure to surge through my body.

His roar filled the room as streams of hot cum filled my pussy. The sensation was enough to send me over the edge as another flood of pleasure coursed throughout my battered body. His loud groans and my high-pitched screams echoed throughout my office as we climaxed simultaneously.

Spent, he fell over me as I gasped for air.

Lost in a haze of pure pleasure, I lay there, feeling his blackened heart beat furiously against my chest as reality seeped back in.

Oh God.

What did I just do?

Chapter Twelve

Illyria

“Get the hell off me. You weigh a ton,” I moaned, trying to move the unmovable. Sighing, Maxim slowly removed himself from my body and stood, tucking his semi flaccid cock back in his pants.

Sitting up, I groaned, “You didn’t use a condom, asshole.”

He smirked. “I don’t need to. You’re my wife.”

“You get me pregnant, I will abort it,” I threatened, walking towards the closet I had in my office, when his powerful hand gripped my upper arm and threw me against the wall. Before I could blink, his other hand tightened around my neck as he pinned me to the wall. “I should kill you for that alone and save myself the grief.”

I growled, “Take your hands off me. Now.”

He didn’t move.

His face was so close to mine I could smell what mouth wash he used and when his hand slightly tightened, I narrowed my eyes. “I hate you.”

“So you keep saying,” he replied, releasing me.

My throat ached, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of showing him he hurt me. It wouldn’t do any good. He only cared about himself and his needs. He got what he wanted, so I didn’t know why he was still loitering around.

Reaching into my closet, I grabbed a clean suit. I knew Maria kept a few of them in there for me, just in case. Picking one, I quickly changed. Once dressed, I turned to find him sitting in my chair behind my desk, watching me intently.

“We need to talk.”

I huffed, shaking my head. “We have nothing to say to each other.”

“Our secret is out. You need to accept that and let me take you to my home upstate, where you will be safe.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you. Nothing has changed.”

“Everything’s changed, *Moya Lyubov* and you know it.”

“I don’t know jack-shit.”

Maxim sighed, getting to his feet, buttoning his suit. “Have it your way, *wife*. I will allow you your freedom. For now.”

Slowly, I turned my head towards him and seethed, “Allow?”

“Allow,” Maxim reiterated, as he walked to the door. “Whether you like it or not, you are my wife and no one is taking you away from me. Especially you. I will have some of my men at your disposal.”

I knew what that meant.

Disposal. He was going to have his goons watch me every fucking second of the day. Probably even when I slept.

Fuck that.

“I don’t need your henchmen watching my every move.”

Max shrugged but said nothing as he walked out of my office, leaving me standing there, alone.

The second I heard the front door of the club slam shut, I dropped to my knees and cried.

God, I was in so much trouble.

If he ever learned the truth...

No. I refused to think of that possibility. I couldn’t. I would never survive the fallout. I just needed to continue with my plan. Continue on as if nothing mattered. Yet, no matter how many times I tried to tell myself that, my heart refused to listen.

Maxim Fedorov was mine.

I knew it just as he knew I belonged to him.

We were the same.

I was the yin to his yang and nothing but death would ever separate us. For years, all we’ve done was try to break each other. Our fights were epic. The passion explosive. No matter

the instance, we seemed to gravitate towards each other. Unable to stop the inevitable.

It didn't matter how badly he hurt me or how badly I hurt him. And God help me, he hurt me just as I hurt him. What we had wasn't healthy. It was toxic and I logically knew it would be best to run. Run away as fast as I could and disappear so he would never find me again.

I wanted to hate him. I tried for months. But one kiss. One touch and every hurtful thing he'd ever done dissolved until it was just him and me. He was an obsession. An addiction I couldn't shake and now he was going to destroy me. Pick me apart piece by piece until I gave in and became the one thing I swore I would never be.

Kneeling on the floor, I cried for the life I worked so hard to obtain as it slowly faded away. I would never again be free to do as I pleased. He would put me in a gilded cage and never let me out. I would never be his equal.

Arms wrapped around me, pulling me into a strong, familiar chest. Hugging Salvatore tightly, I cried, knowing that this might just be the last time he ever held me like this.

"He doesn't deserve you," Sal said, stroking my back. "Let me take you away, sister. I can put in a call to the families. He will never find you."

"He will always find me," I whispered.

"Gio should have let me kill the Russian bastard when I had the chance. I knew he was nothing but trouble."

I smirked, sitting up and looking at my brother. "I don't think even God can kill him."

Helping me to my feet, Salvatore wiped my tears away. "What I don't understand is why. Why did you marry him?"

"Because I love him."

Salvatore shook his head and sighed. "There's love and then there's what you two have and honey, that isn't love. I don't know what it is, but I know it's not love."

"Did you call Giovanni?"

Sal nodded.

“What did he say?”

Sal grinned. “What do you think? He told me to put a bullet in the Russian bastard’s head and make you a widow.”

I knew he was serious. All I had to do was say something, anything, and Salvatore would do just that and I would be free of Maxim Fedorov forever.

“You can’t do that, Sal,” I said, sitting at my desk.

I was tired, so fucking tired of all the fighting. The constant looking over my shoulder. I just wanted a few minutes of peace. I wanted to wake up one morning and know my life was my own. That I was no longer in danger. That I could live, be anything, do anything I wanted. But that would never happen now that our secret was out.

I fucking knew it was a gamble.

One I willingly played.

“Renaldo and I have decided to wait to tell the families. I don’t know what you have planned, Illyria, but you better think of something fast. We can’t keep this a secret for long. You’ve aligned yourself with the Russian Bratva. Once the families learn of your marriage, neither of us can interfere.”

“I know that.”

Italian Mafia never mixed with Russian Bratva.

It was an unwritten rule.

Not once in the mafia’s history have I ever learned of a union between the two. The two branches of the mafia were night and day. Where one believed in decorum and rules and preferred the gentlemanly way, the other didn’t give a fuck. They were messy and killed whomever and whenever. There was no logic to the Bratva.

Long ago, the families established rules that there would be no alliances between the two branches. And to my recollection, there has never been such an alliance.

Until now.

“I wish you’d just let me hire someone to kill him.”

“I can’t let you do that,” I muttered, knowing damn well why I couldn’t give my brother the go ahead. He was right. It would be so fucking easy to end all this misery with a single bullet, but it wouldn’t solve a damn thing. In fact, it would only make things worse.

No. As much as I wanted Maxim to pay for what he did, I couldn’t in good conscience have him killed. “What do you think the families will do?”

Sal sighed. “I don’t know, sweetheart, but I know you will become persona non grata. None of the families will give you aid.”

“What about you?”

Salvatore smirked. “I’ve never followed directions well. You know that. You’re my baby sister. I don’t give a fuck what anyone says. If the families sanction me, I’ll just tell them to go fuck themselves.”

“I’ve put you in a terrible position, haven’t I?”

Shrugging, Salvatore muttered, “Nothing worse than when Giovanni told me I couldn’t see Isabella Cavallari anymore.”

“She was a bitch and you know it.”

He nodded, grinning from ear to ear. “True, but she was good in bed.”

“EWW!” I laughed, picking up a pen and throwing it at him. “I did not need to hear that.”



It was late when I walked into the penthouse at Davenport Tower to find Mrs. Rushton sitting on the sofa in the living room, holding an envelope in her hands.

Seeing me, she slowly stood as I walked over.

“What’s wrong?”

“This came for you twenty minutes ago.”

Handing me the envelope, I opened it and read.

There was no way this was going to be good news.

News delivered in the dead of night rarely was.

Illyria Valentinetti,

First, let me congratulate you on your marriage to Maxim Fedorov. The Italian families around the world would like to wish you nothing but happiness. May your union be everything you wished for.

It is also with a heavy heart that I must inform you that the Italian families will no longer afford you protection. I am sure you understand, as we cannot interfere with your husband's business.

May I suggest seeking protection from an outside source, as your marriage has caused a rift in the alliance that our two branches once held?

Sincerely,

Alphonso Moraiti Vinelli, Don of the families of Italy.

Well, shit.

That was fast.

Sighing, I returned the letter to the envelope and sat.

“It’s beginning. Isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I nodded.

“How did they find out?”

“I have no clue. My brother and the others just found out tonight.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“What I always do. I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep my marriage a secret for long. Hell, it shouldn’t have stayed a secret as long as it did. I just thought it would take a little more time before I got the letter. Which means someone other than me and Maxim must have known all along, but I can’t think of a single person.”

“You already know who is doing this, Illyria. You’ve always known,” Mrs. Rushton carefully said. “He’s been making your life hell for the last year. Now he’s in the city.”

She was right about that. Why Boris Petrovitch had a hard-on for me was anyone’s guess. He dealt with Maxim most of the time. Not me. When I left Max and returned to Chicago, I thought I was free of that life. I was wrong. It seemed at every turn, Boris Petrovitch was there, watching, waiting in the wings for something.

What it was, I didn’t know.

“But I don’t understand why.”

“It doesn’t matter why, sweetheart. He’s evil and you know it. You need to tell your husband the truth. He needs to know that man has been following you and causing trouble.”

I knew she was right.

They all deserved to know the truth.

This war brewing between the East and West coast families would soon spill over everywhere. No family would be safe. Not even the Soulless Sinners who weren’t even affiliated. Soon, blood would run in the streets and only the strongest would survive.

Nodding, I whispered, “I’ll tell him.”

“Sooner rather than later,” Mrs. Rushton ordered, getting to her feet. “Just rip the band-aid off, Illyria. He will be angry at first, but in the end, he will do the right thing.”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

Chapter Thirteen

Illyria

Checking my reflection, I sighed. It was going to be another boring night of drinking, hobnobbing and money. Why I agreed to go to the Museum of Natural History's yearly fund raiser, I would never know. The yearly fund raiser served a wonderful cause to help illiteracy in the city. The money raised tonight would go to help the inner-city schools, where kids could have new books and supplies.

It was also about to serve two purposes. One, it gave me something to do while supporting a good cause. Second, it was a good public venue to tell Maxim the truth. I knew I was hedging my bet, but with Maxim, I never knew what kind of mood he was going to be in.

He was in a constant state of anger most days, barely keeping his grip on reality, and the second the words I needed to tell him fell from my lips, he was going to blow. There was nothing I could do about that. No way to soften what I was about to tell. Mrs. Rushton was right. It was just best to rip the band-aid off swiftly and let the chips fall where they may. My only concern was the aftermath. Because if I knew him like I thought I did, there would be no place I could hide. No sanctuary would protect me.

Only death would save me from his wrath.

Walking out of my bedroom, my heels clicking on the marble floor when my cellphone rang. A private number flashed on my screen. Stopping, I connected the call. "Hello?"

"Your sister-in-law is beautiful. Her belly would look good swollen with my child," the thick Russian accent gruffly said, making the hairs on my body stand at attention.

"How the hell did you get this number?" I sternly said, looking around the empty penthouse, as I ran for my purse, searching for my burner phone. The one my brothers drilled into me to keep at all times. Dialing Salvatore's number, I silently cursed when the line went directly to voicemail.

The fucker laughed in my ear. “Did you really think he would pick up? You’ve been excommunicated. No one will help you now.”

“I have friends, you sick fuck.”

He laughed louder.

Dialing Antonio’s number, I sighed when his phone did the same.

“Two down Illyria. Go ahead. Try big brother. I’ll wait.”

Dialing Giovanni’s number, my heart broke when his phone too never connected.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Why do I do anything? Because I want to. Tell me, *shlyukha*. Have you seen that Irish bastard of a cousin of yours lately?”

Confused, I didn’t know what he was talking about.

My family was Italian.

Had been for generations.

There wasn’t a single drop of Irish blood in the Valentinetti line.

The more I thought about it, that wasn’t technically true. When the realization struck, I shook my head. This bastard had to be fishing for something. What, I didn’t know.

In my family, there were only two cousins who weren’t entirely full-blooded Italian. My father’s sister, my aunt Daniella. She was married when she was younger. The marriage didn’t last. Both were too stubborn and too hot headed. They had two sons. But they weren’t involved with the family like the other cousins. They went their own way. Now, one of them was dead, and the other wanted nothing to do with the family.

“What do you want with him?” I cautiously asked. Getting information out of this sick fuck wasn’t going to be easy. The bastard was vague as hell most of the time, and when he was forthcoming, he still spoke in riddles.

“Because he has something that belongs to me, and I want it back.”

The man was making no sense.

Reggie would never involve himself with a man like Petrovitch. After the showdown with the Golden Skulls, Reggie took Catarina and their two kids and disappeared. They were safe, living their lives in an undisclosed location. Even I didn't know where they were. The last I heard, they were happy and thriving. Catarina was pregnant with their third child.

“I don't believe you. Why don't you stop these games and just tell me what it is you really want?”

“I just did. I want your cousin.”

“Well, good luck finding him. Nobody knows where he's at.”

“I will find him and when I do, I will kill him slowly,” he said, right before disconnecting the call.

Hands shaking, I dialed the only person I knew who knew the truth. Sitting on the arm of the sofa, I waited as his phone rang. On the fourth ring, I almost gave up when I heard his sleepy voice say, “Ms. Illyria?”

“Sypher, sorry if I woke you, but I need your help.”

“Sure. Anything for you.”

“I need you to tell me that Reggie, Catarina and the kids are still safe?”

“Last I checked, they were. Reggie checks in once a week like clockwork. Is everything okay?”

“I just got a call from Boris Petrovitch. He said some things that didn't make sense. He wants Reggie. He said that my Irish cousin has something that belongs to him. Reggie is the only one with Irish blood in my family. He must be mistaken, right? I mean, I know Reggie. He would never associate himself with or put his family in harm's way. Not after everything that's happened, right?”

“It's funny you mention that,” Sypher yawned before adding, “I've been helping with the files Benson Graves

accumulated over the years on several clubs and people across the world, and something caught my eye the other day. I haven't had time to look into further because Montana has me working around the clock to locate Graves. But...yes. There it is. Okay. There is a file simply named *Irlandskly Prizrak*. It means Irish Ghost in Russian."

"Why would Graves have a file on Reggie?"

"I don't know, Ms. Illyria. The file is vague, like really bare. There are only two entries dated, but they were within the last six months, then nothing."

"That makes no sense. Reggie went into hiding over a year and a half ago."

"That's true because I created all the new documents for him and his family and made sure when they disappeared that I erased their existence. As far as the world is concerned, Reginald Buchannon doesn't exist. Could he be talking about someone else in your family?"

"No. The only other Irish relative I had was Dwayne, but he died at the Golden Wedding along with my brother Luciano."

Sypher sighed, then murmured, "I remember."

"I'm sorry Sypher. I know you liked Dwayne."

"Massacre was funny. He never treated me like a kid." The kid whispered, then sniffed. "Look, Ms. Illyria. A lot of these files are dead ends. Men and women who have died over the years. There is no beginning date on this Irish Ghost. No picture to identify the person. Nothing to indicate if the person is male or female. Nothing. The only thing in the file is two city names."

"What cities?"

"The first is St. Petersburg, Russia, and the other is a small village in County Galway, Ireland."

I gasped as a long-forgotten memory popped into my head.

I was barely four, maybe five. I was crying, hiding in my closet because dad wouldn't let me go with my brothers. He never did. Dwayne found me. He knew all my hiding spots.

Sitting next to me, he picked me up and cradled me in his arms as he started singing to me.

“My Galway Girl.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing. The village in Ireland is called Roundstone, right?”

“Uh... yeah it is. Have you heard of it?”

“Yes, I have,” I quickly said, before adding, “Thank you, Sypher. I need to check on something. I will call you back later.”

Hanging up the phone before he could ask me another question, I called Giovanni again. When his phone went straight to voicemail again, I tried Layla. There was more than one way to get ahold of my older brother and I was not above circumventing the system.

“Jesus, Illyria,” Layla huffed angrily, out of breath. “We are busy.”

Yeah, I knew what that meant.

Quickly shivering, removing that thought from my memory, as I impatiently replied, “You can make me a niece or nephew later. I need to speak with Gio. It’s important.”

“Fine. Hold on.”

A few minutes later, my brother groaned, “If you weren’t my favorite sister.”

“I’m your only sister. Look Gio, I’m sorry for calling like this, but I need to ask you something about Uncle Colin. I was young when he and Aunt Daniella divorced. So, I don’t remember much.”

“What about him?”

“Uncle Colin was from Roundstone, Galway County, Ireland, right?”

“Yes. Why are you asking?”

“I remember a song Dwayne used to sing to me. Something about a Galway Girl. Do you know it?”

Gio chuckled. “God, I can’t believe you remembered that. You were so little. Dwayne would sing you that song when you were upset. It calmed you down every time. He called you, his little Galway Girl,” Gio chuckled. “What brought this about? It’s been years, *Cara*.”

“It’s not important. Well, I hope not. Something Sypher told me just got me curious, that’s all.”

“Since I have you, I got the letter from the families in Italy. I want you to know that you are my sister and they can go fuck themselves. If you need me. I expect you to call.”

Grinning, I nodded. “Why Giovanni, I think Layla is rubbing off on you. What a mouth you have.”

“I mean it, *Cara Mia*. Screw the families. You, Sal, Lorenzo and Antonio are all I have left. I won’t lose another sibling.”

“Thank you, Giovanni. I never had any doubt. Now, I must get going. I have a fundraiser to attend and you need to make me a niece. Love my nephews, but I want a niece. You need a daughter to drive you crazy.”

“Good night, Illyria,” Giovanni chuckled before hanging up. Knowing I didn’t have time to sit and dwell on what I just learned, I made a mental note to investigate the matter later.

Right now, I had somewhere I needed to be.



I nervously stepped out of the limo as flashes of light blinded me. Tonight was a big night for the New York Public School System. The Museum of Natural History annual fundraiser was a major cash cow for the public school system. Anyone who was anyone was going to be here tonight to help support the schools of New York city.

Making my way through the throngs of paparazzi, I avoided answering questions. This wasn’t my first rodeo and God willing, it would be my last. Contrary to everyone’s beliefs,

I hated these events. I found them suffocating as the rich lorded and showed off their wealth as if it was something to admire. My brothers avoided these events like the plague, only attending if I begged them.

It wasn't that I couldn't handle these events on my own.

I could. I've been to enough of these things to navigate my way through with little fanfare. No, I asked them to go so I wouldn't be alone. While my brothers thought I lived for these events, they didn't know how lonely they were.

Groomed for this life from birth, my mother would trod me out in front of society without a single thought. With my father always busy, I would keep my mother company. When she died and I stepped into her shoes, I never realized how lonely it all was. In a room of hundreds of people, I never felt so alone in my life.

Then Maxim would be there, and it was as if we were the only ones in the room. For a few short years, I looked forward to these events because it was one of the few times my family and the public could see us together without raising anyone's suspicions.

Now, everything had changed.

Making my way through the crowd, I smiled, kissed, talked and shook hands with everyone, giving them my customary five minutes of attention as they gushed at their accomplishments like they were world altering. I learned early on that those who attended these events didn't give a damn about the charity event they were attending.

All they cared about was their social status.

They were only here to be seen.

That was it.

It was going to be another long night. I didn't want to be here. Especially so soon after momma died. But someone had to represent the family. The whole family was still in mourning. I should have been home with my brothers, grieving. Instead, I was walking into the Chicago Art Institute for their yearly fundraising event.

I couldn't remember what charity they were sponsoring this year. Not that it mattered. These events were never about charities.

It was about them.

The ones with money.

The ones who didn't give a damn if I just lost my mother.

All they cared about was my families' money.

"Illyria, my dear," a whiney voice said, causing me to stop in my tracks. Fuck. I really didn't want to speak with this bitch.

Plastering on my signature fake smile, I turned.

"Mrs. Hilton. How lovely to see you," I greeted her by air-kissing both her cheeks. The woman reeked of expensive perfume and powder. What the hell did she do? Bathe in the stuff? Dressed in her designer clothes, her vagrant jewelry display was gaudy for an event like this. Yet that never stopped her. Rules of decorum and dress flew out the window with women like her. It was all about status.

Who had the best dress?

Who had the best jewelry?

Who had the most scandalous date?

The list went on and on.

"How are you, my dear?" she fussed, fishing for information. Laura Hilton was the city of Chicago's biggest gossip and from one of the wealthiest families. Invited to everything, Laura Hilton spent her evenings at one social event or another. The woman was everywhere. No one escaped her perusal and inspection. "When I heard about Nicoletta, I almost cried."

Almost?

Bitch, don't fuck with me tonight.

"How am I ever going to find another partner for our bridge club?"

"I'm sure you'll manage, Mrs. Hilton."

“And the way she died,” she tutted, gasping as if only hearing about my mother’s passing tonight. “An intruder with a gun? I told Nicoletta that her neighborhood wasn’t safe, but alas, she didn’t listen. I didn’t know your family was having a hard time. If I’d know, I would have tried to help.”

“Excuse me?” I frowned. What in the hell was this fucking woman talking about? What hard time? “I don’t understand. What is my family having a hard time with Mrs. Hilton?”

The skinny bitch leaned forward, covered her mouth as she whispered. “You know. Money troubles. Is that why Nicoletta didn’t move into a better neighborhood?”

Oh no, the fuck she didn’t!

Taking a step back, I was about to give this cunt a piece of my mind. Decorum be damned when I bumped into a broad, firm chest. Strong hands wrapped around my waist, pulling me tighter against him. Instantly, all my anger fled as I heard him growl lowly. His men stepped on either side of us, cocooning us and Mrs. Hilton, as Maxim bent down and whispered in my ear. “Breathe, Moya Lyubov. This is not the time for bloodshed.”

“There’s always time for blood,” I muttered, but nodded.

“Mrs. Hilton, you look ravishing tonight,” Maxim schmoozed, as he took the evil cunt’s hand and kissed the top of it. “Is your husband here? I was hoping to finalize the sale of the property in Lincoln Heights.”

Mrs. Hilton blanched, then stuttered, “That’s my house.”

“I know,” Maxim smirked. “I need a place in the city to entertain and comfortably house my men. You know, something befitting my status. Plus, I can’t wait to see what Illyria will do with it. She has amazing tastes.”

“You can’t buy my house!” she screeched, causing heads to turn in our direction. “It’s been in my husband’s family for generations!”

Maxim eased me towards Vladimir, who winked.

“I can do whatever I want, you napyschennaya torchashchava pizda.”

Vladmir snickered, quickly covering his mouth, clearing his throat.

“I forbid it. I will not allow some mafia trash near my home.”

Maxim sighed as he straightened his tux jacket. “You forget your place, Mrs. Hilton. Your husband is my associate. He only makes money if I do. If I want your fucking house, then I will buy it. Tell your husband that I will seek a new rail company in the future.”

She gasped, shaking her head. “You can’t do that. You’ll bankrupt us.”

“Have a wonderful evening, Mrs. Hilton,” Maxim turned, taking my hand, leading me away from prying eyes, gossiping harpies and ill-mannered socialites. Once outside, Maxim’s men swiftly ushered us both towards their waiting vehicles.

Sliding across the seat, I bent forward and covered my eyes, trying my hardest to stop the tears from coming. Yet when the door closed, Maxim reached for me, pulling me onto his lap as his arms held me.

And that’s when my dam broke.

Holding me, he said nothing, as I cried for my momma.

I thought I could do it. Attend the event, make small talk, stay the predetermined time socially acceptable before I made my excuses, and headed home before I broke down.

I was wrong.

Instead, I barely held it together. If it wasn’t for Maxim, I didn’t know what I would have done.

“Where to, boss?”

“The Gold Coast.”

Holding onto to him for dear life, I didn’t know what else to do. Since the attack on the family compound, and my abduction and rescue, Maxim whisked me away to his home in upstate New York. For a few short weeks, he dropped everything to be with me, helping me recover from what I endured at the hands of that sick fuck Capribella. While it was nothing compared to

what Layla suffered, my time on the tanker left a lasting impression. When Maxim finally returned me to my brothers, my family sank deep into mourning. Not just for my mother, but the other family we lost that day. Even Layla grieved the loss of her grandfather, Don Victor Alonzo Capribella, the head of the Capribella Family.

I thought for sure that my brothers would question my association with Maxim, but none of them did. Instead, they were so wrapped up in their own grief, by the time the family stepped out of the dismal fog, life moved on.

Not for me.

While my brothers led their own lives, I dedicated mine to my mother and her charities. And now that she was gone, I couldn't simply disappear and grieve like my brothers.

I had responsibilities. Responsibilities to my mother's name to ensure that her charities carried on. To do that, I had to put on a brave face and re-enter society, when all I wanted to do was curl up into a ball and cry.

I never felt the vehicle stop when the door opened, as a cool breeze rushed into the cab. "Come with me, Moya Lyubov. I want to show you something."

Taking his hand, I allowed him to lead me from the vehicle as we walked in silence, hand in hand, along the bank of the Gold Coast in Chicago.

"Sit with me," he said, stopping near a bench overlooking the cool waters of Lake Michigan as he sat. Standing, looking at the calm water, I whispered, "Sometimes I want to get on a boat and sail away into the darkness where there are no more parties, social niceties or any of this."

"My yacht is yours, Moya Lyubov. Say the word and we can leave tonight."

Turning, I smirked, "You mean that, don't you?"

"For you, I will do anything."

Sighing, I sat next to him, snuggling close as his arm came around my shoulders. "I miss her."

"I know."

Sniffing, I whispered, "Thank you for rescuing me again."

That night, Max sat with me as I talked about and cried for my mom. He stayed with me, holding me as the sun started to rise.

He never complained.

He was there for me when no one else was.

Chapter Fourteen

Maxim

Looking at my watch, I noted the time.

I was late. I had somewhere I needed to be and sitting with my drunk friend while he wallowed in his drunken misery wasn't that place. Had all kinds of love and respect for the man, but he really needed to grow a pair.

“Are you even listening?”

Looking up, I smirked at my friend. “I'll listen when you have something important to say.”

“Asshole,” Montana chuckled, flipping me the one finger bird, before downing another shot of scotch. I noticed he'd been hitting the bottle a lot lately. It was understandable, considering everything that had happened. My friend couldn't catch a break with his woman. One minute he had everything wrapped up tight, the next she pulled the rug out from underneath him.

Currently, his lady love, Tessa Jackson, had barricaded herself in her old apartment near Central Park, refusing to speak to him after the accident that damn near took her life in the harbor. When she woke, the stubborn woman had had enough and sent my friend packing.

Montana was giving her space. Space that she requested, but it was slowly eating away at him. From what the others told me, Montana barely left the club. I would never understand men like Montana. A man of power, he could find another woman to fulfill his desires, but he wanted a stubborn one. A woman so much like *Moya Lyubov*, it almost seemed predestined. Not that I believed in destiny or fate. I believed life was what we made of it and our actions and decisions blazed our paths. In reality, I shouldn't be questioning his love for the head-strong woman, considering I had my own obstinate spitfire to deal with.

Thinking a change of subject might pull him out of his misery, I asked, “Have you heard from our mole lately?”

He took a deep breath as he poured himself another shot. “No. Nothing for a few weeks now.”

“Maybe it’s time to send someone to see if he’s still alive?”

“That will only get him killed. When he has something, he will send a text for the next drop. Until then, we wait.” Montana sighed, rubbing his hands down his face. “I still can’t believe he’s lasted this long. He has to be the luckiest son of a bitch alive.”

“No. That goes to your guest downstairs. Speaking of which. Has he even left that room?”

I tried not to read too much into the man downstairs. If Montana and I thought we had problems, our problems were infinitesimal to the drama of the man downstairs. The ramifications of his actions and the choices he’d made would never end well for him, all because he fell in love with and wanted to protect a woman. A woman who, like *Moya Lyubov*, and a few others who were nothing but collateral damage from the lives we led.

“He comes out when the club is asleep. Works out in the gym, grabs something to eat, then returns to his isolation.”

Shaking my head, I sighed as I addressed the elephant in the room. “How’s Tessa?”

He groaned, laying his head on the table. “Fuck if I know. She’s gone radio silence. I am now regulated to seeing my son every other day.”

“Say the word, and I’ll have your son here in an hour. Possession is nine-tenths of the law. Keep the kid and force her hand.”

“Jesus’ fuck, Max,” Montana growled. “I know I’m a bastard, but I’m not that vengeful. Fuck. Is that what you have planned for Illyria?”

I laughed. “We don’t have a child together. My plans for my woman are my own and none of your concern.”

With all seriousness, I asked, “What are you going to do about Tessa? Petrovitch knows how to use her to get to you. You may have to bring her in. Forcefully.”

Montana groaned. “I know. She’s just so fucking pissed. She wants nothing to do with me. She hates that I accused her of going behind my back. She hates that I put her life in danger. She hates that the life I live could blow back and hurt York. More importantly, she fucking hates my guts right now and I don’t blame her. I never wanted my life to touch her. I just wanted her.”

“My friend,” I sighed. “This life we lead isn’t for the weak. Your Tessa has withstood much since her time with you. She’s angry right now. Anger is love. It’s when she no longer cares is when you need to worry. Give her the space she needs. Your Tessa is a smart woman. She will see the truth.”

“Is that what you are hoping for with Illyria?”

“*Moya Lyubov* is a strong woman. Raised in this life, she isn’t one to wilt away. Yes, she is angry at me right now, and rightfully so. But I will never apologize for what I did. She knows that too and she can’t move past that fact. This isn’t the first time I disappointed her and I fear it won’t be the last.”

In the five years I’ve known *Moya Lyubov*, there were many times I upset her. Many times, I had to break her heart. None were like what I recently did, but one did stand out.

Getting out of my car, I headed straight for the building in front of me. It wasn’t the first time I walked into Valentine Coro, nor would it be the last if I had anything to do with it.

I was only here for one thing.

To get her to safety.

In the next twenty-four hours, everything would change, all because I aligned myself with two motorcycle clubs. What came next would either solidify my standing within the Bratva or put a bullseye on my back. Either way, I couldn’t be anywhere near the fallout.

I didn’t need to explain to Vladimir the reason for my decision. The impending fallout was going to be heard around

the world in the coming days, and it was imperative that I took measures to keep her away from it.

“Mr. Fedorov! You can’t go in there!”

Ignoring my woman’s secretary, I marched into her office, ignoring the looks of contempt from some of her board members. Sitting at the head of the table, she looked up at me and scowled. “Kind of busy here, Maxim.”

“Meetings over. Leave. Now!” I ordered firmly as the board members quickly got up and left. The second the room cleared, my woman got to her feet and sneered. “How dare you!”

“We need to leave. Now.”

“Why?”

“That’s not important.”

Illyria laughed. “That’s where you are wrong. I have a wedding to attend tomorrow in California, so unless you are planning on being my plus one, I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Moya Lyubov, the only wedding you will be attending tomorrow is your own.”

The second those words left my lips I knew there was no taking them back. I meant them. She was mine. Always would be. I knew that the second she fell into my lap. While I knew I wasn’t thinking rationally, it was too late now. I needed to get her on a plane and away from the United States before the aftermath of the Golden Wedding took place. There was no fucking way in hell I was going to allow her to step one foot in California.

Illyria stood, unmoving, as she tried to interpret if I was joking or not. When I failed to smile, she narrowed her eyes and said. “That wasn’t a proposal, asshole.”

“It’s the only one you’re getting. Now, are you coming willingly, or shall I throw you over my shoulder and carry you out?”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

Not only did I dare, I spanked her ass in the lobby as several of her employees looked on.

Yeah. It wasn't my finest moment.

By the time my plane landed in St. Petersburg, Russia, she had calmed down a bit, but the snarky attitude of hers remained. In addition to her pre-existing anger, my choice to confiscate her cellphone magnified her fury.

I wasn't taking any chances of her family or the Golden Skulls reaching out to her. As soon as I knew the wedding went off as planned, I would explain everything.

In the meantime, I was going to show her the home of my birth.

"Boss," Vladimir whispered as I watched Illyria as she stared out the window of the iconic Hotel Astoria, located across from St. Issac's Cathedral. The hotel itself is a landmark in St. Petersburg, one of the city's crowing glories. Erected in 1912, in the Admiralteysky District, the hotel was just a short walk from Nevsky Prospekt Palace Square, one of the many places I wanted her to see during our brief stay.

"I've made all the arrangements. Are you sure marrying her is the right thing to do? If the Pakhan learns of this, you will be putting her life in danger."

"She was in danger the moment she was born, Vladimir. Any word on the other wedding?"

My best friend shook his head. "No boss. Nothing yet."

Getting to my feet, I walked over to my woman, wrapping my arms around her as she relaxed into my embrace.

"It's beautiful here."

"Yes, it is."

"Why did you bring me here, Maxim?"

"Because I want to marry you, Moya Lyubov."

"So, you're still sticking with that are you?"

"It's the truth."

“No, it’s not,” she said, removing herself from my embrace. “You are many things, Maxim Fedorov, but I never pegged you for a liar. So out with it. Why the sudden need to see your homeland?”

Stubborn woman was too damn smart for her own good. I knew if I was going to get her in front of a priest, I was going to have to tell her some semblance of the truth. She wouldn’t budge otherwise and while I was all for forcing her to say the words ‘I do’, some part of me wanted her to mean what she said. Sighing, I looked out over the square and admitted. “The reason you are here in Russia with me and not at the wedding in California is because after the wedding, the Society is going to attack. Now, before you say another word, yes, your brothers know about the attack and so does Reaper. They have taken measures to ensure everyone’s safety.”

“How do you know about the Golden Skulls and the Society? You’ve never aligned yourself with any underground organization before. Why now? What aren’t you telling me?”

“There is a lot you don’t know about me, Moya Lyubov. You are safer that way. Please don’t make me lie to you.”

“This whole trip was a rouse. To keep me occupied so I don’t worry about my family?”

“I want to marry you. I’ve loved you from the first moment you fell into my lap at the Foundation Ball all those years ago. You are mine, Moya Lyubov. You’ve always been mine. Now, I want to claim you permanently.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “Do you know how long I’ve waited for you to say those words? Now that they are out there, all I feel is confusion and doubt. This is supposed to be the happiest day of my life, Maxim, and you are ruining it with your lies.”

“I’m sorry, Moya Lyubov, if I gave you any other impression. My devotion is real and heartfelt. Can we please shelve this argument until after we are married? We have somewhere we need to be soon.” I said looking at my watch. If we didn’t hurry, we would miss our window of opportunity. This was not how I wanted to start our marriage, but I wasn’t

leaving Russia without our signatures on a marriage document.

“Excuse me? We are getting married now?”

“Within the hour.”

“Did a rock fall out of the sky and hit you in the head? I can’t marry you in the next hour! I have nothing to wear!”

Gathering her in my arms, I kissed her forehead. “You look beautiful, Moya Lyubov. I’d be proud to stand beside you as you are right now and claim you for my own. Marry me? Today? Now?”

Kissing my way down her face, towards her neck, I knew the second she gave in when I felt her body succumb to mine as I lavished my carnal intentions on her. That was one thing I could rely on with Illyria Valentinetti. Her Italian blood ran hot and once ignited she was putty in my hands.

In that moment, I wished it would always be like this between us, but that would never happen. Because hours later, she would learn that her that her beloved brother, Luciano and cousin Dwayne died in the aftermath of the Golden Wedding.

Chapter Fifteen

Illyria

Slamming my bag down on my desk, I sat balling my fist as I fumed. The one motherfucking time I needed him to tell him something important, he didn't fucking show. I didn't know how long I waited for him, but when the announcer started making his closing statements, I fucking left.

I was done.

I never wavered. Not once in the last year and the one time I did, I made a fool of myself. Well, fuck him. I didn't need him. I was Illyria fucking Valentinetti. I didn't need anyone.

I could take care of the problem myself.

Leaning forward in a chair, the front doors opening caught my attention on my security monitor. If that fucker was here to mess with me, I was going to cap his ass immediately.

Instead, the last person I ever imagined entered.

Leaning back, I stared at the woman and shook my head. She had a lot of nerve showing up at my place after the way she treated Montana. I had half a mind... fuck it.

I had nothing better to do, anyway.

Getting to my feet, I headed for the main room when I heard a member of my security team say, "I'm sorry, ma'am. Barney is no longer the owner."

"What?" she questioned. "What do you mean? Who owns the club now?"

"I do," I said, smirking as I sauntered over to her. "My name is Illyria Valentinetti. The bitch. Remember?"

Frowning, Tessa replied, "Excuse me?"

"Oh, that's right," I grinned, crossing my arms over my chest. "You were drunk that night."

"I'm sorry. Have we met?"

I laughed. "Fuck me and here I thought I was going to get to have some fun. Look Tess, yes, we've met. You accused me

of fucking Montana, got in my face and told me to find another fuck. Then shit went to hell.”

And just like I suspected, the sweet, innocent woman had no fucking clue what I was talking about. Instead of cutting and running like she did with my friend, Montana, she owned up to her mistake and apologized. Which I gave her props for, but not much. “I’m sorry, but I don’t remember. If I misbehaved, my apologies. I only came to talk to Barney. Since he’s not here, I will leave.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Jesus’ fuck, you are just like he described,” I sighed. “Come with me. We need to talk.”

Turning, I headed back to my office, leaving her no more room for discussion. She could follow or not. I didn’t care.

“Take a seat,” I said, sitting behind my glass desk.

Settling into a seat, Tessa asked, “I didn’t know Barney sold this place. If I had known, I wouldn’t have come.”

I stopped her right then and there. “He didn’t sell it.”

“I don’t understand. You said you were the new owner.”

“I am,” I sighed, then cursed. “Fuck me. I hate being in the middle of shit that has nothing to do with me. Why he thought keeping you out of the loop was safer I will never understand. Men with fucking dicks. Just like my brothers. They think they know best. Well, they don’t know jack shit.”

“What?”

“Look, Tessa. I’m just gonna lay it all out for you, okay? Barney’s dead. Montana killed him because he was using you to get info on him and the club. Barney was working with a man you know by the name of Benson Graves. Graves was the broker for the Soulless Sinners back in the day before he syphoned millions from the club. He also accumulated information. Lots of information, which he handed over to a man named Boris Petrovitch. We all thought Graves was dead, but even I know that unless it’s a bullet to the brain, dead doesn’t really mean dead in this life. Anyway, the Graves you know, started working for the West Coast Bratva, more

specifically Boris Petrovitch. The same man your roommate escaped from. He is also the man who shot up the Gala the night we met. He killed eighteen party goers that night, trying to get to you. Montana figured it out and got you out of there before he took a swim in the Hudson. Whatever you think about Montana, you don't know jack shit about the man or what he will do to keep you alive."

Tessa shook her head, holding up her hand. "Stop. I don't need to hear this."

I growled, leaning forward onto my desk. "Yes, you do because my friend has gone dark, unreachable. For that alone, you are going to sit your ass down and listen to every fucking word I say. When I'm done, then you can fucking leave."

She didn't move.

"The man you know as Montana Stone is the most loyal, honest man I've ever met. He says something, you can take it to the bank. He will honor his word. Yet for some fucking reason, you think he is a pariah, a danger to you and your kid. Honey, that man is a fucking danger to anyone who dares look at you. You think because you come from some backwoods country that shit doesn't stink there? Let me enlighten you. You wouldn't even be alive right now, if it wasn't for Montana. Since your release, that man has stopped three hits on you. One before you even left the hospital. He's called in every fucking marker he has to protect your stupid ass. All so you can go on living your shit life in oblivion. Women like you make me sick."

I watched as she remembered everything that has happened to her since her arrival in the city. Every fucked-up instance she found herself in and how it all played out. I didn't need to look into her head as she was putting two and two together. I fucking knew the man.

In fact, I knew another just like him and the more I thought about it, the more uncomfortable I was getting as I remembered Montana's words to me, my conversation with Vlad and what Sypher told me. What if Maxim did what he did for a reason? What if, in his own way, he was still protecting me? However, for the life of me, I couldn't think of a good enough reason for him to do what he did.

No. I refused to believe that Maxim Fedorov, the Bloodletter, would put my life above his. That wasn't the man I knew.

Tears streamed down Tessa's face as she came to understand the truth I told her. Instead of being the better woman, I let my vindictive nature take root.

"Never in my life have I ever seen a man so in love with a woman that he would forget all reason to ensure that her happiness prevailed. And you throw it all back in his face. You called me a bitch at the Gala, but honey, you are the bitch."

"Where is he?" she whispered.

"Why do you care? You got what you wanted. You're free to live your life as you want and he will spend the rest of his life ensuring you have that fake, imaginary world you so greatly crave."

With that, Tessa quietly got to her feet and left my club.

The second she walked away, I felt like fucking shit for doing that to her. She was a woman adrift in this life. Instead of helping her, I threw her to the sharks, knowing damn well she would either sink or swim. Instead of showing her some compassion, I fucking took my anger about my own situation and threw her problems back in her face.

Fuck.

Maybe I was the bitch she said I was.



Three days later, it was dark when I heard Mrs. Rushton calling my name. Rolling over, I sighed tiredly. "What is it?"

"Salvatore and Lorenzo are here, along with the cousins."

Looking at the clock on my nightstand, I noted the time. Moaning, I sat up. "Did they say why they we're here at four in the morning?"

“No,” Mrs. Rushton simply said, holding my robe out for me to slip on. Tying my robe closed, I walked out of my room and into the living room to find my brother pacing nervously, as Lorenzo stood, drinking a cup of coffee, while my other male cousins milled around.

Upon seeing me, Salvatore rushed over to me and engulfed me in his arms, hugging me tightly. “Oh, thank God.”

“Told you she was fine,” Lorenzo yawned. “Now, can I go home?”

Pulling out of Salvatore’s embrace, I looked at Lorenzo. “I thought you left with Donatella. Why are you here in the city?”

Lorenzo groaned. “Because Sal called. That’s why. Instead of sleeping next to my wife, I’m here with him, so he doesn’t go off the deep end and start killing everyone. By the way, Sal, Gio said if you call him again, someone better be dead.”

Walking over to Lorenzo, I took his cup of coffee and drank it, hoping the hot brew would help make sense of this early morning visit.

“I’ll make a fresh pot of coffee,” Mrs. Rushton said, before heading into the kitchen.

“Thank you,” I muttered, grimacing as I handed Lorenzo back his cup of sugar water. “That shit is nasty. How you don’t have a mouth full of cavities, I will never know.”

Before Lorenzo could comment, Sal asked, “Illyria, has your husband contacted you lately?”

I flinched, then narrowed my eyes. “Soon to be ex-husband and why do you want to know?”

“Because Petrovitch made his move. He took Tessa.”

“Oh God,” I muttered, shaking my head as I reached back for something to grab onto. Feeling the couch, I sat on the arm of the sofa and shook my head. I heard stories. Horrible stories of what Petrovitch did to women. The shit he did made nightmares seem like happy times. The man was one of the vilest creatures that ever walked this earth. If he had Tessa, I could only imagine what she endured.

“Is she alive?”

“Barely. What the fucker did to her,” Sal whispered, as he shook the images from his mind. “I got word that Petrovitch is still in the area. He got away before Montana could get his hands on him. You should know that there was a gunfight tonight down at the docks. Maxim was with Montana. It was bad, baby. Really bad. Tessa is...holy fuck. What that bastard did to her.”

My heart raced as I tempered my face. “Is he dead?”

The elevator door dinged and before Salvatore could reply, there he was. Standing in my penthouse at Davenport Tower, disheveled and covered in blood, from head to toe. His closest men were behind him as they carefully maneuvered around him and into my apartment, making sure there was no one else here. Slowly getting to my feet, his eyes focused on me. He said nothing as he stood there staring, his eyes glued to mine.

“Illyria, we need to get you somewhere safe,” I heard Sal say, as if from far away. I wanted to run, to let Salvatore hide me. Maxim was in a dangerous state, but I knew from experience that I was safer with him. Taking off with Salvatore would only push Maxim past his breaking point and the Bloodletter would emerge. No. Whatever Maxim saw tonight, he needed me.

I couldn't look away from him.

I wanted to, but I wasn't strong enough.

His eyes told me everything I needed to know. He was holding on by a thread, ready to snap any second. I'd only seen him like this one other time. It was something I rarely, if ever, thought about, but seeing Maxim now, I knew he was about to rage and if I didn't get everyone out of here, he would kill them all.

“Sal,” I barely said, never taking my eyes from the large man dripping blood on my floor. “Get your men and leave now.”

“What? You can't be serious!”

“Go. I'll be fine. I will call you later.”

“Illyria, I don't think.”

“Get. Out,” Maxim snarled lowly, the anger fueling the flames in his eyes as he seared me to my spot from across the room.

“Go. Now,” I pleaded, as Lorenzo didn’t need to be told twice before he snapped his fingers at the cousins, before grabbing Salvatore and dragging him from my apartment. Within mere seconds, the only ones left were me and Maxim. Even Mrs. Rushton seemed to take the hint, as I could no longer hear her moving about the kitchen.

“Maxim,” I cautiously whispered, raising my hands as I slowly approached. “Just you and me, okay? No one else.”

“Ms. Illyria, I don’t think,” Vlad muttered cautiously, slowly reaching for his gun. Shaking my head, I replied, “I wouldn’t do that, Vladimir. Just take the men and leave. Stand outside the door if you must but get the hell out of here. And please take Mrs. Rushton with you.”

Vladimir nodded and did as I asked.

Finally, alone with my Russian bear, I treaded carefully as I moved towards him. “Let me help you into the shower, baby. I’m not going anywhere. Just you and me. Just the way you like it. Just you and me.”

His mouth covered mine in a ravenous, crushing kiss as he forced my mouth open, allowing his tongue to meet mine in a highly charged dance. Before I could do anything, Maxim had me pressed against the wall as he started kissing his way down my neck.

He was hungry.

He always was after bloodshed.

But this was more. I could feel it. Whatever happened tonight really got to him. There was no rhyme or reason to his madness. There was no love or tenderness. He was savage, untamed. Almost as if compelled. The need to dominate. To feel human again in any way possible.

This was a starving man fighting for survival.

Using his weight to keep me against the wall, he yanked and fought his way out of his coat as he began gripping and

squeezing my curves roughly through the silk robe that covered me. It was almost as if he couldn't get a firm grip on me as his fingers dug deep into my skin. I just knew I'd have bruises marring my body by morning.

I knew my clothing wouldn't last and when he gathered up a large swath of it, I held perfectly still as he ripped my silk robe from my body, growling low as he did so. He never broke the crushing kiss despite his movements as he took what he needed from me, without regard to my wants or needs. Not that they mattered at the moment.

There was no way I could stop him.

Not like this.

Maxim was a ravenous lover on a good day. Lost in his mind, he was a feral beast who took what he wanted and wouldn't stop until sated.

His hands explored the back of my thigh, drawing my leg up, hooking it over his hip. The second I was open to him he wasted no time sliding a couple of fingers into my slick lower lips.

I gasped at the roughness, digging my nails into his shoulders as I pulled away from his bruising kiss. His mouth instantly latched onto my neck, sucking and biting my skin as his fingers pillaged and plundered my cunt forcefully.

The only thing I could do was hold on.

This was about to be a rough ride.

At the sound of his zipper lowering, I closed my eyes and braced myself as he speared his hard cock deep into my wet pussy. My loud scream didn't deter him as he grabbed my other leg and held on tightly as he plundered and took what he needed from me. His grunts echoed all around as he lost himself within my body, holding me tight as he rammed his dick furiously into me.

There were no words of love, no endearments, nothing to let me know the man using my body was the man I fell in love with.

His body kept up a predatory pace as I tried to breathe through the pain he was causing.

His hand cupped my breast, squeezing it tightly, eliciting a moan from me as he bent to suckle it. When his teeth bit my nipple, I cried out just as he pumped his cock harder into me before stilling as he roared out his release.

Moments later, I heard the shower turn on as I looked down the hall towards my room. He was in there, the rage within him still riding him hard.

After he finished with me, he stepped back as I slowly sank to the floor. My body was sore from his assault. He never blinked as he took in the sight of me. I never showed fear, as I refused to look away.

My Russian bear was still an animal as his body heaved deep breaths as he tried to quell the bloodletter within.

It was a losing battle.

He was the bloodletter, and until he sated his thirst, his rage would control him.

I sat there on the floor, against the wall in my living room as he walked towards my room and disappeared. I could have run. I should have. He was no longer my problem. He made that perfectly clear a year ago, but I couldn't leave him like this. Some small part of me refused to let me get up and save myself. The need to help him overrode every sane thought in my head.

He was my addiction.

The very poison that ran in my veins.

Together, we were the antidote that could only save us.

Slowly getting to my feet, I winced, rubbing my thigh. Looking down, I could clearly see his fingers still embedded in my skin as he gripped me firmly. Bruises already forming on my pale skin.

The first of many before my time with him ended.

Slowly making my way down the hall, I entered my room to find his bloody clothes scattered along my floor. Not bothering to pick them up, I headed into the bathroom.

Almost as if on autopilot, I opened the shower door and slipped in behind him. He stood with one hand braced on the wall, his head bowed as the hot water washed the remnants of night away.

He never moved, didn't even flinch when I placed my hand on his back to help wash away the blood that soaked through his clothes onto his skin, revealing the black Russian cross that signified his allegiance to the Bratva brotherhood. The ravens scattered around, signifying the men and women he killed along the way.

There were many of them.

Unlike the Italian Mafia, I learned early that the Russian Bratva didn't distinguish between male and female. It didn't matter. Cross the Bratva and they would kill you. I also learned that the brotherhood came first before everything, including me.

Maybe that was the thing that kept me from giving into his claim. I knew he loved me in his own way, but not enough to put me first. I guess it really didn't matter, anyway.

He severed any hope we had of making our marriage work a year ago. I knew it and he did, too. Only he was too damn stubborn to believe it.

Laying my head against his back, I wrapped my arms around his waist. "What happened?"

His body sagged as the violence of what he saw and did weighed heavily on him. "He tortured her, *Moya Lyubov*."

Closing my eyes, I tried not to imagine what Tessa went through, but images of her beautiful face contorted in agony as she screamed out and cried for help filtered into my head. Tears I didn't know I could shed for a woman I barely knew rolled down my face, masked by the water falling around us.

"After Montana rescued her, I killed the survivors. I did it for her. He got away. Ran like the coward he is, but not before leaving me a message," he said, pushing off the wall, turning to face me. Cupping my face, my heart picked up as I whispered, "What message?"

Maxim shivered, shaking his head as his eyes closed.

“Tell me,” I whispered, my hands drifting up his chest.
“Please.”

Maxim opened his eyes and said, “You’re next.”

Chapter Sixteen

Illyria

He was finally asleep.

It took another round of him using my body in the shower before he finally succumbed to exhaustion. Now he lay in my bed, sprawled out, sleeping peacefully as the horrors of the night finally released him.

Reaching for the remote on the nightstand, I stood, watching the blinds close, blocking out the morning rays. He would sleep for hours, undisturbed, and when he woke, I wouldn't be there.

I couldn't.

I couldn't let what happened last night ever happen again.

Placing the remote back on the nightstand, I bent over his sleeping form and lightly kissed his lips. "I love you, Max, but I can't keep doing this. Forgive me."

Picking up my heels, I gathered my bag and left my room, closing the door behind me. Making my way down the hallway, I saw Vladimir and the rest of his men milling around. I knew she was already gone. The second he showed up last night, Mrs. Rushton knew what to do.

Placing my bag next to the suitcases near the elevator, I slipped my feet into my heels before facing Vladimir.

"He's resting. My advice is to let him sleep."

"He won't like this, Illyria. What he found on the boat..." his voice trailed off. He cleared his throat and stated, "He will find you."

"No, he won't because I am leaving and never coming back," I firmly said, reaching into my suit pocket for two envelopes. Handing them to him, I added, "Make sure Montana gets this. It's the deed to the Gentlemen's club. Tell him, thank you, but I'm out. The other is for Max."

"I can't let you do this."

“It’s not your choice. I’m tired of all of this. I just want to live my life without fear. I know it sounds stupid considering my family, but I’m done. I’m tired of lies and vendettas. This war will never end. I’ve lost a beloved brother, a cousin I adored, and for what?” Shaking my head, I sighed. “After what happened to Tessa, I can’t. I’ve got too much to lose. My life isn’t my own anymore.”

Vlad stiffened as his eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

Shaking my head, I reached for my coat and put it on. “Nothing. I’m just tired. I will stop by the hospital to pay my respects to Tessa, then I will leave for good. Take care of him, Vladimir. He is going to need you.”

Saying nothing more, I picked up my bag, then reached for the handle of my suitcase and entered the elevator. I knew he wouldn’t stop me. He didn’t have the authority. While I may still be married to Maxim Fedorov, I wouldn’t be much longer.

As the door closed, a lone tear escaped as it slowly rolled down my cheek. Wiping it away, I promised myself right then and there that it would be the last tear I ever shed for the man who held my heart.

Walking out into the bright sun, I headed for the waiting car at the curb. Handing my driver my bags, I hopped into the back seat of the car to find my cousin Maria waiting. A solemn look on her face as she said nothing. What could she say? She knew the truth. She knew how I felt. In the end, as the car pulled away from the curb, she reached over and grabbed my hand, giving it a slight squeeze.

Forty minutes later, the car pulled up in front of St. John’s Presbyterian Hospital as Maria handed me the vase of long stem white roses she picked up for Tessa. Thanking her, I reached for the handle before asking, “Did Mrs. Rushton make it safely to the Harbor on 5th?”

“Yes. She will help Clara until you send for them.” Maria stated, then carefully questioned. “Illyria, are you sure this is what you want to do? You’ve made a life for yourself here. Everyone here will protect you. If you are worried about

Petrovitch, I can call in more cousins to help. He won't get close. I can promise you that."

"No, you can't. If it was just Max, I wouldn't worry but this man," I muttered, shaking my head as I thought of him. "Petrovitch will kill everyone that means anything to me to get his hands on me. It's too great of a risk. One I refuse to make."

"But to never see him again," Maria said, shaking her head. "He needs you."

Refusing to discuss the matter further, I exited the vehicle and walked into the hospital.

The second I stepped out of the elevator that took me up to the intensive care unit of the hospital, I saw several of the Soulless Sinner's. Each looked tired, worn out as they stood vigil around the door that separated them from the woman clinging to life on the other side.

"Mercy?"

The big man lightly shook his head. "It's bad, Illyria. August damn nearly lost her last night. What that fucker did to her. I've never seen anything like it."

"How is Montana?"

"Barely hanging on. If he loses her..."

Placing my hand on his arm, I stated firmly, "He won't lose her. She is a fighter. She will survive this."

Mercy sniffed. "He's in there with her. Won't leave her side."

"Let me try," I offered, as Virginia Stone walked over. "I will help you," she said, wiping her eyes. Nodding, I said nothing more as I opened the door and walked in.

Inside the room I came to a complete stop upon seeing Tessa lying motionless in the bed, hooked up to all kinds of machines that were working tirelessly to keep her alive. There wasn't a part of her body that I could see that wasn't bruised, cut, or raw. Montana sat beside her in a chair, his head laying on the bed, as he held her hand. The only sound in the room was the machines beeping and breathing for her.

“Montana?” I whispered, as he looked up at me. “I apologize for intruding, but I came to say sorry to Tess.”

He frowned his voice hoarse as he asked, “What do you have to apologize for?”

“Tessa visited the club the Friday before everything happened. She wanted her old job back and I said some things I shouldn’t have.”

“She sent me several texts that Friday. She said she knew the truth.”

I solemnly nodded. “Yes.”

He narrowed his eyes and growled, “What the fuck did you tell her?”

“Everything.”

“What do you mean, everything?”

“I was still butt hurt after the way she treated me at the Gala. I wasn’t thinking. I just wanted to get my revenge. So, I told her the truth. Everything you’ve kept from her. Once I started, I couldn’t stop. She knows about Barney, Graves, who her father is. I left nothing out.”

“Jesus Christ,” he groaned angrily. He was right to be. I was just as guilty as the man who hurt her. In my anger, I contributed to a chain of events that hurt her. “That’s why she texted and called. Why, Illyria? She was out. She wanted nothing to do with me anymore. She was going to take that job in West Virginia. She was going to be free.”

“No, she wasn’t,” Virginia spoke up cautiously, as George Stone and Maxim entered the room. “She wasn’t going anywhere.”

I tried not to react to him, but he stood right behind me. So damn close, I could feel his anger seeping into my pores. I should have known Vladmir would wake him the moment I left.

Motherfucker was loyal till the end.

“You fucking meddled again. Didn’t you? After I explicitly told you to stay the fuck out of my personal life, you couldn’t help yourself. What? What the fuck did you do now?”

Virginia flinched as her husband George growled, making her shrink as she admitted, “After Tessa broke it off with you, I remembered the offer at Charleston Memorial was still on the table. I knew she would take it and leave with York. When I called the director, he told me that Tessa accepted the position and would start Saturday, June 3rd. So, I had her served.”

“Excuse me?” Montana growled, sitting up. “Served with what?”

“Custody paperwork stating that she wasn’t allowed to leave the state until York was eighteen. That you wanted full custody if she took her son out of state. That if she stayed, you would share joint custody with York. I knew she wouldn’t fight it. She was broke, had no job and no family.”

“You BITCH!” he roared, jumping to his feet. “She would have been gone. She would have been safe!”

Virginia cried. “I’m so sorry, Montana.”

“Get out,” he growled furiously. “The both of you get the fuck out.”

George wasted no time, taking Virginia by the hand and removing her from the room as I bowed my head before turning to leave. Exiting the room, I handed Mercy the flowers I bought for Tessa and left the hospital, knowing I had just severed a long-time friendship that I loved.



I stared out the window, watching as everything I loved slowly got smaller and smaller. As the city faded away, I closed the blind and sighed. Reaching into my bag, I pulled out the small picture box I kept with me. Opening it, I stared at his face. The man I loved. The man I would always love. I knew then that there was nothing he could ever do to make me stop loving him. It was living with him I couldn’t handle. So much alike, yet so different. We wanted different things and would never see eye to eye.

The only way for either of us to find happiness was to live separate lives. He was better off without me, just as I was without him. No one would ever come close to him. I knew that now. It didn't matter who I met in the future. There would be no one for me but the Bloodletter.

As my hand ran over the picture next to his, I tried to control the tears that fell. Everything I've done and will do in the future was to ensure he lived. He had to live. And I was going to make sure he did.

Closing the frame, I wiped my tears and said, "Maria, it's time. Go tell the pilot our destination."

My cousin got up and walked to the front of the plane as I placed the picture frame back into my bag and reached for my phone. Dialing a number, I waited for the call to connect.

"Illyria!" Jackson's voice shouted. "Where the hell are you? Maxim is scouring the fucking city for you. Your apartment is vacant. What the hell is going on?"

"Jackson," I calmly said. "I'm sorry to put you in this position, but you owe me a debt and now it's time to collect."

My former friend and lover sighed. "Fine. What do you want me to do?"

After telling him what I needed, he cursed, "Jesus, fuck, Illyria. You are going to create a shitstorm. Are you sure about this because once I file the paperwork, he will lose his fucking mind? He's going to kill me. You know that, right?"

"It's the only way to protect him."

"Protect him! Have you lost your fucking mind? He's the fucking head of the East Coast Bratva. He can protect himself. That man is going to fucking make the city bleed until he finds you. Trust me when I say you do not want him to find you. Just come back and I'll help you figure something else out because this is suicide!"

"It's too late. I've made my decision. Just file the paperwork as soon as you can. And Jackson...don't disappoint me again."

"Fuck," he groaned. "I should have never left Alabama."

“No, you shouldn’t have. Goodbye Jackson,” I said, before disconnecting the call before dialing another number. This was one call I prayed I would never have to make. But with Petrovitch searching for me, I had no choice.

“Mrs. Valentinetti. How may I help you?” the familiar stern voice said.

“Mr. Law, I am invoking the protection clause in my contract.”

“For how long?”

“Two weeks should be long enough. I’ve wired the funds into the agreed account.”

“I will see to everything, ma’am. Will that be all?”

“Promise me. I need to hear you say the words, Mr. Law.”

“On my honor, ma’am. Nothing will harm them.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, ending the call and placing my phone back in my bag. Laying my head back, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I’ve done everything I could to ensure his safety. It was out of my hands now.

“Illyria,” Maria whispered.

Opening my eyes, I looked up at my cousin.

“We should arrive in Ireland in five hours. Is there anything else you need me to do?”

“No Maria. Rest, because when we land, it’s time to start hunting.”

Chapter Seventeen

Maxim

“WHERE THE FUCK IS SHE?!”

It had been one week since Illyria vanished into thin air. Nobody knew where the fuck she was. Not even her family, who were out searching, digging, going over every place she could possibly be.

The last time I laid eyes on her was at the hospital where Montana tore into her and his mother after their involvement with Tessa's capture. Though their hearts were in the right place, my friend was in no state of mind to listen to reason. When I left, it was to find my woman gone.

No one knew where she went.

When I returned to her penthouse at Davenport Tower, it was to find the place empty, as if she had never lived there at all. Even Mrs. Rushton, her trusted housekeeper, was gone. If it was just Illyria, I wouldn't have been too concerned. Moya Lyubov was known to take off when the mood suited her, but she always returned.

However, knowing that Mrs. Ruston was gone, well, that didn't bode well for anyone. Illyria never did anything without Mrs. Rushton. The woman had been with her since birth. Doted and loved on her like a second mother. There wasn't a damn thing that Illyria didn't confide in Mrs. Ruston about and with the woman gone too, that meant only one thing. That Illyria wasn't coming back.

“Boss,” Rurik, one of my trusted guards, said. “We've looked everywhere. She's not in the city.”

“She has to be somewhere!” I roared, slamming my hands down on my desk. I needed her found, and fast. I couldn't protect her if I didn't know where she was. Petrovitch was still in the city searching for her, too. If he found her before I did... I shivered at the thought.

No. I was going to find her and lock her ass down. I was tired of playing these petulant games of cat and mouse with her.

It ended now. The sooner I found her, the faster I could come up with a plan to eviscerate the motherfucker who was causing so much trouble.

“Boss,” Nikandr said, walking into my office, dragging Jackson Deveroux behind him, before throwing him into a chair in front of my desk. The former lover and attorney looked scared. He should be. I was still considering putting a bullet in his brain for touching what belonged to me. He was only breathing at the moment because *Moya Lyubov* asked me not to hurt him. But my patience was wearing thin and without knowing where she was, I wasn’t above shedding some blood.

Even if it was his.

Waiting impatiently for someone to say something, Nikandr slapped Jackson on the back of the head and growled, “Speak!”

“Jesus!” Jackson groaned, rubbing the back of his head. When Nikandr reached for his gun and placed it at Jackson’s temple, Loverboy raised his hands in defeat. “Fine! I’ll speak. Just don’t shoot me!”

“I’m waiting,” I growled.

“Illyria had me file divorce papers a week ago. I got a judge to sign off on them. Your divorce will be final in thirty days.”

“Which judge?”

“Judge Matthews. Over at city hall. It’s too late. The courts filed the papers. You can’t stop it.”

I smirked. “That’s what you think. Rurik, call Virginia Stone. Tell her to make it go away today. If she can do it within the hour, I will owe her a marker. Then you and Aleksandr find this judge,” I said, getting to my feet.

Reaching for my coat, I walked around my desk as Loverboy quickly asked, “What about me?”

Putting my coat on, I looked at the smarmy fucker and asked, “What about you?”

“I just did what she asked!”

“You didn’t work for her. You worked for me.”

“I owed her!”

“You didn’t owe her anything. You owed me because I let you live after touching what was mine. I don’t give second chances. You know that. Goodbye Mr. Deveroux.”

Walking out of my office, I never flinched when I heard the retort of Nikandr’s gun going off. Vladimir fell in line right behind me as I left my house in upstate New York and headed back to the city.

I had a judge to see.



Walking out of the judge’s house, I headed for my car, climbing into the backseat. Vladimir, following as Aleksandr started the vehicle, driving away, Rurik sitting beside him.

“Call Dmitry and have the clean-up crew take care of the mess.”

“Mrs. Stone called. She’s taken care of the problem as if it never happened.”

“Good.”

“Montana called. He needs to talk.”

“He say why?”

“No boss,” Vladimir muttered. “Only that you would want to hear what he had to say.”

Sighing, I nodded. “Aleksandr. To Stone House.”

“He also informed me that Giovanni Valentinetti will be at the meet.”

“So, big brother has finally left his island,” I smirked. “Anything on Illyria?”

“No boss. Like us, every stone we’ve kicked over has resulted in nothing. Your wife has left no trail.”

“I taught her well.”

“Too well,” Vladimir groaned. “Look, boss, every Bratva organization around the world is looking for her. That’s not including the Mafia families. Now, Montana has entered his club in the hunt. She is the most wanted woman on the planet. There is no place she can hide. We will find her.”

“We need to find her first.”

“We will boss. You need to give us time.”

“It’s been a week already.”

Vladimir said nothing more.

What could he say? He knew the longer she was out there, the easier it would be for Petrovitch to find her. I wasn’t the only one with a long reach. It was now a race to find the elusive woman.

An hour later, the car pulled into the underground garage of Stone House. Exiting the car, Mercy and Malice greeted me. Both men looked tired but rested. After shaking hands, I followed them into my friend’s house.

“Good evening, Maxim,” Mrs. Alice, Montana’s longtime housekeeper, greeted me with a smile. Bending down, I kissed the lovely woman on the cheek. “Mrs. Alice, you look lovelier every time I see you. Thank you for having me in your home.”

Mrs. Alice was an institution in the city. Everyone knew who she was. Respected and loved dearly by all that met her, she and her ancestors before, devoted their lives to Stone House. When Montana’s parents so-called retired from life, they passed down Stone House to Montana. As my friend put it... Mrs. Alice came with the house.

“You are most welcome. Montana is waiting for you in his office. You know the way. I will bring in refreshments shortly.”

“Thank you.”

“This way, Maxim.”

Following Mercy deeper into the house, I found Montana in his office sitting behind his desk going over paperwork.

Turning, I looked at Vladmir and said, “Play nice with the bikers.”

My second groaned but nodded.

Closing the office door behind me, I removed my coat, hanging it on the coat rack near the door, before taking a seat on the leather couch.

“Got a coded message last night,” Montana said, getting right to the point.

“And how is our mole?”

“He thinks he has a lead on Illyria.”

Sitting up, I growled, “Where?”

“He didn’t say. Said he will send more if it pans out.”

Jumping to my feet, I roared vehemently. “I’m going to kill him myself with my bare hands. I’m going to rip his head off and piss down his windpipe. I’m going to shove his dick so far up his ass he can suck his own dick! I’m going to pull his arms from their sockets and beat him to death with them.”

Montana grinned, sitting back in his leather winged back chair. “Geez, Max, tell me how you really feel about him?”

“Does he know the danger she is in? Does he fucking care?!”

“I think out of all of us, he knows the most. He’s been with Petrovitch these last two years. He knows what the fucker is capable of. Hell, we all saw what the son of a bitch did to my Tess, and she was only with him for nine hours. Trust me, we all want to find Illyria. None, more so than our mole.”

Plopping back down on the sofa, I sat forward, holding my head in my hands. “I don’t know how to handle this. I’ve lived my whole life not getting attached to anyone and then she falls into my lap and everything changes. I’m not good with feeling shit. I never have been. Feelings make people do stupid things. I’m not thinking clearly. All I see when I close my eyes is her face in pain, hurt, begging me to save her.”

“She’s running, Maxim. Hell, my Tessa did the same thing when she learned the truth. You don’t think Illyria figured out

what we've been doing, do you? And that's why she took a runner?"

"No. There's no way. Only you and I know the truth."

"Well, something made her run. Help me out here, Max. What would cause Illyria Valentinetti to drop everything and disappear into thin air? We figure that out, then we'll know how to find her. She had everything she needed here. We gave it all to her. She was protected. Safe. The only thing that makes sense is that she learned something and started questioning everything."

I shook my head. "She didn't learn anything from me. I was careful. If you are right and she's searching, then we better figure out what it is she's looking for fast, because if I know Illyria like I think I do, then we're in trouble. That woman will leave no stone unturned until she's satisfied with her results."

Montana sighed, leaning back in his chair. "I know. She's like a dog with a bone."

I chuckled at that as someone knocked on the door.

Looking up, we both watched as Mrs. Alice brought in a tray laden down with food. Placing it on the side table near the wall, she turned and said, "Use plates. I just cleaned this room yesterday."

"Yes, ma'am," the both of us said quickly.

"Oh, and Mr. Valentinetti is here."

"Send him in." Montana kindly ordered.

Mrs. Alice smiled as Giovanni walked in, nodding to Mrs. Alice as she left the office.

"Thought you were in retirement?" Montana smiled, leaning forward.

"So did I," Giovanni muttered grumpily, as he removed his gloves and coat. "Any word on my sister before I get started with the reason for this visit?"

Both of us shook our heads.

Giovanni sat, unbuttoning his suit jacket and began. "Got a call from a former contact of mine in the IRA. He told me this

amazing story. Would either of you like to hear about it? Or do you two gentlemen already know?"

I looked over at Montana, who steeled his face but said nothing. When neither of us spoke up, Giovanni continued, "I learned that the IRA has picked a side. Now I thought that was rather odd considering they generally stay to themselves, preferring to keep their hands in many pots, so to speak. Taking into consideration that you, Maxim, contract with the IRA for shipping and receiving of your goods across the pond, and you, Montana, use them for your weapon disbursement in Europe. Tell me, gentlemen, why would the IRA sever ties with both of you and back Petrovitch? What do they know that we don't?"

"That makes no sense," Montana frowned. "They wouldn't. We pay them handsomely."

"He's right. I've been using the IRA for my shipping line for years. Never had a problem with them before."

Reaching into his suit jacket, Giovanni pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to me. "Maybe this has something to do with it."

Opening the paper, I stared at Illyria's face.

"What the fuck is this?"

"My sister's face on a wanted poster. My contact sent it to me. They are all over Ireland and in England. There is a bounty on my sister's head."

Handing the paper to Montana, I got to my feet and started pacing again. The implications of the IRA siding with Petrovitch were profound. There was only one reason they would sever ties and side with a man like him and it had nothing to do with their cause. It was strictly monetary. They wanted the money.

Montana whistled. "Damn. A hundred mill for one woman."

"Which means my sister is now the most wanted woman on the planet. Those flyers have hit the dark web. They are everywhere. Petrovitch is willing to pay anyone to deliver her into his hands. Whatever his reasoning for wanting Illyria is

more than any of us thought. He doesn't just want Illyria to get to you, Maxim. There is another reason. No man in any position of power would fork over that kind of money for a woman, regardless of who she was. No. There is a specific reason for his desire to get my sister."

"And only she would know what it was," Montana whispered, placing the paper on his desk. "Maxim, she knows something. Something big. You know her the best. What could Illyria possibly know that has the eyes of the world on her."

Shaking my head, I couldn't think of a single thing.

"She never really confided in me. Not like most women do when they are in a relationship. Our relationship had boundaries. I never talked about my business with her, and she never talked about her family business with me. We both come from two different worlds. We knew that going in. Our lives never mixed."

"Well, something did, and it peaked my sister's interest because she's out there somewhere digging. I know Illyria. She won't stop until she's found every thread of evidence. Whatever she's learned, it's going to get her killed if we don't find her before Petrovitch does."

"Maybe we're looking at this the wrong way," Montana muttered, looking at the paper again. "Illyria is a business savvy woman. Smart, cunning and can throw down with the best of them. She doesn't do anything without knowing exactly how it will turn out. Maybe this isn't so much about what she's learned but maybe something she's protecting."

"You can't seriously think that my sister is protecting Fedorov? She knows the man can take care of himself."

Montana nodded. "I agree. It's not Maxim. It's something else. Something that she cares deeply for, would even kill to protect."

"Funny you say that, Montana. There is only one thing that I know of that Illyria truly cares for in this world more than herself and it's her family. So, I found it odd that shortly after Illyria arrived in New York, she called me wanting to discuss our Uncle Colin Buchannon, Dwayne and Reggie's father. I

thought it odd, considering she was small when he left our family. Do either of you know why Illyria would suddenly become interested in a man she barely remembered?”

I carefully looked at Montana, who steeled his features.

Giovanni shook his head. “You know, this was one of the main reasons I left the game. All the damn secrets. I tired of them, but I learned something valuable from my time in the thick of things. Knowledge was power. Those who have it and those who will kill to obtain it. So, I called the one person on the planet who could possibly know what the hell my sister was going on about. I don’t have to tell either of you who I called. What he told me got me thinking long and hard about everything that’s happened over the last few years. A lot of instances that made no sense. Like how did Reaper know exactly when the Society would attack at the wedding? Or how he found the heads of the Society? But my favorite mystery is why would a man who dearly loved his wife, who never thought twice before killing for her, suddenly change course and destroy the very thing he lived for? Then it hit me.”

Giovanni smirked, looking at both of us. “My dear friend knew the threat to his beloved wouldn’t end with just the Society. There was someone else. Someone none of us considered. The middleman. He knew as long as the middleman lived, there was still a threat to his woman. Only my friend couldn’t get to him because he was untouchable. So, he asked for help. He couldn’t ask me because my family business rarely left Chicago, but you two are global. Both of your organizations have a reach my family will never have. I think Reaper knew that and reached out to you two. I also believe that you two were in on this from the beginning. Feeding Reaper information as you learned it, allowing my friend to take all the chances while you two reaped the rewards and when my friend became too big of a threat to your endgame, you had him killed. Correct me if I’m wrong, gentleman, because I’m just getting started.”

Fuck!

Sitting down, I looked at Montana, who stared blankly at Giovanni Valentinetti. The fucking Italian was right.

Well, mostly, but not about all.

Chapter Eighteen

Illyria

“Damn it, Sypher. I am standing right where you told me to. There is nothing here.” I shouted into my phone as I looked around the vast green Irish hills around me.

I was standing in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of Ireland, looking at nothing but green hills as the wind whipped around me. Nothing for miles except lush green fucking hills. I liked nature, but this was too much nature for me. Plus, it was fucking cold here.

“It has to be. According to the current maps of the area, there is a small cottage no more than five kilometers from the road. Did you stop when I told you to?”

Growling, I sneered, “Yes, I did, you idiot. I’ve followed all of your instructions to the letter. Now, where is the damn cottage?”

“I’m telling you, Ms. Illyria. It should be right there!”

“Well, it’s not!”

“Maybe you didn’t walk far enough?” he muttered.

“I walked until you told me to stop!”

“Begging your pardon lass, but who are you talking to?”

Turning quickly, I stared at a behemoth of a man. Standing well over six foot six, with flaming red hair, wearing jeans, a flannel shirt and a wool overcoat, the man cocked his head as he stared at me like a fool.

“I’m sorry can you repeat that?” I said quickly, hanging up on Sypher. I would deal with him later. Right now, I needed someone who knew the area and this man would do just fine.

“An American,” the big man sighed, walking away.

“Wait a minute. Maybe you can help me!” I shouted, chasing after him. “I’m looking for a cottage that belonged to Colin Buchannon.”

The big man stopped, and turned to face me, glaring he asked, "What are ye wanting with my brother?"

"Brother?" I asked, only deciphering the last word he said.

Well, at least I hoped it was what he said. My Irish brogue wasn't much better than my Russian.

"That's right, brother."

"Colin was my uncle. I'm the cousin to his sons, Dwayne and Reginald Buchannon."

"You're the Italian. The Galway girl."

"That's right," I smiled up at the man. "That's what Dwayne called me. My dad's sister, my aunt Daniella, married Colin."

"You best leave, lass. Ain't safe here," the big man said, walking away again.

Jesus Christ. Didn't anyone have any information for me?

Sighing, I raced after him. "Why? Why is it not safe for me?"

"IRA."

"Who?"

The man stopped again, looked around, then leaned forward and whispered. "The IRA lass. Irish Republican Army. They're everywhere."

"I don't understand. What would they want with me?"

Once again, the big man walked off as if I was annoying him. Maybe I was, but he was the first lead I had since Sypher told me about that fucking file. I had no damned idea what I was looking for or what I would find, but something in my gut told me I would find answers here.

I followed the man for what felt like miles. My fucking feet were killing me and thanks to wherever he was going, I lost my cell service about an hour ago. Wherever the big man was going, he didn't seem to be upset that I was following him. Not like I had any other options. According to him, he was my uncle

Colin's brother. That meant he was family. Only no family I ever met. But family was family.

Well, that's what my dad and mom always drilled into me.

The sun was setting by the time we made it to a small cottage nestled near a hill. It wasn't much, but the smoke coming out of the stone chimney told me it was dry and warm inside.

"Please, I need help," I begged, as the man kept walking. "I need to find my uncle's cottage."

"Why?"

"Because I just do. It's important."

"Why?"

My God. He was just as annoying as Dwayne and Reggie. Neither of them could just come right out and tell me what I wanted to know without asking a million questions first. It had to be their Irish roots. Because no Italian could be this aggravating.

"Mr. Buchannon, please. I've come a long way. I'm tired and I just want to know where my uncle's cabin is. I think he left something behind. Something that will shed light on what I'm dealing with."

Well, it was technically the truth.

Kind of.

He didn't need to know that I was being hunted by a sadistic son of a bitch hell bent on destroying my soon to be ex-husband. I just wanted to know why Petrovitch had a file with my uncle's information.

"Told ya I don't know nothing. Now leave before we both find ourselves in a lot of trouble."

"What trouble?"

"IRA."

"What does the IRA have to do with my uncle?"

"Not your uncle, lass. You."

Now that stopped me short. “What?”

“They are looking for you. You best leave while you can. If they find you, they will sell you to the Russian for money.”

I didn’t need a translator for that.

I understood him clearly.

“Told you it wasn’t safe here for you. There is a bounty on your head. Pictures of you everywhere. You best leave now.” The big man said, walking into his cottage, only to return moments later, handing me a small leather-bound book, held together with a leather strap.

“Take this. Told him I didn’t want any part of this mess. He said someone would come for it. Guess that’s you. Now leave,” he said, before slamming his door in my face.



It was close to midnight by the time I walked back into my hotel room. After trekking all the way back over the Irish hillside, I finally made it to my car and quickly drove myself back to civilization.

Dropping my bag on the small table near the door, I wasted no time calling Sypher back. Ignoring the time difference, I didn’t give a damn if he was studying or sitting in a class. If he knew what was good for him, he better answer the damn phone.

Sitting on the small couch in my room, I kicked off my shoes, sighing as I stretched my toes in the thick carpet. Reaching for the leather-bound journal my uncle’s brother gave me, I untied the leather strap and opened the book, unsure of what I would find.

What I wasn’t expecting was to find most of the pages written in a mix of Russian, English and a language I never seen before.

What the hell? How did this journal end up in the hands of my uncle’s brother? How did he get this? Who gave it to him?

Flipping through the pages, most of it was undecipherable. I didn't speak Russian or the chicken scratch I assumed, was another language. However, a few items stood out, like the names Tessa Jackson, Remi Anderson, Layla Franks, and my name, to name a few. The only connection to all of us was the fact we were all involved with leaders of their respective organizations. Tess belonged to Montana, Remi belonged to Reaper, Layla was married to Giovanni, and I was with Maxim. What I also found alarming was the names attached to ours.

It didn't take me long to figure out what I was looking at.

This was a hit list.

It had to be.

A way to hurt and dismantle major organizations.

From my estimations, someone was going after the families of the head of each organization. The ramifications, if this person succeeded, would cause a war unlike anything anyone had ever seen.

Reaching for my phone, I dialed Sypher.

I needed help to decipher this ledger, and he was the only one who could help. The youngest son of Moonshine, the former President of the Tennessee Chapter of the Golden Skulls, Sypher had a gift for information and technology. The kid surpassed everyone's expectations. The best in the business, Sypher was away at college, getting an education while still helping when he could. Sypher didn't believe in division. He helped everyone and because of his ability to keep secrets, he was instrumental in many organizations, like my family and the Soulless Sinners', just to name a few.

"Ms. Illyria?" he sighed, sounding relieved to get my call. "You had me worried."

"I'm safe, Sypher. I found something. Well, given something, but I can't read most of it. It looks like a ledger, maybe a journal, but I can't read it."

"Not a problem. Snap a few pictures of the first couple of pages and send them to me. Let me see what I can find."

Doing as he said, I quickly snapped off several pictures and texted it to him.

“Okay. I got them. Um, well... It’s a mix of Russian, English and Gaelic?”

“Gaelic?”

“Yeah. Whoever wrote this wasn’t very good at either languages. It’s almost as if whoever wrote it was trying to write in code. For example, the first page is a jumble mess of misspelled Russian words. Almost as if whoever wrote them was using the phonetic spelling of each word to remember them.”

“So, whoever owns this journal isn’t Russian?”

“That would be my guess. The words written in English are atrocious, almost as if whoever wrote them didn’t bother with correct spelling and don’t even get me started on the Gaelic. How many pages are in this journal?”

“Quite a few.” I started taking more pictures before sending them to Sypher. That’s when I noticed the dates. “At the top of each page is a date. The first entry is August 12th, 2021. That’s a little over two years ago, Sypher.”

“Ms. Illyria, I can’t do what I need to do without physically seeing the ledger. Is there any way you can get it to me?”

“I will get it to you in six hours,” I said, getting to my feet. I needed to know what was in this ledger. I knew it had something to do with Petrovitch. I felt it in my bones.

If Sypher could decipher the journal, maybe I could find a way to stop Petrovitch from destroying everything I loved.

“What do you mean? You’re coming here?” the kid sounded shocked and uneasy. Curious, I asked, “Is that going to be a problem?”

“Um, no. I just... well, I’ve never had a girl in my dorm-room before.”

I smirked. “I promise to keep my hands to myself. I’ll see you in a few hours, Sypher.”

Disconnecting the call, I hurriedly left my room and walked next door, knocking as I waited for Maria to answer. When she did, I quickly informed her of our travel plans, knowing she would make the arrangements.

Chapter Nineteen

Illyria

It was early the next day when I arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the MIT University Campus. Established in 1861, MIT has played a significant role in the development of many areas of modern technology and science. Only the best of the best went to MIT and Sypher was the best.

“Are you sure this kid can do what he says?” Maria asked, as she opened the side door to one of the dorm buildings.

“Yes. He’s the only one.”

“Hope you’re right, Illyria, because you are putting this kid in danger by involving him.”

“He knows the risks.”

“But do you? Petrovitch already got his hands on Tessa. What he did to her will feel like child’s play if he gets his hands on you and you know it. That man has a hard-on for you something fierce. You should have told Maxim the truth, or at least your brothers. This vendetta you are on will not end the way you plan. Let’s just go back to New York, grab Mrs. Rushton and Clara, and disappear.”

“I can’t do that. As long as Petrovitch is alive, he won’t stop searching.”

Maria grabbed my arm and angrily stated, “Listen to me, Illyria. I love you. I will always protect you, but this is asinine. If you continue down this path, Petrovitch will find you. Just tell Maxim the truth!”

Yanking my arm away from her, I shook my head. “I can’t. Not until the threat is gone.”

Maria sighed. “You’re making a big mistake, cousin. What will happen if Maxim learns the truth, only to find out that he could have prevented it? Have you even thought about what this will do to him? Do you even care? He’s a part of this too. He has a right to know!”

“I will tell him,” I sighed. “When I end Petrovitch.”

“You don’t get it!” Maria shouted, making me jump. She never yelled at me. In all the years we’ve known each other, she’s always been the calm and collected one. “You can’t stop Petrovitch. Not by yourself. There is no harm in asking for help, Illyria. I do it all the time. Hell, Giovanni didn’t think twice before asking the Golden Skulls for help. Montana asked Maxim for help. Your stubborn nature is going to get you killed. Enough of this nonsense. Call Maxim!”

“If you don’t want to be here, then leave!” I shouted back angrily. “I will finish this myself.” Turning, I stormed up the stairs, not bothering to see if she was following me. She made herself perfectly clear. She thought I couldn’t handle one man. That’s all he was.

One man.

Albeit a vile, egotistical and dangerous man, but he was still just a man. From the moment that bastard learned Maxim was interested in me, he’s made my life a living hell. Always showing up at venues when he wasn’t invited. Or if he was, he would watch me like a hawk, waiting for any inconsistencies. On the few times he spotted me and Maxim together, I would catch him grinning wickedly as he disappeared within the crowd.

At first, I thought I was imagining it, but now I knew I wasn’t.

The man was looking for something. Waiting, watching my every move. Even when I broke things off with Maxim, he never left me alone. Sending his goons to the Valentinetti Corp. where I worked.

I grew up in this life. I knew when I was being watched.

Then the unthinkable happened and I knew the only way to keep anyone from learning the truth was to fade into the background. So, I stepped back from society. Moved my office from the Valentinetti Corp. to my penthouse in Chicago until the whispers started. That’s when I disappeared in the dead of night, only to emerge when it was safe.

Petrovitch wasn’t the only left scratching his head. Everyone was. My family, friends, acquaintances, even Maxim.

For three months, nobody knew where I was. For those short months, I was free. But I knew it wouldn't last. At that time, I did everything I could, reached out to others, not associated with any organization, for help. By the time I re-entered society, I made sure my secret would stay secret, even after my death.

Only when I eliminated the threat would I tell everyone the truth.

I may be just a woman, but I was the daughter of Valentino and Nicoletta Valentinetti. If anyone thought I would roll over and lay down and let a man dictate to me how I was going to live and protect me, they didn't know me at all.

My father and mother taught me well.

Firm in my resolve, I knocked on the door just as it opened to reveal a grown man. No longer the gangly goth kid I remembered, but now a young man stood before me. Tall and muscular, Sypher stayed true to his roots. He still had his shaggy black hair that hung too low, covering his face and tattoos on every inch of skin I could see. The young man smiled shyly. "Hi, Ms. Illyria."

"Oh my," I grinned, looking him up and down. "You have changed, haven't you?"

Sypher blushed. "Yes, ma'am."

Hugging the boy I remembered, now several inches taller than me, I whispered, "It's good to see you."

"You too," he said, patting my back uncomfortably before taking a step back, letting me pass.



Confused, I rubbed my temple. "English, Sypher. Not all of us have your brain. I need you to dumb this down for me."

We had been going over the journal for hours. After he uploaded every single page into his computer, Sypher wasted no time running his analysis and doing whatever it was he did. We

quickly learned that it was a diary of sorts. A testimonial and an account of one individual's last few years.

"See here," he said, pointing to an entry in the journal. "The author scribbled. He was in a rush, almost as if he didn't have time to write everything down. He does this every few months."

"What does the chicken scratch have to do with figuring out what Petrovitch wants with me?"

"It doesn't."

"Sypher," I moaned. "Help me out here. Please make sense!"

"I think whoever wrote in the journal is a mole."

That got my attention. Sitting up, I stated, "That means Petrovitch has someone in his organization that can be bought."

"Yes. But I think this mole already works for someone."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because these entries coincide with dates of big parties."

"What do you mean? What parties?"

"All these dates where the mole hurriedly scribbles. They are dates of big galas, banquets, balls, etcetera. Fancy parties that not only you've attended but so has Montana Stone and Maxim Fedorov."

"Are you suggesting this mole is working for one of them?"

Sypher nodded. "Or both. It's the only thing that makes sense. Why would Mr. Stone or Mr. Fedorov have a mole in Petrovitch's organization?"

"I'm more worried about who they talked into doing such an asinine thing? I mean, to go into an organization like Petrovitch's with no kind of backup is suicide. Whoever it is must have known that if he got caught, it would be an instant death sentence."

"Or it was someone who had nothing to lose. Someone who could talk himself out of anything. Whoever the mole is,

he's in trouble. The last entry was the night Montana raided the Gentlemen's Club and discovered Benson Graves files. There is nothing after that."

"What about my name and the others, Remi, Layla and Tessa? Have you found anything about them? And what about the name Arianwen?"

"Well, that's where it gets weird," Sypher said, turning back to his computer, typing fast.

I chuckled. "You mean it's not weird enough yet?"

"Oh, it's weird, but look at this. I found this on page three. It's about Remi."

"What does he say?"

"It's written in Gaelic. Anytime the author or mole writes about you ladies, he does so in Gaelic. Almost as if protecting you all somehow. Gaelic is a dying language. Few people left on earth can read or write it. He takes care when writing these passages, almost as if he's concentrating, putting a lot of thought into them."

"What does he say?"

"Well, for starters, in this passage, he's apologizing to Remi. Something about his part in her big day. He says he never meant to cause her so much anguish."

"Big day?" I muttered. "Her wedding?"

Sypher nodded. "The entry date was days after, but then the only other entry regarding Remi was months ago, where he once again apologizes for his part in causing her more pain and hopes that one day, she can forgive them."

"Them?"

"That's what he wrote. I looked it up three times to make sure I had the correct translation. He wrote '*them*'. Then he wrote, pleading with her to forgive him."

"It's almost as if he is talking about someone else?"

"That was my thought, too."

"What about Layla?" I asked curiously.

“There is only one entry that mentions Layla. He apologizes for not realizing the truth sooner. That he tried to stop her cousin’s betrayal but was too late.”

“He has to be talking about when Carmine betrayed Layla. He died for that betrayal, too.”

Sypher nodded.

“What about Tessa?”

“He talks about her father and protecting her son. That she isn’t safe. That he wished he could have done more to protect her. He warns her that her friend is not a friend but the lover of the boss. He talks about the plans his boss has for her and how it disgusts him. This entry is at the end of the journal. Whoever this is, has had enough. He wants out.”

“He’s talking about Tia. She handed Tessa over to Petrovitch. Tessa is still recovering from her time with that bastard.”

“Ms. Illyria, most of the entries where he writes in Gaelic are about you. Your life. The danger you’ve put yourself in. He fears he won’t be able to protect you. But there is one particular entry I want to read to you. It’s dated almost six months ago. It’s the only entry that I can’t make heads or tails about. It reads... *I can’t stop him. He searched far and wide for the truth and now he knows. He won’t stop until both of you are dead. Please, oh please do the right thing for once in your life. Because I fear when the time comes, there will be nothing I can do. I can’t lose you too.*”

“Knows what?”

Sypher shrugged. “He doesn’t say.”

Just then his computer dinged. Turning back to his monitors, Sypher started typing something into his computer when he sighed. “Well, this isn’t good?”

“What isn’t?”

Sypher turned to me and said. “I know who Arianwen is and you’re not going to like who or where she is?”

Chapter Twenty

Maxim

This was turning into a clusterfuck.

Sitting at the table surrounded by the heads of all the major families, major players, along with Montana, I listened as Giovanni ranted endlessly. I understood why he was angry. He had every right to be, but he was out of the game. The second he walked away and handed Salvatore the reins, he stopped being on Petrovitch's radar. If he was smart, he'd get back on his plane and never look back.

"Say something!" Giovanni roared, slamming his hands on the table.

Sighing, I took a deep breath and looked my brother-in-law dead in the eye. "I don't owe you any explanation."

"No, but you owe me one," Sal muttered, turning his head towards me. "As the head of the Valentinetti Family, I have a right to know, Fedorov. My family has an alliance with the Golden Skulls. We swore to give them aid when needed. My sister-in-law is the blood bonded sister to Reaper. We are family."

"I'm confused. Who is the head of the Valentinetti Family now?" Montana countered point blank, pissing both Giovanni and Salvatore off even more.

I knew Montana was deflecting the conversation.

We both knew what was coming.

"Why would Reaper do this? I got he wanted the Society to believe the Golden Skulls were dead, but his plan didn't work. Did it? No, because in the end, it took all of us to bring them down. So, what was the plan for Petrovitch?" Ghost asked, sitting at the table.

The acting President of the Golden Skulls looked disgusted as he shook his head. If anyone understood Reaper and the way his mind worked, it was Ghost. "Let me guess.

Reaper knew the plan wouldn't work and made a contingency plan.”

When I stayed silent, Ghost cursed, getting to his feet shaking his head. “Motherfucker. That's it. I'm done. I warned Reaper no more lies. Fuck him and fuck all of you. You want to continue to play these games, then you can do so without the Golden Skulls. We're out.”

“Sit down,” Montana growled, narrowing his eyes at the man. The room went deathly silent as my men, along with the Soulless Sinners, stepped forward.

This meeting would not end well.

Ghost smirked. “Fuck you, Montana. You don't get to tell me what to do with my club.”

“I said sit the fuck down, you fucking pussy bitch,” Montana menacingly reiterated.

No one moved.

Not even me.

I'd heard rumors of Montana Stone's vile temper but had never seen it. Though I was positive if Ghost refused Montana, all of us were about to see a side of my friend that was rarely seen. When Ghost refused to move, Malice and Payne stepped up behind him and pushed him back down into his seat. Holding him there as he tried to fight his way free.

Getting to his feet, Montana growled angrily as he bent over, placing his hands on the table. “You think you can talk to me that way? You should thank me, you fucking cunt! Instead of working with Reaper to solve the problem, you hid behind his skirts, then bolted when he needed you the most. He was the motherfucking President of your club and you left him. Where was your fucking loyalty? I show up to help you get rid of the Satan's Angels and where the fuck were you, Ghost? Hiding in a fucking safe room like some little bitch! You are not fit to wear that patch! All of you should be thanking Maxim, Reaper and I. At least we had the motherfucking balls to act! You should all be thanking us!”

Getting to my feet, I placed my hand on Montana's shoulder as he turned and roared before punching a hole in the nearest wall.

"Gentlemen, let me break this down in simple terms for you," I said, knowing it was time to tell them everything. Our plan lasted longer than we thought. Almost two years and in that time, our mole gathered a plethora of information. Now that the secret was out, it was time to bring the other families into the fold. "When you all took out the Society, you forgot one important actor. The middleman. The man who worked with all the players. A man with nothing to lose and so much to gain. When you killed off the major actors of the Society, you did his job for him and now he's doing exactly what Reaper, Montana and I thought he would."

"He is cleaning up loose ends," Renaldo Romero stated, sitting back in his chair.

"It's more than that. Petrovitch wants all of us. Me more so than all of you. You should know, Ghost, it wasn't Reaper who reached out to us. It was me who reached out to him."

"What?"

"Boss," Vladimir whispered. "You don't have to explain anything to them. They won't understand."

Holding up my hand, I stopped my second.

The time had come for everyone to learn the truth.

"The Golden Skulls weren't the only ones trying to get rid of the Society, Ghost. Contrary to your beliefs, the Society didn't really care that much about your little motorcycle club. The Golden Skulls are chump change compared to my organization or the Soulless Sinners, who are global. We are two organizations the Society couldn't infiltrate and desperately needed to if they wanted to move forward with their plan. You think your club made a dent in their organization by saving all those people? You didn't even scratch the surface. You were a nuisance, an annoying fly."

"The same goes for you, Giovanni," Montana said firmly, walking over to stand next to me. "Your family is small. Only

covers Chicago. Though Bratva, Maxim's organization, is worldwide. He has contacts all over the world. Contacts that the Society coveted and desperately needed. When they couldn't get Fedorov to fall in line, they started going after the people connected to Maxim."

"My sister Dominika was a beautiful young girl with her whole life ahead of her until Petrovitch snuffed out her light. The night I fled Russia, I found Petrovitch and his goons raping my sister. I lost it and killed those I could. In the aftermath, it was only then that I realized in my bloodlust I killed my father as well. He tried to stop me from killing Petrovich. In the end, I fled Russia with my sister with a price on our heads. Once in America, my sister had a hard time assimilating into our new lifestyle. She disappeared shortly after. I looked everywhere for her, but she vanished. Many years later, thanks to you, Giovanni, I learned that a man named Moonshine, the President of the Tennessee Chapter of the Golden Skulls, gave my sister refuge in the hills of Tennessee near his clubhouse. During her time there, my sister lived a relatively peaceful life until she met and fell in love with James Doherty. They had a son, Dylan Franks Doherty, my nephew. Because of the fighting within the Golden Skulls, my sister fell victim once again when Sabastian Capribella raped my sister to get back at James Doherty, resulting in the birth of my niece Layla Franks Capribella."

Holding up my hand to stop Giovanni from interrupting, I continued, "When I learned what happened to my sister and then to my niece, I knew there was only one person on the planet who could be so vile, so indiscriminate that the bloodlines between families didn't matter. So, I started looking for him. He wasn't hard to find. I knew he wouldn't stop until every last drop of the Fedorov blood was gone from this earth. Only I didn't consider the carnage he would wreak along the way. When I learned his plan, I sought Reaper out. He knew more about the Society than any of us. He'd been fighting them his whole life. We agreed to work together. Those secret texts and calls he received, Ghost. They were from me. I was passing along information I found to help him do what he needed to do. Only it didn't work, as you all know. When

Petrovitch realized what Reaper and I were planning, he stepped away from the Society right before the Golden Skulls and everyone attacked. He was always one step ahead and we never could figure out why.”

“That’s where I came in,” Montana said. “All of you know Benson Graves. The motherfucking accountant worked for all of us for years before my dad learned he stole millions from us. We thought we killed the fucker, but we were wrong. Benson took what he learned from all of us and gave that information to Petrovitch.”

“But Benson never worked for Fedorov,” Giovanni muttered.

I nodded. “That’s right. I prefer to keep my accounting in house. A lesson my father taught me well.”

“I get Benson. I got Petrovitch. Hell, I understand Reaper and the Golden Skulls. What I don’t get is you, Fedorov. Where do you fall into all of this? Why seek out Reaper and ask for his help?” Renaldo asked, then frowned before adding, “You said your father tried to stop you from killing Petrovitch. Why?”

Shaking my head, I instead offered an explanation. “The Bratva differs from your Italian Mafia, Renaldo. While some things are the same, there is much that is different. Secrets run rapid within the Bratva. Secrets are money. Secrets mean life or death. But the main thing you must know is that the bloodline does not guarantee safety. The Bratva is about power. Who has it? Who wants it? And who’s willing to do anything to get it? Most of those in our organization were not born into the Bratva. They’ve earned the right, killed for it, lied for it, bled for the right to wear the Russian star. Where your mafia relies on customs and civility, the Bratva knows no such thing.”

Looking at Ghost, I added, “You think Reaper had secrets, Ghost? The secrets I keep would give you nightmares. Reaper did the only thing he knew to protect you, his club brothers, even the woman he dearly loved. When a man is at his breaking point, he will transform himself into the most vile

creature to save the ones that mean the most to him. He will do anything. He will even become the very evil she fears to ensure that she lives.”

“She was safe. He killed every threat to her and he still died,” Ghost countered, fuming with indignation. I knew at that moment he would never understand the lengths Reaper went to ensure his club survived.

“Did he?” I countered, fed up with this conversation.

None of them understood the gravity of the situation. They were still looking with blinders on. They needed to open their eyes and look between the lies. Petrovitch wasn't going away because they got rid of the Society. They all thought they were free to do as they pleased. They were going to get themselves killed if they didn't wake the fuck up.

“Boris Petrovitch isn't going to go away, gentlemen,” Montana stated. “He has every one of us on his radar. We are a threat to him and what he wants. You think this is a simple case of vendetta, but it's not. Petrovitch wants it all. We each have something he desperately wants. My club, Maxim's organization, to end the mafia. He is going to come at us with everything he's learned and that motherfucker had learned a lot about us thanks to Benson Graves. So, stop thinking small time and start thinking global.”

“He's going after our families, isn't he?” Salvatore muttered, before looking up at me. “More importantly, he's going after Illyria. He wants her to get to you because you two are married.”

I nodded. “He gets Illyria. He kills two birds with one stone. He will have my organization and he will destroy your family.”

“That's why you slept with that woman. It was the only way to push Illyria away.”

“Yes.”

Ghost sighed, hanging his head as he muttered, “Shit. Reaper did the same thing. We all thought it was odd, out of character for him to allow cut sluts back in the club. He knew

Remi hated them. Didn't want them around the kids. When he started spending more time with Wendy, we all thought he was finally losing his mind after everything that happened, but he wasn't, was he? He knew exactly what he was doing. He was still protecting Remi, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Montana affirmed, before I could.

"Why? What does Petrovitch want with Remi?" Ghost asked.

"It's not my secret to tell," I said, before carefully looking at Vladimir, who glared at me, slightly shaking his head. Looking back at Ghost, Montana offered, "All you need to know is that Remi is safe. Reaper ensured that."

"With his life," Ghost barely said.

I didn't react.

I couldn't.

Neither could Montana.

The secrets we held kept people alive. Kept the dangers at bay. We would only reveal the truth once we eradicated the threat.

Until then, everyone could believe what they wanted to believe.

Gathering my coat, I was done with the meeting. I'd already said too much when the club doors opened and in walked a disheveled and out of breath Maria Valentinetti, the personal bodyguard to Illyria. Frantic, the worried but pretty woman approached as I stepped forward when I realized Illyria wasn't with her.

"Maria, where is Illyria?" Salvatore beat me to the punch, walking over to her.

"You have to stop her," the woman said frantically, pleading with Salvatore before turning to me. "She's planned it all. Everything. But she's making a mistake. You have to stop her."

Salvatore frowned as I asked. "Where is Illyria, Maria?"

“She’s going after Petrovitch by herself. She thinks she can stop him. I tried to tell her she couldn’t. That she needed to tell you the truth, but she won’t listen.”

Chairs scooted roughly against the floor as men stood. Nobody said a word, the shock apparent. It was ludicrous to think of Illyria doing something so crazy. I knew my woman was head-strong and stubborn, but to go after Petrovitch herself was suicide.

She had to know Petrovitch would kill her.

“Why would she do something like that without bringing it to the table first?” Renaldo asked, moving closer. “She’s smarter than that.”

“Because Petrovitch is going after Valentinetti Corp. The company is in the middle of a hostile takeover. She found out Petrovitch was going after the company right before she came here. That’s why she agreed to take on the club. She needed a seat at the table to get more information on the bastard. She’s trying to stop him from bankrupting the family.”

“The family’s money isn’t in Valentinetti Corp. It never was. That company was something our father started to make us look legit,” Giovanni furiously admitted. “I gave her the damn company so she would stay the hell out of the family business. Father didn’t want her anywhere near it.”

“Where is she now, Maria?” Montana asked.

“She was in Cambridge, Massachusetts with Sypher when I left.”

Montana quickly turned, reaching for his phone and dialing a number.

“Mr. Fedorov, I tried to make her see reason. I even threatened to tell you everything, but she didn’t care. She’s determined to save the company and not bring shame upon the family.”

“Holy shit,” Salvatore cursed, as I stared at the worried woman. There was something more she wasn’t saying.

Taking the scared woman's hands, I led her back over to the table. Helping her to sit, we all retook our seats as I carefully said, "We need you to tell us everything, Maria. Start at the beginning."

Chapter Twenty-One

Illyria

“Sypher? This can’t be right. Are you sure about this place?” I whispered, looking at the rundown motel on the outskirts of Las Vegas, Nevada. When Sypher informed me who Arianwen truly was, I didn’t want to believe it. Not her. Not the sweet, shy woman who tended the bar at the Soulless Sinners clubhouse, named Silver. The young woman wasn’t much younger than me. I was having a hard time understanding how Silver could be on Petrovitch’s radar.

It made no sense.

Who was this woman, and did Montana know Petrovitch wanted her dead? With more questions than answers, I begged Sypher to accompany me on this fact-finding mission. Two heads were better than one, so to speak. After some wheeling and finagling, he agreed. I needed help in the worst way and with his keen eyes I knew we could figure this out fast.

Time was running out for me. I had one more week to gather all the information I could find and hopefully figure out a way to stop Petrovitch before he made the move to buy Valentinetti Corp. I refused to stand in front of my brothers and tell them I had failed. I couldn’t bring shame upon my family, not after everything we’ve already been through. I wouldn’t do it. My brothers entrusted me with the family company. I couldn’t let them down.

“I’m sure, Ms. Illyria. There wasn’t much on this woman. Almost like she just appeared out of nowhere. I mean, she’s got a driver’s license, social and a birth certificate, but someone issued them recently. Like months ago. Before that, nothing. She never existed.”

“I’ve met the woman, Sypher. Trust me. She exists. She lives and breathes the Sinners clubhouse. If she’s in that journal, then that means she knows something, and I want to know what it is. Maybe she can tell us who this damn mole is, or more importantly, why Petrovitch wants Maxim so damn

bad. I get that information, then I will know how best to handle him. Right now, I'm winging it. I need more answers."

"Well then, she would be the one to ask. She has no past."

"Everyone has a past."

"None that I can find and you know I can find anything."

Walking into the motel office, I tried not to cringe at my surroundings. The place smelled awful. The putrid stench was making my stomach queasy. The place was filthy. Trash and rotted food containers littered the desk.

"We're filled up," a grumpy voice said, from behind the desk.

Carefully walking closer, I laid eyes on an old man, chewing on a straw as he watched some black and white television with antenna ears held together by aluminum foil.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for someone."

"Ain't no one here,"

"A woman, about my age. Black hair with silver tips. Has tattoos running up and down her arms."

"She ain't here."

"So she's been here?"

"Said she ain't here."

"Do you know where she might be?"

"Try the old dirt track. Around twenty-five miles north. If she ain't there, she's gone."

"Thank you," I muttered, grabbing Sypher's wrist as I hurried out of the place.

It was a quiet drive as Sypher continued to look for information in the journal, scouring every page as to the identity of the mole or what Petrovitch's end game was. That journal was my only clue. I knew the answers were in there. Sypher just needed to figure out the clues the mole had left. I wanted this over with. I wanted my life back, and that wasn't going to happen as long as Petrovitch lived. I knew Maxim

would never tell me anything. He was bound by some damn code that prevented him from saying anything. My brothers were no better. They would do everything they could to keep me from learning the truth.

Even Montana would keep his trap shut.

They may have given me a seat at the table, but in their eyes, I was still a woman. I knew that going in. In their eyes, I would never be a major player. I would never hold a seat of power. Women were around for one thing and one thing only. To solidify a man's bloodline.

"Turn off up ahead," Sypher said, looking up from his computer. "The dirt track should be... oh crap!"

Looking at where he was pointing, I slowed the car to a stop as Silver stood in the middle of the road, legs a few inches apart, as she pointed a gun directly at us.

Turning off the engine, I whispered, "Let me handle this."

"Okay," Sypher muttered, his eyes glued to Silver.

Reaching for the journal, I got out of the car as a hot, southerly wind whipped around me, suffocating me. The air was thick with heat, making it hard to breathe. Cautiously walking forward, I heard her say, "You shouldn't be here, Illyria. He's looking for you, too."

"I know. That's why I'm here."

"You stupid bitch," Silver sighed, dropping her gun. "You are going to get both of us killed. You know that, right? Why do you think I left the only home I ever loved? I didn't leave because I wanted to. I left to protect them."

"Why does Petrovitch want you?"

Walking away, I followed Silver into a small guard shack near the entrance of the dirt track. The place looked abandoned, as if no one had used it in years. The place was small. No bigger than a shoebox. Sitting on the small cot, Silver sighed. "Does he know you are here?"

"Who?" I asked, grabbing a small wooden stool to sit.

“Montana? Malice? Your man. Take your pick.”

“No. None of them know. In fact, none of them know where I am. I left the city last week and haven’t returned.”

Silver looked at the door and muttered, “I wouldn’t if I were you. He’s looking for you. He knows everything. If he finds you, he will kill you.”

“Why does Petrovitch want you, Silver? How do you know him?”

“Let’s just say I am intimately acquainted with the son of a bitch and leave it at that,” She barely whispered, before looking at me. “He saw you the night of the Gala. Right before he shot up the place. He saw me too. That’s why I left. I stupidly thought if he only saw me, that maybe he would leave everyone else alone. I was wrong. I heard what happened to Tessa. Is she okay?”

“She’s recovering. Not sure about okay. Not after what he did to her, but she’ll live.”

“He didn’t...”

I shook my head. “No. He cut her. Drugged her and beat her, but no. He didn’t rape her.”

“She got lucky, then. That’s his preferred form of torture. He likes to hear women scream.”

I wouldn’t exactly say that Tessa was lucky. I saw what that bastard did to her. She would bear the scars of her time with him for the rest of her life. The nightmares she must be suffering I couldn’t fathom.

“Silver, do you know why Petrovitch wants me?”

“You have something that can hurt him.”

“You mean like my relationship with Maxim?”

Silver shook her head. “No. He doesn’t give a shit about your relationship. If anything, he would use you as a means to an end to kill Maxim. He really hates Mr. Fedorov. Like really loathes him. But you... for him to want you, that means you

have something or know something he wants. Only you can answer that question.”

“What did Tessa have that he wanted?”

Silver shrugged. “Nothing that makes sense. He toyed with her. That means she was a means to an end or the beginning of his game. He likes to play games, Illyria. What you need to understand about the son of a bitch is that he loves his games. He’s a master at them. Once he knows all the players, he will spend years learning everything he can about his opponents. Their likes, dislikes. What they love. What they hate. By the time he starts a game, he’s already won. That’s why I left.”

“Do you know why Petrovitch wants Maxim dead?”

Silver looked at me and nodded.

“Will you tell me?”

She slowly shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I promised.”

So, she knew the truth. The real reason Maxim was determined to kill the bastard. Knowing Maxim, it could be something big or something so miniscule that it didn’t matter. From what I knew about Maxim, was that he didn’t believe in second chances. Once he got someone in his sights, he wouldn’t stop until he bled the fucker. However, as much as I wanted to probe this conversation more, I knew Silver wouldn’t divulge anything.

This line of questioning was getting me nowhere. So, I went with the truth. “Petrovitch is buying Valentinetti Corp. My company. The company my family entrusted to me. I can’t stop him without help. If you know anything that could help me stop him, I will give you a marker.”

Silver laughed, holding her stomach as she gasped for air. I didn’t see what was so funny about what I said. I was deadly serious about the company. It was my baby. I lived and breathed that company. Because of the deals I’ve made, I’ve

solidified Valentinetti Corps' future, and I refused to let some two-bit thug waltz in and take everything away.

“You think he gives a flying fuck about your company, Illyria? Petrovitch doesn't want your damn company. He wants you. Women mean nothing to him. We are a means to an end. An easy way to get to what he really wants. The company is a smoke screen. A way to get close to you, to get to know you. Were you even listening when I said he likes to play games? The man isn't buying your company. He's buying you.”

I silently shook my head. She was wrong. My life was an open book. All Petrovitch had to do was look in the papers and he would know everything there was to know about me. No. He was going after my company for something more. And until I found out what that was, I wasn't letting up. I needed to know the answer.

“Listen and learn,” Silver stated, as she sat up and looked me dead in the eyes. “You are a pawn. Everything you think you know about the man is what he wants you to believe. The man you are fighting is cunning, wickedly smart and devious. He has no morals. He doesn't believe in the gentlemen's code like the others. Motherfucker probably pissed on the damn handbook if there is one. All Petrovitch cares about is solidifying his mark in the world and to do that, he needs to take out all the major players. This fucker doesn't give two shits about you or your family company. He wants Maxim. He's always wanted Maxim. He wants Montana. He wants it all, your family included. All the ports and the contacts, so he will be the top dog. He wants to control the underground. He wants to be the Czar.”

I shook my head. “No. That's impossible. None of the families would allow one man to rule over everything. It's unthinkable. It's never happened before. Not in the history of organized crime.”

“Think, woman,” Silver said, tapping her head. “Think of it like your stupid company. You have a board, right? Men and women who sit and help you do whatever it is you do. Now picture the heads of all the families around the world as your

board members and Petrovitch sitting in your spot. He would control everything. The shipping ports, the weapon trade, the skin trafficking, the drugs, everything. No one could do anything without his okay. That's his endgame. It has always been."

"But the families won't allow that," I whispered in disbelief.

"They won't be able to stop him. Like I said, he's playing a fucking game. Has been for years. He knows everything, Illyria. Just like he knows how to bring Maxim to heel."

"Me."

"Exactly. Women have always been a means to an end for him. You, Tessa, Layla, Remi, even me. We're connected to powerful men. Take us out of the game and the men in our lives will crumble. Do you honestly think Maxim Fedorov will do nothing if Petrovitch gets his hands on you? That man will bargain, sell everything, even give up his foothold on the East Coast to get you back. This war was never about you, me or the other women. It's about power. Who has it and who's willing to do anything to get it? And don't even get me started on the kids."

My head snapped to hers as I muttered, "What do you mean?"

"Children are a liability, a distraction that he will snuff out the first chance he gets. He won't allow a child of a prominent figurehead to reach the age of maturity and claim what is rightfully theirs."

"But Tessa, Remi and Layla have children."

"And they are as good as dead if Petrovitch wins this war. They will be the first to go. Sick bastard will probably even kill them in front of their parents before he kills their mothers. You should know all this, woman. You grew up in the mafia organization. Didn't your father or brothers teach you anything?"

Rubbing my face, I sighed. "I'm Italian Mafia. It's not like that with us. There are rules."

Silver rolled her eyes. “My God, you really are a sheltered mafia princess, aren’t you? Wake the fuck up, Illyria. Your own father killed women and children to get his foothold in Chicago. Are you telling me you never knew how your father claimed Chicago?”

“You’re wrong. My father would never harm a child.”

Silver smirked. “God, you can’t be that gullible. You think you know everything, but you don’t. Even when faced with the truth, you keep your blinders on. Look, I need to get the hell out of here. If you found me, then Petrovitch shouldn’t have a fucking problem, but before I go, let me leave you with these parting words. Everything you know is a lie. Ask yourself this. Knowing what I just told you about the man, what would he gain by taking your company? When you think you’ve figured it out, try again because you are going to be wrong.”

“Where are you going?”

“Far away from here. Hopefully, so far, he will never find me,” she said, gathering her things and stuffing them into a backpack.

Getting to my feet, I headed for the door when I remembered the journal. Turning back to her, I asked, “Silver. Does the name Irish Ghost mean anything to you?”

Silver stopped moving, then slowly turned around and faced me. “Where did you hear that name?”

Silver fixed her gaze on the journal as I held it up. “Found this in Ireland. Do you know anything about it?”

Gathering her bag, she flung it over her shoulder as she walked past me before saying as she eyed the journal once more, “You need to ask Maxim.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Illyria

Watching Silver hop on her motorcycle and ride away, I stood there as I tried to assimilate everything she told me. Could I have gotten it all wrong? She clearly knew more about Petrovitch than I did. She had no reason to lie to me. According to her, we were both in danger. That I believed. The bastard made it perfectly clear he wanted my company. But what if Silver was right and it was a means to an end to get to me? If she was right, then I was in more trouble than I thought and I was playing right into his hands.

I had too much to lose and nothing to gain by continuing this search. My last lead just drove off for places unknown, running from the very man I was trying to bring down. Silver never pegged me as the scared damsel in distress type. From what I knew of her, she was strong, a survivor by all accounts. Yet, she didn't think twice as she rode away.

Looking around the desolate Nevada desert, I wondered why she chose this place to hide out in. There was nothing here. Nothing at all. I knew she knew more than she said. I wasn't stupid. The woman was a plethora of information, only I didn't know the right questions to break her safe. Instead, she took what she knew and ran, only telling me to return home for my answers. To do that, I would have to face my brothers and Maxim.

I couldn't stand before my brothers and tell them I lost everything. I refused to look at the disappointment in their eyes. Then there was Maxim. God only knew what he would do or say.

“Ms. Illyria?”

Looking towards the car, Sypher was standing beside the open door waving his phone. “Got a minor problem. Montana is calling me.”

“Shit,” I muttered, as I headed towards him. “Did you answer it?”

“Uh...no. He’s been blowing up my phone for the last ten minutes. And now Ghost is calling me. This is bad, Ms. Illyria. If I don’t answer, they will call my brothers.”

Getting in the car, I started the engine as I heard Sypher’s phone ring again. “Now Bullseye is calling me.”

Before I said anything, I watched as Sypher’s phone went black moments before a face appeared on his screen. “Boy, you are in deep shit.” The familiar woman cursed angrily. “Just what in the hell do you think you are doing in Nevada? Do you know the shitstorm you’ve created? Your brothers are losing their shit. It’s taking the entire club to stop Chipper and Trout from looking for you. They called Ace. He’s waiting for you in New York right now. Ghost is threatening to put you on lockdown. Montana wants you to be sanctioned and I’m not even going to relay what Fedorov plans to do to you. They all know where you are. Is she with you?”

I sighed, leaning my head back against the headrest as I nodded.

“Yeah, she’s with me.”

Phantom growled. “Get on a fucking plane and head home now. Illyria, your brothers know everything. This mess has nothing to do with your family’s company. It never did.”

Sypher looked at me, pleading.

Knowing when I was beat, I sighed, “We’re heading home.”

“Good. Head to the nearest airport. There are tickets waiting for you. Don’t miss that flight. Someone will be at LaGuardia to pick you up. And Sypher, if you know what’s good for you, I’d start talking the second you can.”



“Who is Ace?” I asked, shortly after our flight took off.

“What?”

“Phantom said your brothers called Ace. Who’s Ace?”

Sypher cringed. “He’s my oldest brother. Ace Leroy Franks. He’s in the military. Or at least he was the last time I checked. I’m the youngest of four boys. Mom always wanted a daughter but ended up with the four of us instead before she couldn’t have any more kids. Ace is the oldest, then there is Bailey, which you know as Chipper, then Charlie, who goes by Trout, then me, Danny.”

Something about Sypher’s brother’s name nagged at me. I’d heard that name before, but I couldn’t place where.

“Your mom went down the alphabet?”

Sypher smirked. “Yeah. She said it made it easier. Mom and dad wanted a house full of kids. Mom never had a big family growing up, so when she met and married dad, she wanted to go big or go home, so to speak.”

“So why do you seem worried about Ace? Do you not get along with him?”

“It’s not that. I love my big brother, but he never really understood me. I was always the different one. The oddball of the family. Which is kind of ironic since Ace never really fit in with the club life either. He joined the military right after high school and never looked back. The last time I saw him was when we buried dad. He didn’t even show up for mom’s funeral because we couldn’t reach him. Then shit hit the fan with the club. I know he keeps in contact with Trout, but that’s about it.”

“You two weren’t close?”

“Not like he is with Trout. Ace firmly believes in right and wrong. He hates the gray part of life.”

“You mean the life we live?”

Sypher nodded. “Give Ace a direction and he’s good to go. He likes things structured and orderly. He hated that dad straddled the line between right and wrong. Never understood club life, either. When he left for the military, he seemed happier. Dad always hoped that someday Ace would come home and take over the club, but I think deep down, dad knew it

wouldn't happen. When dad died, Ace blamed the club. Blamed Reaper and Bullseye."

"So why would your brothers call him knowing how he feels?"

"I don't know," Sypher shrugged. "But if Ace shows up, then shit is really going to hit the fan. Ace isn't like anyone you've ever met. He's just more."

"What does your brother do in the military?"

"He's part of a special ops team. Well, he was the last time I checked. I try not to look too much into Ace. He always seems to know when I'm snooping around. The last time I got nosey, he crashed my computer."

"How is that possible? I mean. You're you. *The Sypher*. You are the best there is."

"Like I said. Ace is more."

The flight from Las Vegas to LaGuardia took just under five hours and by the time the plane landed, my palms were sweating. I knew the second I got off this plane, my brothers would lock me down or whisk me away to some unknown location where I would never see the light of day again. That was the good part. I refused to think what would happen if Maxim greeted me at the airport. God only knew what he would do with me.

The second the flight attendants opened the plane door, passengers quickly got up, gathering their bags as if nothing was wrong. Even Sypher wasted no time grabbing his carryon and falling in line.

Only I couldn't.

I couldn't move.

Holding my phone tightly in my hand, I stayed seated until the plane emptied. When the last passenger disembarked, I gathered my bag and stood just as a familiar face walked onto the plane.

"Sister."

"Brother."

“What am I going to do with you?” Giovanni asked, shaking his head angrily as he nodded to our cousins, Giuseppe and Nico, who boarded the plane after him, before turning to leave me standing there in shock.

“Mrs. Fedorov,” Nico smirked, shaking his head as he motioned for me to follow. When I didn’t move, Giuseppe reached for my arm.

“Touch me and it will be the last thing you do.”

“Ignore her, Gus!” Giovanni shouted. “Drag her kicking and screaming if you must!”

Storming after my brother, I yelled as I walked down the stairs into the bright sun, “Just who in the hell do you think you are?! You have no right to order me around.”

“That’s where you are wrong, sister. I have every right,” Giovanni smiled, leaning against the large blacked out SUV, parked on the tarmac with the door open, waiting for me to get in first.

That was never going to happen.

“I’m not getting in that vehicle.”

“You will either get in my vehicle or you can ride with him.” Giovanni said, looking to my right.

Slowly turning, I spotted three Black range rovers idling. Before I could ask who it was, the middle car’s back door opened and out walked my soon to be ex-husband, looking ready to flay my ass alive.

If I wasn’t scared before, I was now.

There was no way in fucking hell I was going anywhere with Maxim Fedorov.

“You don’t have a choice. Either way, you are getting into a vehicle. Choose. Your family or your husband.”

“Gio, please. I need to find Maria.”

“No,” my big brother shook his head. “Maria told us everything. I don’t know what you think you were doing, but you were putting yourself in danger. You know that. Now stop

with these games and choose. Your husband or your family. This nonsense ends right now.”

“Why are you making me do this?”

“Because, sister, instead of the families looking for Petrovitch, we had to stop everything to look for you. That man needs to be eliminated and instead of doing just that, you’ve sent the entire underworld on a wild goose chase and for what? So, you can go sightseeing and protect a company that doesn’t matter? Jesus, Illyria. I don’t give a damn about the fucking company. I care about you! No company is worth your life. God, do you know what it would have done to us if that son of a bitch got his hands on you? There is nothing any of us wouldn’t have done to get you back. You are playing yourself right into his hands. He’s using the company to get to you!”

“It wasn’t like that. I was looking for something?”

“What? What were you looking for?”

Shaking my head, I refused to answer. I knew better than to lie to Giovanni. It would do me no good, and once he learned the truth, he would go ballistic. If I thought Sal was a bomb waiting to go off, Giovanni was nuclear. The fallout would not bode well for me.

“I can’t tell you.” I whispered.

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Fine. I won’t tell you. Not right now, at least.”

“Still playing silly games,” Giovanni sighed. “Illyria, your life is not a game and you are putting yourself in danger. I warned you five years ago that getting involved with Maxim wasn’t a good idea. I implored you to stay away from him. But like always, you did what you wanted. Now, you live your life straddling both families. It doesn’t work that way, sister. You may be the Valentinetti Mafia Princess, but you are also Maxim’s Bratva Queen. You can’t be both sweetheart. This madness must end. You need to choose a side.”

“I can’t,” I said, looking away from him.

I was so close. So damn close to freedom, I could almost taste it. There was no way I could choose. Not right now, at

least. I wasn't ready. If I went with my brother, he would lock me down back home in Chicago or whisk me away to the island. If I went with Max, I might as well be waving the white flag of surrender.

"Then I'm choosing for you. You are no longer responsible for Valentinetti Corp. You're fired!" Giovanni roared.

"You can't do that. I love that company. Papa started it. You gave it to me. It's mine."

"Not anymore."

"Let's go, *Moya Lyubov*," Maxim said, standing behind me reaching for my arm.

Shaking him off, I pleaded, "Please, Gio. Don't do this. I can't go with him. He will lock me away. You will never see me again."

"At least I'll know you're safe."

"What about Mrs. Rushton? I need to call her. If she doesn't hear from me, she'll worry. What about Sypher? He's innocent. I didn't give him a choice."

"You should have thought about her and him before your little adventure. As for Sypher, Ghost and Montana will take care of him. Maxim, take care of my sister. She's all yours." Giovanni said, getting in his car.

I stood motionless as I watched my brother drive away, leaving me with the one man I didn't want to be with.

What in the hell was I going to do now?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Illyria

Sitting beside him in the back of the vehicle as it pulled away, he said nothing as he turned away from looking out the window. I knew reasoning with Maxim Fedorov was an impossible feat. Once the man made up his mind, he was unmovable. Nothing I said or did would get him to change his mind.

Stubborn Russian asshole.

What worried me the most was where he was taking me. The possibilities were endless. His house in upstate New York? His Penthouse in the city? One of his many warehouses? His strip clubs? The man had business dealings and secret rooms all over the greater New York City area. Each used frequently in his line of work.

There was something I still needed to tend to in the city, and the longer I was under Maxim's thumb, the harder it was going to be for me to do what I needed to do. Broaching that subject with him right now wasn't a good idea, so I kept my mouth shut. I still had a week to make him see reason, or at least find a way to call Mrs. Rushton. The sooner I could get word to her, the faster she could get Clara out of the city. She would know what to do now that everything we'd worked for was gone. I wondered how Clara was handling everything. She was so young, but I trusted no one better. I knew she would do what she had to if the time came. Technically, I prepared for every eventuality. Even this one. Just never thought everything would come to this.

Leaning my head back against the headrest, I thought about everything that had happened to me since I met Maxim.

The man who changed my life.

From all the good to the bad, he was there in one capacity or another. Over the last five years, I had somehow fallen in love with the unlovable. In his defense, he tried to warn me, but like everything in my life I didn't listen and did what I

wanted. Now, I am married to him. Married into a life I thought I knew.

Thought I could handle it.

Thought I could control it.

I was wrong.

In the end, I was exactly where my mother warned me I would be if I didn't stop my foolishness and accept the fact that my life was never technically my own.

My brother called me a mafia princess.

So did Silver.

I never liked that term.

Within the Italian families, I knew what that term meant. A bargaining chip, an object that they could maneuver for the gain of the family. None of the men considered how we felt. Our feelings didn't matter. My brother proved that point just mere minutes ago. I dared not think what it meant for the Bratva.

There was so much I didn't know about the Bratva organization. Maxim kept his business close to the vest, refusing to let his life touch mine in any way. In fact, with Maxim, I had more freedom than I did with my family. Which I thought odd, considering the rumors I'd heard about the Bratva.

I guess in my own selfish way I thought I'd be able to have my cake and eat it too. I should have known that was impossible. Like dangling the Gentlemen's Club in front of me and giving me a seat at the table.

They didn't want me there.

They put me there so they could keep an eye on me.

To protect me.

I knew that now.

It didn't matter what I did, where I went or who I was with. In the end, I would always be a commodity. A puzzle

piece that my family and countless others could maneuver around on a chessboard for their own gain. What that gain was, I needed to learn and learn fast.

Like the rules of the game Silver mentioned, information changed and flowed freely daily. One minute I could know everything, the next, it didn't matter. It was the one with all the knowledge who had the power and I planned on being that person.

My mother told me from the start that information was power. Those who had it won the game, and those who coveted it, would find themselves bleeding in the streets.

I thought I had all the information I needed.

I was wrong. But I learned a great deal along the way, like nothing is what it seems. That everyone had secrets. I did too. And though I wasn't ready to play my hand yet, I was still in the game.

The men in my life may think they've won, but I was just getting started. I am Illyria Nicoletta Valentinetti, and I was about to change the rules of the game.

When the vehicle came to a stop, I didn't say a word as Maxim quietly got out of the vehicle. Standing near the door, he waited until I slid over and stepped out.

I was in the city.

More importantly, he brought me to his penthouse. The one I vowed never to walk into again. The one he fucked his whore in. If he thought he would get a rise out of me by bringing me here, he thought wrong. With my head held high, I walked into the building and headed straight for the elevator. Neither of us said a damn word as the elevator ascended to the top floor before opening into a penthouse I was familiar with. I knew every nook and cranny of this place. Spent days, weeks exploring the rooms.

Walking into the lobby, I headed straight for the kitchen, where I knew he always kept a bottle of my favorite red wine. If I was going to do what needed to be done, then I was going to need some liquid fortitude.

Opening the wine cooler, I grabbed my bottle of wine, then reached into a cupboard and grabbed a glass. Placing both on the kitchen counter, I rummaged around the drawers until I found the corkscrew and got to work opening my bottle.

I said nothing as his men checked every room before vacating the premises. He took a seat, watching my every move before saying, “I know what game you are playing, and it won’t work, Illyria.”

“Illyria? I thought I was *Moya Lyubov*?” I smirked, popping the cork as I reached for my glass, pouring myself a full glass.

“You had to know it was going to come to this. I tried to warn you.”

Swallowing a large gulp, I used the back of my hand to wipe away a dribble that ran down my face. “I don’t know what you are talking about. Warn me about what?”

“Why did you leave?” he countered.

“I needed a vacation.”

“No, you left because of what I did. You saw my dark side and I scared you.”

I laughed.

“Hate to break it to you, Max, but you’ve never been the golden boy. You wear the dark like a cloak. So, no. You didn’t scare me. In fact, I knew exactly what was going to happen when you showed up at my penthouse that night. Would you like to see the bruises you left? I think I still have one on my hip.”

He cursed lowly in Russian.

“So how long is my prison sentence going to be?”

“What?”

Taking another drink, I elaborated, “You know. How long am I grounded for because I still have commitments to attend to, and business matters that I’m needed for and let’s not forget my club? The very club you men gave me lock, stock

and barrel. The grand re-opening is this weekend. I have to finalize the guest list, call the caterers, hand out the employee schedules and make sure everything is perfect.”

“Montana will be by later for your signature. He’s found another person to run the club.”

Tsking, I shook my head. “Not a chance in hell. I’m not selling the club. You all gave it to me and it will be over my dead body before I sell it. If any of you even try to forge my signature, I will see all of you in court and I promise you I will answer every question truthfully.”

“You can’t run a club from here, Illyria.”

“Watch me.” I dared.

Maxim shook his head before running his hands down his face. I was pushing him to his limit. I knew I was. I’d seen the signs many times before. The more I challenged him, the faster he would blow.

“I also have the Sunshine Charity Event coming up in three weeks. My mother’s charity. I need to go shopping for a new dress. It’s at the Met this year and I refuse to wear last year’s designs. You will need to think carefully before appointing my security detail that day. I plan to hit all the shops for the perfect ensemble. I don’t want any whiners hindering my fun.”

“Illyria,” he growled.

“Then there is Mrs. Rushton. If I am going to be living with you for the foreseeable future, I want Mrs. Rushton. You’ve already vetted her, so I don’t want to hear any complaints about her in that regard. She is damn good at doing her job. More importantly, she is the best when it comes to taking care of my needs. I know you like your Russian cuisine, but I like a variety and I refuse to go without my favorite Italian dishes.”

“Not happening,” he glared furiously, as I grinned. “Don’t get all pissy with me now, Max. You knew what you were marrying. Which reminds me. How is my divorce going?”

Did Jackson manage to get the papers filed before you killed him?”

“There is no divorce,” he growled lowly.

“I see,” I muttered, taking another drink as I shrugged. “It was worth a try, anyway. Now, as for my social schedule. I have a society lunch every Wednesday with the prominent ladies of the city at the Tavern on the Green. It’s weekly, so don’t forget to put that in your calendar. I also have my own charity commitment over at the New York City Metropolitan Library where I distribute children’s books and give away school supplies to the inner-city schools. Then there is...”

“ENOUGH!” Maxim roared, getting to his feet. “You are not going anywhere. You are not doing anything. You are to stay here until Petrovitch is dead. Is that understood?”

Carefully laying my wineglass down, I looked at the fuming man and lowered the boom. “That’s where you are wrong, Max. I may be your prisoner, but I am still Illyria Valentinetti. I have a life that I will continue. If I fail to attend any commitment, fail to arrive at any function that I am scheduled for, even if I fail to show up at the club tomorrow, the local authorities will be notified of my absence, and I have instructed them to investigate my disappearance. That’s not including what the papers will say.”

“You’re bluffing. You wouldn’t do that to your family. Not to Montana.”

“Am I?”

Maxim gripped my arms. “What the fuck did you do?”

Smiling at him, I said, “You taught me well, Max. I too have friends everywhere. You even met some of my friends when you attended one of my charities last year. Don’t you remember?”

His hands slid from my arms as he stepped back. “The Policeman’s Fundraiser Ball. You were the keynote speaker.”

“That’s right. It’s amazing how my line of work puts me right in front of the very people who are eager to bring down your organization. Amazing men and women in blue. So eager

to help rid this city of crime. I felt compelled to give them what they needed.”

“Are you crazy! Do you want to bury the rest of your family? Me? Your friends?”

“All of you are safe as long as I don’t miss my appointments. Now, give me a phone. I need to call Mrs. Rushton.”

“Who did you give the information to, Illyria? You put their life in danger, you silly woman. Don’t you get it. Petrovitch is about to start a war you can’t win. He doesn’t care about parties and galas. He wants you. He’s going to do everything in his power to get his hands on you to bring me down. To bring down everyone. Your life isn’t a game!”

“I’m just playing by the rules you men set, Max.”

“*Moya Lyubov*, please. Whatever you have going on in that devious mind of yours, trust me. You are going to get yourself hurt, or worse, killed. Stop this vendetta you have against me and tell me what you’ve done?”

“Not a chance in hell unless you want to tell me the truth about you and Petrovitch?”

Before I knew what was happening, the weight of his toned body pressed hard against mine as he pinned me to the wall. His hand gripped my face hard as he growled, “You think this is a fucking game? You know nothing, little girl. Now tell me what the fuck you are hiding before I really lose my temper.”

“Go to hell.”

“Wrong answer, baby,” he sneered, his grip tightening as he kissed me hungrily. I could already feel his erection rubbing against me as I longed to sit upon it, riding him hard until he came. Not that I would ever give him the satisfaction again. Fucking bastard was the reason I was in this mess. Yet the more I fought him, the angrier he got as he consumed my mouth like a starving man.

Just the thought of him using my body as he desired left me breathless as I frantically started clawing at his belt,

loosening it, desperate to feel his hard cock in my hands again. He let out a low growl as I opened his pants to free his cock. He gasped for a breath at my first touch before winding his hand into my hair, pulling my head back roughly, growling, “You are nothing but trouble. A spoiled fucking brat who throws tantrums when you don’t get your way.”

“You would know all about that, wouldn’t you?”

“No more. I’m going to fuck that impediment out of you if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Good luck.”

Grinding his cock against my hand, I stroked the end of his cock as his teeth sank into the flesh of my neck, causing me to whimper as his tongue ran along my collarbone.

I could feel myself getting wetter by the second. The angrier he got, the rougher he was. Civility gone as the Bloodletter remained.

Suddenly, he pulled away, grabbing my wrist hard, as he dragged me into the very bedroom we once shared. The same bedroom where I found him fucking another woman.

Fighting him as hard as I could, I wasn’t strong enough as he threw me down on the bed. Dropping his pants and ripping his shirt from his body, he stalked towards me. A caged animal replaced the man I once knew. His eyes flamed with retribution and punishment. His growls echoed all around, sending a slight chill down my spine. I’d seen Maxim in many moods, but this one was new. Danger rippled off his body in waves as he stalked towards me, intent on teaching me a lesson I wasn’t sure I was ready to learn.

Slowly backing away from him, I gulped. “Max. You’re scaring me.”

“Shut up,” he growled lowly, grabbing my ankle, yanking me back towards him.

I yelped as he tore my clothes from my body, uncaring of the damage he was doing until they were in a heap on the floor along with his.

“Time to pay the piper, Illyria. I’ll give you one more chance. What are you hiding?”

Slowly shaking my head, I whispered, “I can’t.”

“Then so be it.”

Before I could formulate a response, Maxim was above me. His lips were back on mine, bruising and rough as he devoured my mouth once more. Grinding his hips forcefully into mine.

The head of his cock rubbed painfully against my clit, making me buck beneath him with every jolt of carnality he sent soaring through my body. He was predatory. Wild and hungry. I’ve been with Max many times in the last five years. I’d seen him at his best and stupidly thought I’d seen him at his worst. But I was so wrong. The man consuming my body wasn’t the man I knew, nor the man I married. This man was dangerous. Determined, devious. He was the devil incarnate hell bent on incinerating my soul to bring me to heel.

He was everywhere. I couldn’t breathe as he bit my neck again, moving down my chest before reaching my exposed breasts. Driven by pure lustful anger, I cried out as his fingers pinched roughly at my nipple. He replaced his fingers with his mouth, sucking hard at my nipple, nipping and scratching it with his teeth as his other hand firmly squeezed my other breast.

My hand gripped the back of his neck as I sunk my nails intently into his skin, drawing blood as he harshly devoured my breasts. My body writhed beneath him in a merciless desire to consume him as he greedily devoured my body. I wanted to reciprocate in kind with every bite, scratch, pain filled desire he inflicted on me. I wanted to take him into my mouth. I wanted to lick and suck his cock until I drove him as wild as he was making me. I tried to lift myself, but he was unmovable. Resolute in his consumption as he pushed me back down on the bed.

“I’m going to fuck you into compliance,” he growled.

“Good luck,” I taunted, as he gripped my hair, turning my face as his lips pressed against my ear and I shivered as I heard him whisper.

“You will bend.”

I cried out as his teeth bit my earlobe.

I knew he drew blood. In kind, I raked my nails down his back, slowly and methodically eliciting the same pain he just inflicted on me.

He roared loudly, arching up, as my hands fell to his waist.

Gasping for air, I took a fortifying breath before I opened my eyes to find him staring straight into mine. Pure, unadulterated fury emanated all around him as he smirked. “You forget, wife. I know your body. I know what you crave.”

“Fuck you.”

“Oh, I plan to,” he sneered as he slammed his cock deep into my core, making me scream out. My cries fell on deaf ears, as he repeatedly and forcefully pushed his thick cock inside me, filling me up, making my legs shake. His unrelenting pace served only one purpose.

To fill his desire. Not mine.

His ravenous pace was unrelenting as my body succumbed to his.

I was helpless to stop him. My body craved his. He was my addiction. A drug I couldn't shake. No other man came close to the carnal nature of the man over me.

I knew then, at that very moment, I was powerless to stop him.

He would always get his way. He tried to tell me before, but I never listened. I refused to. Now the truth was before me. The man I married was not the man I thought him to be.

He was more.

His pace quickened. His grip tightened as my stomach clenched. His growls become more desperate as he used my

body for his own gain. With a loud roar, he lost control as his body tensed above mine, his cock buried deep in my womb as his hot cum spilled deep inside me.

Then he did the unthinkable.

Before I could scream out my release, he pulled out and stood to his full height, smiling deviously. My body was shaking, desperate for its own release as I heard him say. "Did you think this was about you?"

"What?" I gasped, not understanding when realization hit me.

He was going to deny me my pleasure until I told him what he wanted.

Motherfucker!

Laughing, he walked away, leaving me on the bed as if I was an afterthought.

"I HATE YOU!" I screamed, at his retreating form.

"You have one hour to clean yourself up before I return. Unless you want to tell me the truth."

"FUCK YOU!"

Maxim shook his head and grinned. "I'll see you in an hour, then."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Maxim

“Where is she?” Montana asked, as he drummed his fingers on a table, watching as I paced back and forth in the Soulless Sinners clubhouse. The gathering room was full of men from all sides. Bikers, mafia, Bratva. It wasn’t everyday men like us gathered, but for one particular woman, it seemed everyone wanted to lend a helping hand to make sure she stayed safe. I knew everyone liked *Moya Lyubov*, just didn’t know to what extent.

Now I did and I wasn’t sure I liked it.

She was mine.

My woman.

My wife.

“At the Gentlemen’s Club, preparing for the re-opening this weekend.”

“Who’s on her?” her brother, Giovanni asked, looking around the room at all the faces before returning to me.

“Half my crew, along with two men from every family. That’s not including the Retirement Rejects Montana loaned out to me. But it’s not enough.” It wouldn’t matter if I put the entire Armed Forces on Illyria. My woman could talk herself out of anything when the mood suited her. She was stubborn, opinionated, headstrong, devious, and at the moment, a complete pain in my ass.

She refused to submit. Refused to tell me what I needed to know. The whole night, I used her body for my own pleasure denying hers and still the stubborn vixen said nothing.

“Did she give you anything we can use, Maxim? Anything to help us figure out what she was looking for? Planning?”

“The only thing she let slip was her connection to the NYPD. Apparently, my pain in the ass has made friends all over the city and has threatened to release information on all of us if we stop her from living her life,” I sighed, taking a seat, hanging

my head. “She thinks this is a game she can win. But she’s wrong. How do I get her to see the danger she’s really in?”

“You don’t,” Salvatore sighed, leaning back in his chair. “Illyria has always been of her own mind. She will believe what she wants to believe. Until she is faced with the truth for herself, there is nothing any of us can do to persuade her differently.”

That was the damn truth.

Stubborn woman.

“What about Sypher? Did he say anything?” I asked, looking at Montana, who shook his head.

“The kid refused to divulge anything. He’s currently sitting in my mailroom under lock and key. Which brings up another problem. I received an unexpected visit last night from his big brother, Cpt. Ace Franks. Fucking guy is trouble.”

“How so?”

“For starters, he’s military. Like gung-ho to the core military. He knows we have his little brother and he’s demanding I hand him over in the next forty-eight hours or he and his friends are going to storm this place.”

“I’m sure that ultimatum went down well?” Salvatore snickered.

“About as well as dicks in a meat-grinder. But the fucker isn’t playing. I bought us some time, but if we don’t release the kid soon, the bastard will be back.”

“Why forty-eight hours? You’d think if he wanted his kid brother, he’d demand him at that moment?” Renaldo asked, confused. I was as well. If someone was holding my family member, I wouldn’t leave without them.

Montana shrugged. “Got me. Even confused the hell out of Ghost who tried to get me to release the kid over to him, but that wasn’t going to happen. That fucking pussy is skating on thin ice as it is.”

“Where is Ghost?” Lorenzo asked, looking around the room for the acting President of the Golden Skulls M.C.

“On a plane back to Tennessee. He is of no help here, so I sent him packing.”

“What about the kid’s computer?” I inquired.

All of us in the room knew that Sypher never went anywhere without his computer. The kid lived and breathed that damn thing. A computer genius, Sypher lived for coding and the dark web. The kid helped all of us on more than one occasion with problems we’ve dealt with in the past. A veritable trojan horse, there was nothing Sypher couldn’t find or hack into.

“Confiscated that thing the second he stepped off the plane. Phippen and Shame are trying to decode it, but they are having no luck. The kid created his own fucking algorithm. He encrypted everything. Even the damn password that, according to Phippen, is twenty-eight characters long and changes every hour. The fucking brat might as well put that shit in Klingon. It’s going to be awhile before they crack it.”

Giovanni chuckled. “He might have. From what I know about Sypher, he is a huge Sci-Fi geek.”

“I have a suggestion,” Malice piped up, as all heads turned to him. Standing against the back wall of the room eating an apple, the man said, “There is a way to get the information you want a lot faster than cracking an impenetrable computer and scaring the crap out of a kid. Why not tag your wife? Like Montana did with Tessa. Give her the illusion of freedom she desires and let her lead us to what she is hiding.”

Montana roared with laughter. “You want to tag Illyria Valentinetti? Are you nuts?!”

Malice shrugged. “Kills two birds with one stone.”

“She would rip the tracker out with her bare hands,” Lorenzo chuckled. “It won’t work.”

“There is more than one kind of tracker,” Malice mysteriously smirked before he took another bite out of his apple. “Ask Phippen. He’s got the perfect tracker for every situation.”

“It won’t work,” Sal reiterated. “I know my sister. There is no way she will allow any of us to inject her with a tracker.”

“Never said it had to be injected,” Malice grinned. “Think more along the lines of slipping it in.”



I stood over the table and stared at the tracker, no bigger than a pinhead, as Pippen explained, “It’s the latest in covert tracking devices. All the Alphabet Groups use them. Only theirs don’t have the long-range capabilities like mine does.”

“How long-range are we talking?” Giovanni asked, bending over the table to inspect the contraption.

“Anywhere.” Pippen grinned proudly, puffing up his chest.

“What do you mean, anywhere?” Montana growled, standing against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. Not impressed.

“I mean worldwide, Prez. Once inserted, the tracker attaches itself to the tissue. It’s noninvasive and gives off no signals. It’s virtually undetectable. Not even an x-ray machine can detect my tracker. It’s made with a specialized polymer that mimics skin.”

“But how do you get it into the body without a person knowing?” Salvatore asked as Pippen blushed.

“Well, that’s the tricky part. You’re gonna need one of these.” He said, laying down a condom next to the tracker. “I designed these trackers to be inserted vaginally or anally.”

Montana roared with laughter as he slapped me on my back while I stared at the kid in shock. He had to be fucking kidding. I damn near fucked myself unconscious last night and she didn’t even flinch.

“You mean?” Giovanni muttered, looking from the table to me as he narrowed his eyes.

“Yep,” Pippen gulped, as he slowly nodded his head. “He would have to have sex with her.”

“And I’m out of here,” Sal groaned, as he quickly left the room. Lorenzo rushing out with him.

Giovanni gathered his coat before heading for the door. “Well, Maxim. I don’t envy you one bit. But to protect my sister, you have my family’s blessing to do whatever you need to ensure her safety. Montana, keep me informed.”

Shaking my head. “There has to be another way. I refuse to tag her and just let her walk off as if she’s won. That serves no purpose but to keep her in danger. There has to be something we can do to get her to talk because let me tell you. I can fuck her into the next millennium, and she won’t talk.”

“That’s the point Malice is making. The only way we can figure out what your wife is up to is to set her free. Everyone knows her because she is a public figure. Hell man, there isn’t a paper in this city that doesn’t know about Illyria Valentinetti. Also, on account of her multifaceted humanitarian initiatives, the paparazzi will commemorate her wherever she goes.

“Would you agree to this if it was your woman on the line?”

“Fuck, no,” Montana growled. “But Tessa isn’t Illyria Valentinetti. Your woman is the face of the Valentinetti Family. She can’t leave her house without the paparazzi waiting to take her picture. Add in all the men we have on her. Illyria won’t be able to sneeze in this city without one of us knowing.”

Looking back at the tracker, I shook my head.

“If I do this, she will never trust me.”

“She doesn’t have to trust you to sleep with you, Max. This is about keeping your wife safe while we figure out what she’s hiding. You can repair your relationship later, but right now, this is all we’ve got. Which means you’ve got forty-eight hours to wine, dine and bed your wife. It’s not that hard. You’ve been with the woman for five years. Albeit a tumultuous five years, but you should know how to get into her pants by now. Lie if you have to. Just get that thing planted inside your wife. You know Petrovitch is in the city. He is going to do everything in his power to acquire her. If he succeeds, we need to be able to track her if that happens. It’s the only way, my friend.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Illyria

Typing away on my computer, I tried to ignore the two men lounging on my sofa as if they didn't have things to do other than to babysit me.

It was ridiculous.

All these men for little ol' me.

Then again, if Maxim knew me at all, he wouldn't have let me leave his penthouse. Once I figured out his game last night, I let him think he had the upper hand. Though my body was paying for it today, I still won. He was still oblivious and my secret was safe.

Now, all I had to do was figure out a way to get a message to Mrs. Rushton without alerting my jailers. As my fingers clicked away on my keyboard, everything I came up with was impossible. I couldn't call her because Vladmir was monitoring all my outgoing calls. I couldn't text either because Vlad was forwarding all of those straight to my family and Maxim. I thought about sending an email, but Vlad had those covered too.

A knock at the door had me looking up. Smiling, I leaned against my desk as Happy walked in. "Hello, there. What brings you by?"

Happy was a sweet man. Big, burly and just plain happy all the time. He was also the chaplain of the Soulless Sinners and the grandfather to Linsey, Vicious' wife.

The big man sat before my desk and shook his head. "Gotta say, gorgeous. You sure know how to cause a fuss when you're around."

"Really? How so?" I chuckled.

Happy saw the two men lounging on my sofa and nodded. "Seems overkill to me, but I just follow the rules. So, Montana sent me and the other Rejects as your personal bodyguards, my lady. Wherever you go, we are to follow."

Leaning back, I sighed. "You've got to be kidding me?"

“Nope. Got told this morning before I even climbed out of bed. The Retirement Rejects are on the case. Well, your case, but you get what I’m saying.”

“This is ridiculous.” I stood walking around my desk as my two shadows immediately followed. Ignoring them, I left my office, heading for the main room of the club to find several men lounging around. Half of Maxim’s crew mingled and talked with members of my family, Renaldo’s family and the Rejects. In total, I counted twenty-five men.

“He’s lost his fucking mind.”

Happy stood beside me, rubbing his neck. “Yeah. All these men, for one little filly, is a bit much, but considering the trouble you’ve already caused, can you blame him?”

Rounding on the big man, I sneered. “I didn’t do anything wrong. I am free to do as I please. I don’t have to report to anyone. I never have and I never will!”

“That’s not true, cousin, and you know it,” Giuseppe muttered, as he threw a card down on the table before picking another. “You’ve always had men on you. From the moment you were born. There was nowhere you went that the family didn’t know about.”

Nikandr nodded. “The moment you started seeing the boss, he had men on you at all times as well.”

“They are right, Ms. Illyria,” Romeo Romano added, throwing two cards down before pulling two more from the deck. “Every time you entered the city, Renaldo put some of our men on you as a favor to your family. You’ve never been alone.”

“Are you all telling me that all of you have babysat me at one time or another?”

Every man in the room nodded.

“Gorgeous, is there somewhere we can talk without other ears,” Happy whispered as a few eyes in the room took notice.

“Whatever you need to say to Mrs. Fedorov, you can say in front of all of us. We’ve all been ordered to relay her day in detail,” Vladimir stated firmly, walking into the room. “Mrs. Fedorov no longer has any more secrets.”

Narrowing my eyes at the man, I grinned. “Is that true, Vladimir? Are you sure Maxim, my brothers and everyone else wants to know that I’ve started my period and the cramps are painful? How about how heavy my flow is and that just standing here is causing me to bleed through my tampon? Want to explain to them how I insert it? I’m sure Maxim would love to know that you watched me so you can explain it to him in great detail.”

The room groaned as Vladimir paled.

“I thought not,” I huffed, as I stormed back to my office, Happy laughing boisterously as he followed closely, closing the door on my two shadows who tried to enter.

“Damn girl,” the man chuckled, taking his seat again.

Sitting by myself, I fumed. “The nerve of those men. I can’t believe this shit.”

Happy sobered. “Can you blame them, though?”

Sighing, I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my desk. “Guess not. But that out there is overkill, and you know it. So, what did you need to talk to me about?”

“Was out in Central Park yesterday, you know, near the Harbor on 5th.”

Stilling, I slowly nodded as he continued.

“It was a pretty day. The birds were chirping, and the kids were laughing. A great place to just sit and relax, you know. Saw a beautiful woman and we talked for a bit.”

“That was nice.” I carefully said, knowing that Vladimir was listening to this conversation.

“She’s a single mother. She recently moved in with her daughter.”

“It’s always good to have family around.”

“Yeah, it is,” Happy said, looking at his hands before looking back at me. “She was telling me how she misses her other daughter. She’s worried about her. Seems her daughter has bitten off more than she can chew and she’s worried she’s about to make a big mistake.”

“Sounds like she has a strong daughter. She should have more faith in her.”

“She’s afraid her daughter is going to get hurt.”

Sighing, I sat back in my chair, looking around my office. What could I say to that? It was a possibility. Life wasn’t easy. I knew that. In my life, danger was a part of my life. I knew every morning as I stepped out of my home there was a possibility I could be kidnapped, mugged, or worse, killed. But I refused to let the fear of the unknown stop me from living my life.

“What did you tell her?”

“That, as a father myself, I knew the dangers life harbored. And if it was my daughter, that I would do everything I could to ensure her safety.”

“What if the daughter doesn’t want her help?”

“Everyone needs help, Illyria. Even those who believe they don’t. Those are the people who need it the most. She asked me to watch out for her daughter. I told her I would because this particular daughter has more to lose than anyone.”

Looking at my own hands, I muttered. “What if this daughter refuses?”

Happy shook his head. “It’s not up to her anymore, Dollface. I gave this mother my word. You, of all people, know I don’t do that lightly.”

“You must have really liked this mother to do that?”

Happy smirked. “She is a beautiful woman with a lot of love left to give. I enjoy seeing her smile.”

I grinned.

Yeah, she had a beautiful smile.

Happy said nothing more as he left me to ponder his words. I knew what Mrs. Ruston was saying. I understood her worry. She was like a second mother to me. Best friends with my mother, Mrs. Rushton, helped me through the grieving process of losing my mother, my family home, my brother Luciano and the countless cousins. She dropped everything to be with me the night I saw Maxim with that other woman and through it all, she

never criticized me. She never chastised or made me feel unworthy. She treated me as a human being, showing me kindness, love and her exceptional understanding of the life I lived.

Always the first to lend an ear, Mrs. Rushton gave me the best advice and tried to get me to see things from a different perspective. Even when I didn't want to listen. Which was often. But most importantly, she never gave up hope I would do the right thing.

I knew how she felt about my relationship with Maxim. While she wasn't happy at first. In reality, my relationship with Max frightened her, but as time went on, she noticed a positive difference in me. She told me once that Maxim complimented me in ways no others have. That he brought out the best in me. Over the years, when we would argue, she instructed me to talk to him. To open up and show him the real me. That if my marriage was going to work, I needed him to see the real me. Not the woman everyone thought I was.

For the longest time, I refused.

Nobody gave a damn about the real me. The person I was behind closed doors. I learned that lesson early in my life. That perception was everything. To guard my thoughts and feelings. If I ever showed the real me, people wouldn't understand. They would think I'd lost my mind. Finally gone off the deep end.

That I was a fraud.

There was only one person who knew the real me and he died at the Golden Wedding, taking everything with him to the grave. Not even my cousin Dwayne, with his infectious laughter and smooth, soothing voice, knew the real me. I was a product of my raising. A true mafia princess to the core. That's what I played up. That's what I knew. That's what the world believed.

Sometimes, I wanted to escape it all.

To run away from the life I was born into.

To just be the person I was born to be, not made to be.

But that would never happen.

I would never be free of the chains that bound me.

My life was not my own. It never was. Never would be.

I think somewhere deep down I knew that. I just hadn't accepted it yet. Because when the truth came out and it would, the life I knew would be over and a new role would begin.



It was late when I walked into the penthouse to find Maxim sitting in the living room, waiting for me. I barely dropped my bag on the floor before he started in with the Spanish Inquisition.

“Who is Jacob Kyle?”

“The foreman of the crew finishing up the remodel. Why?”

“Get rid of him. He’s too friendly and I don’t like the way he looks at you.”

Sighing, I rolled my eyes as I headed for the kitchen. If this was how tonight was going to go, I needed some liquid fortitude. After pouring myself a glass of my favorite red wine, I ignored the brooding Russian and headed towards the spare room. There was absolutely no fucking way in hell I was sleeping in his room again.

I was fucking tired and my body still ached from his salacious ministrations last night. I wasn’t even going to mention the fact that I still hadn’t received any gratification, while he got his three times.

Fucker thought edging me would teach me a lesson, well let’s see how he handles a severe case of blue balls.

Walking into the room, I stopped in my tracks.

Everything was gone.

Even the bed.

What the hell?

Turning back to the living room, I asked. “What happened to the spare room?”

“Took your advice. I remodeled.”

“Where is my stuff?”

“Where it belongs. Next to mine in the master bedroom.”

“I am not sleeping in there. Not in the same bed you fucked that whore in.”

“You did last night.”

“I wasn’t given a choice!”

“And you don’t have one now,” he muttered, looking up from his computer. “What was with the cryptic conversation between you and Happy?”

“It was personal and none of your business.”

Maxim smirked. “Either you tell me or I call Montana and have him question Happy. Either way, I will find out.”

Staring at the man who clearly didn’t understand the meaning of boundaries, I sneered. “It was nothing. He just wanted some advice.”

Maxim sighed, reaching for his phone. The next thing I heard chilled me to the bones. “Yeah, it’s me. She’s refusing to say. You’re up.”

“You bastard. It was nothing!” I yelled, throwing my full wine glass across the room as it chattered into thousands of little pieces against the wall. The red wine stained the white wall as if blood dripped slowly down it. “I’m telling you the truth.”

“No, you’re not. You forget, *Moya Lyubov*, I know when you are lying,” he said, closing his laptop before getting to his feet. Shrugging out of the white dress shirt he wore, he placed it on the couch, then removed his belt. “You know how much I hate liars.”

Gulping, I took a step back.

I knew.

I’d seen firsthand what he did to them.

It wasn’t pretty.

But I was his wife. There was no way he would do that shit to me. My brothers would kill him dead if he did. He stalked towards me as I stumbled until my back hit the wall.

He looked more dangerous than last night, if that was possible.

“What are you going to do?”

He yanked me towards him as he lowered his face, whispering, “Why I’m going to fuck my wife until she tells me the truth?”

“You can’t. I started my period.”

“They don’t call me the Bloodletter for nothing.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Illyria

The night of the Grand Re-opening of the Gentlemen's Club,

Tonight was the night.

Everything was ready. I had attended to all.

I left nothing to chance.

Tonight was going to be the biggest night of my life or the worst.

Sitting at the vanity in Maxim's Penthouse, I applied the last bit of lipstick to my lips before placing the cap back on the small gold tube in my hands when I noticed they were shaking. I didn't know why. It wasn't as if I hadn't been to an event like this before. Hell, parties were my life. From the moment mother allowed, I'd attended openings, galas, balls, dinner parties. I'd gotten so good at them. By the time I turned twenty-one, I was free to attend unchaperoned.

Or so I thought.

But tonight was different.

Tonight, it wasn't about some charity or organization trying to raise funds. Tonight, it was about my club.

Tonight, all eyes would be on me, and that rattled me to my core. It was one thing being the CEO of Valentinetti Corporation and attending events, because I was representing my family. This tonight was all me. Everything from the décor and guest list to the food served and the music played. Tonight, everyone would see a side of me I rarely showed.

"Moya Lyubov?"

Turning, I stared at the man who, for the last few days, had been systematically trying his damndest to break down every wall I erected by any means at his disposal. To make matters worse, tonight we would attend the grand re-opening together, as husband and wife.

One of my secrets would soon come to light and there was nothing I could do about it. He made that perfectly clear.

In more ways than one.

I was his, and he was staking his claim.

“Do I look alright?”

He smirked. “You look wonderful tonight.”

Nodding, I steeled myself, putting my game face on. I refused to show any weakness. Getting up from the vanity, I ran my hands down my dress for the night, taking one last look in the mirror. Gathering my clutch, I walked past him into the living room to find several of his men dressed in tuxedos, waiting. Taking a quick look at them, I said nothing, even though they all looked perfect.

I refused to give them any ammunition.

Making sure I had everything I needed, Max walked up behind me, placing his hand on my shoulder. Shrugging him off, I tried to step away from him when he grabbed my arm.

“You know the rules, *Moya Lyubov*. You will be at my side the entire night. Wherever you go, I go. Understood?”

“Perfectly,” I said, yanking my arm away from him.

When he held out my coat for me, I narrowed my eyes, taking it from him, refusing to let him have the satisfaction. Throwing it over my arm, I pressed the button for the elevator. Seconds later, the doors opened, and I walked forward, as did everyone else.

Surrounded by Maxim and his men, I knew tonight was going to be a nightmare.

And I was right.

It was a nightmare.

One of my making.



The club was hopping as I entered to find the grand re-opening in full swing. The music was pumping through the speakers as women danced and performed on the stages around the room. Waitresses moved quickly through the sizeable crowd of partygoers, delivering drinks while happily conversing with the patrons. Everyone was here. From high society to local businessmen.

I ensured that no one was left out.

Even the paparazzi milled about snapping pictures of the event, eager for their pictures to grace page six of the New York Times. Tonight, there was a veritable collection of who was who in the New York society.

Making my way through the crowds, I smiled and greeted everyone. Speaking with each guest as if they were the most important person in the room. A trick I learned from my mother.

“Bunny!” I squealed, hugging the vibrant wife of the Morgan Chase Bank CEO’s wife. Bunny Wilford was the head of the women’s societal lunch league. She was a sweet woman to those who adored and kissed her ass. And a fucking raging bitch to those who opposed her. The woman had her head so far up her own ass, she probably swallowed her own shit.

“Illyria, my dear,” the woman greeted, quickly air kissing my cheeks. “What a lovely dress. Is that Dior?”

“Valentino,” I smiled, quickly turning so she could get a good look.

“Ravishing, my dear.”

“I just love your gown. Such a beautiful color on you. Makes you vibrant and delish!”

Bunny grinned. “You always say the most wonderful things. I must say, my dear, it surprised me when I received your invitation. I had no idea you were venturing into the club scene. And to think you kept this all to yourself. Not even a little hint!”

I laughed. “I wanted to surprise everyone.”

“Well, you did just that, my dear. This place is something else,” she said, eyeing one of my dancers, Violet, as she slowly slid down a pole, wearing only a thong.

“Bunny, let me introduce you to Maxim Fedorov.”

Bunny stiffened, then grimaced. “We’ve met.”

“Mrs. Wilford.”

“Mr. Fedorov.”

“Oh, there is Elana Stevens. I must talk to her about next week’s luncheon. You will be there right, my dear?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Quickly air kissing one more time, Bunny scurried off as if her ass were on fire.

“Fucking cunt,” I heard Maxim mutter, as he downed his scotch.

“That fucking cunt is one of my major contributors to my mother’s charity. Show some respect,” I snarled, as I smiled and waved at another familiar face.

“She’s still a cunt.”

“Illyria!”

Turning, I smiled at the familiar and friendly face as I rushed through the crowd to hug Linsey Duchene Van Otto, the head of Duchene International and the wife of Vicious, a member of the Soulless Sinners. Following the tragic murder of her sister Davina, I had the pleasure of meeting a sweet woman who had taken over Duchene International. A quiet woman, Linsey preferred a quiet life where she could raise her three nieces and Vicious’ daughter, Elizabeth.

“Thank God. A friendly face,” the beautiful woman hugged me.

I laughed.

“I know. The vultures are out in mass tonight. I didn’t think you would make it. How are the babies?” I asked, as Maxim shook Vicious’ hand. Linsey recently gave birth to twins at the Soulless Sinner’s clubhouse. It was all anyone would talk about when the news hit the papers.

“Growing like weeds. You must stop by and see them.”

“I know. I will make time next week. I could use a break from all of this,” I smiled, then added, “You look amazing for a woman who just recently gave birth to twins.”

Linsey blushed. “They keep me busy, but tonight, I am off duty. Mrs. Alice offered to watch the kids so I could come here tonight. I wasn’t going to leave you alone with wolves all by yourself. But did you have to invite everyone?”

“It was either invite them all or face the wrath of Bunny. That is a drama I don’t need. Besides, you know how they all like to talk. I figured if they had front row seats, there would be no speculation.”

“The rumor mill is going to run rapid tomorrow. I don’t envy you.”

I laughed. “If that was all I had to worry about.”

“Got a hug for your sister-in-law?”

Turning, I gasped as my brother Giovanni stood behind me with Layla. I hadn’t seen her since Giovanni whisked her and the kids away to the island.

Hugging her tightly, I held on longer than I should have because when I released her, her eyes narrowed, “Sweetie, are you okay?”

Quickly blotting my eyes, I nodded. “I’m just so happy to see you. I’ve missed you.”

Meeting Layla for the first time was a life-changing moment for me. As I looked at her, an overwhelming sense of love washed over me, and I couldn’t help but admire her strength, resilience and her remarkable ability to persist through any challenge that came her way. Despite the challenging life she had before meeting my brother, Layla was determined to take control of her future and not let her past dictate her present. With my brother at her side, Layla finally found the love and happiness she always craved.

I wanted so much to be like her.

She was the sister I always wanted.

“I can’t believe you’re here.”

“I wasn’t going to let Gio stop me from being here for you.”

“I could have,” my brother muttered, kissing her forehead. “But I hate telling you no.”

“How are my nephews?”

“Getting more and more like their dad every day,” Layla smiled, before she turned to Maxim. “Uncle.”

Maxim stiffened beside me. It was after the attack on my family compound in Chicago that Maxim learned his younger sister Dominika gave birth to two children after she disappeared, shortly after they arrived in the states. Layla and Dylan were the only family Maxim had left and while Maxim acknowledged them in public, he refused to seek any relationship with them.

“Niece.”

“Have you reached out to Dylan yet or are you still refusing to acknowledge him?”

“He’s a pain in the ass.”

“Yes, he is. A lot like you. But he is your nephew.”

“Don’t remind me,” Maxim growled, downing another scotch before grabbing another as a waitress walked past.

“What would your sister, our mother, say?” Layla challenged.

Maxim growled. “Don’t you ever mention my sister in my presence again, girl. You know nothing about her. So, watch yourself, Mrs. Valentinetti.”

Giovanni sneered, moving Layla behind him. “Apologize to my wife right now, Fedorov.”

“Fuck you,” Maxim chuckled, before disappearing into the crowd. Watching him go, a tiny part of me wanted to go after him. I saw the hurt in his eyes when Layla mentioned his sister. Maxim never talked about Dominika, but I knew he loved her deeply. Her death disturbed him profoundly.

“Fucking Russian prick,” I heard my brother lowly curse.

“What is his problem?” Layla asked.

“Ignore him, *Tesoro*. He will never change.”

“And to think I thought my family had problems,” Montana chuckled, walking over, quickly kissing my cheek. “Hey, beautiful. Delightful party.”

“Thank you,” I muttered, looking once more at Maxim’s retreating figure.

“Come on, Illyria,” Montana said, offering me his arm. “It looks like I’m your chaperone until the Bloodletter returns. Just let him cool off. Besides, you have more guests to greet. So, let’s get this torture over so we can party.”

Taking his arm, I allowed Montana Stone to lead me deeper into the club. We only made it a few steps when Montana stopped dead in his tracks as he stared blankly through the crowd.

“What is it?”

“It can’t be?”

“What?”

“Largo.”

Looking around the club, I spotted the woman Montana had laid eyes on. Largo Davenport was the former wife of Caleb ‘Mercy’ Davenport, the Vice President of the Soulless Sinners. Mercy adored his wife until she got up and left him a few years ago, taking their daughter with her. Soon after, she served him with divorce papers. Their divorce rocked society to their core. To make matters worse, I recently learned that Largo gave up custody of their daughter Sophia without notice. I knew Largo, and I knew she worshiped Mercy and loved her daughter dearly. So, it made no sense why she ended everything. Still beautiful as ever, Largo hadn’t changed since the last time I saw her. In fact, she was more beautiful with her long dark brown hair flowing in waves down her back and curvy body. The woman was a knockout.

She turned heads wherever she went.

“I thought she divorced Mercy a few years ago?”

“She did.”

“What is she doing here? Mercy is going to fucking flip,” I muttered, looking around for the Soulless Sinner.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. Stay here,” Montana said, making a beeline for the woman. Heading back to my brother and sister-in-law, I walked straight into a firm chest.

“Mrs. Fedorov.”

Looking up, as icy fear rushed through my veins as I stared at the very man behind all my problems.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Maxim

Taking a seat at the bar, I ordered another scotch, telling the bartender to leave the bottle. I fucking hated these events. If I didn't have to be here, I would fucking leave immediately.

Everyone here was so fake it made my skin crawl.

None of these people gave a damn about anything but their own wallets. Fucking society pricks. What the hell would they know about struggles, blood, or death? They lived their privileged lives and didn't give two fucks about the life that happened around them. As long as they had their fancy house, fast cars and cash in the bank, they were content.

They'd shit themselves if I showed them what real life was like.

The very life that took my beloved sister away from me.

I wanted to strangle Layla's neck for mentioning my sister.

How dare she?

She knew nothing of my sister.

Dominika may be her mother, but she was my sister.

I loved her first and still mourn her today.

“Boss?”

“Not now, Vladmir.”

“Sorry boss, but you need to see this,” my second said, placing his cellphone down in front of me. Picking it up, I read the text.

Irlandskly Prizak: Cover blown. Petrovitch knows. Making move tonight. Be ready. Extraction in one hour. Port Authority. Don't be late, asshole.

“Fuck!” I cursed loudly, getting to my feet as Mercy rushed over.

“Did you get it?”

Vladmir nodded. “Just showed him.”

“I can’t find Montana. What do you want us to do?”

Looking around the sea of people, it would take forever to find anyone in this mess. Reaching for my phone, I asked, “Who’s working Port Authority tonight?”

“Romano’s men, but he won’t go with them.”

“He doesn’t have a choice,” I stated, waiting for Renaldo to pick up the phone. The second it connected, the sounds of gunfire and men screaming assaulted my ears. Knowing that Renaldo was busy, I hung up and sighed. “Okay, Vladmir, you and Mercy head to Port Authority and pick up the asshole. Take him directly to the clubhouse. I need to find Montana, then get Illyria out of here.”

Mercy and Vladmir immediately left as I made my way into the crowd when my phone vibrating stopped me. Connecting the call, I placed a finger in my other ear so I could hear. “Renaldo?”

“He’s busy entertaining my men at the moment. So, tell me Maxim, how much do you love your wife?”

“Boris,” I growled, maneuvering around the room, trying to locate Montana. If Petrovitch was calling me personally, it meant only one thing. He was here and he was about to toy with me. “Where the fuck are you?”

The son of a bitch laughed. “Closer than you think. You look like a lost schoolboy, Max. Maybe I can help you find what you are looking for. Is it your biker friend Montana? He’s over by the restrooms searching for a lost sinner. Or are you looking for your brother-in-law? He’s sitting at a table rubbing the belly of our beautiful niece. Or maybe it’s your Italian whore you’re looking for. She does look stunning tonight.”

“I’m going to fucking kill you.”

Boris tsked, “Now, now brother, best not lose that temper of yours. Remember what happened the last time you did that?”

“What the fuck do you want?”

“What I’ve always wanted. Your blood on my hands.”

“Then stop these games and let’s finish it.”

“But I love our games and now I have the upper hand. Two new pawns to play with. One will be fun to torture. The other is so pretty. I bet she fucks like the whore she is. Tell me, brother, does she like it rough?”

“You stay the fuck away from her,” I growled menacingly, cursing silently as I searched the room for Illyria. “She has nothing to do with this.”

Fuck!

Where in the hell was she?

“She has more to do with this than you know. Tell me, brother, has she told you the truth yet? Do you know what she is keeping from you?”

“What are you talking about?”

Boris chuckled. “She didn’t tell you. Oh, this is priceless.”

Seeing Montana storm out the back door of the club, I pursued him. “Go to hell, asshole.”

“Oh, brother. I love our conversations. Now, before you catch up with your friend and come up with a plan that won’t work, you should know *that* I will take great pleasure in what I am about to do. As for that biker thug, when you see him, tell him I know where my silver-haired beauty is at. He better hurry. And finally, for that Irlandscky Prizak, you and your friends put in my organization? Oh, do I have plans for him. When I find him, he will receive a proper Bratva punishment for his betrayal. Maybe I will sever his head and gift it to your Italian whore.”

Before I could formulate a reply, the fucker hung up laughing, saying, “Let the game begin.”

Running for the backdoor, I slammed the door open to find Montana leaning against the wall smoking a cigarette.

“Not now, Maxim. I’ve had a shit night.”

“And it’s about to get worse. Petrovitch made his move. I can’t find Illyria. The Romano’s are in a gunfight near Port Authority and to make matters worse, our mole blew his cover. He needs to be extracted immediately.”

“Jesus, fuck,” Montana cursed, throwing his half-smoked cigarette on the ground before walking back into the club. “Where is Mercy?”

“Sent him and Vladmir to pick up our mole. It’s going to be close. Hope the idiot’s armed. When I called Renaldo, I could hear gunfire and men yelling. I haven’t been able to get him to answer. But I need your help in finding Illyria.”

“I left her over near the offices. Largo was here.”

“Mercy’s wife?”

“Ex-wife. Fucking bitch saw me and ran. Disappeared into the fucking crowd.”

“What the hell was she doing here?”

“No fucking clue. Problem for another day. Let’s find your wife and get the fuck out of here,” he said, as we looked over the growing crowd. It was going to be like looking for a needle in the haystacks. People could barely move around.

Packed tight, it was standing room only.

“Fuck this shit,” Montana growled, right before he stormed over to the DJ’s booth, grabbing the microphone from him. The second the music stopped, he yelled. “Party is fucking over. Get the fuck out!”

When no one moved, he added, “NOW!”

As the club patrons dispersed, Giovanni walked over with his wife. Vicious and Linsey were right behind him. Several of my men stood guard, making sure there were no problems as the club emptied. Seeing Nikandr, I told him to keep an eye out for Illyria.

“What’s wrong?”

“Have any of you seen Illyria?” I asked.

“She left with Montana after you stormed off,” Giovanni growled, then looked directly at my friend. “Tell me you didn’t leave my sister unattended.”

“I saw someone I needed to speak with. The whole fucking place is full of our men. She couldn’t have gone far.”

“You don’t know Illyria,” my niece whispered.

For the first time since I met my sister’s daughter, I agreed with her. Illyria Valentinetti was cunning. If she wanted to disappear, this was the perfect event to do so and considering how I’ve been treating her these last few days, I wouldn’t put it past her.

“We need to send some men to the Port Authority. Romano’s men are under fire.” Montana stated, as Giovanni turned and whispered to a cousin of his, who nodded, quickly leaving with a few of his men. “What else?”

“Petrovitch called me. He said let the games begin. He was here tonight. In the crowd. He saw all of us. He said a lot of cryptic shit that could mean anything, but knowing him, it’s important.”

“Like what?” Montana asked as he typed into his phone.

“I need to find Illyria. Where the hell is she?”

“Texting Phippen to activate her tracker. We will know where she is soon enough. What did the fucknut say, Max? Think.”

Running my hands through my hair, I said, “He said something about the biker thug. That he knows where the silver-haired beauty is at. That he better hurry.”

Movement close to all of us had all of us turning as Malice stormed out of the club.

“Fuck,” Montana groaned. “Fury, follow him.”

“He said he knows what Illyria has been keeping from us. He knows her secret.”

“Did he say what it could be?” Giovanni asked, covering the speaker of his phone as he talked into it.

I shook my head. “No. He taunted me with the information. He said it was something she did.”

“Did?” Layla questioned. “That makes no sense. What could Illyria have done that she would need to keep from everyone? I mean, unless she was hiding something like a pregnancy, I can’t think of anything.”

My head snapped at my niece. “What the fuck did you just say?”

“Think about it. Illyria’s life is an open book, with every detail that she wishes to share, being splashed across papers across the globe for the general public to read. But her personal life isn’t. She keeps that part hidden. There are only a few family members who know the real Illyria. Luciano knew the most. They were tight. When he died at the wedding, she pulled away from the family. She threw herself into the company. She stopped going to parties and such. Which isn’t like her at all.”

“Get to the point, *Tesoro*,” Giovanni growled.

“My point is, there isn’t much Illyria hides but something like a pregnancy, she would. I know I would and did. The second I found out I was pregnant, I had Giovanni take me to the island. I don’t want anyone to know about my children. Not after the life I’ve lived. I want them protected. The only other person who might know something is her housekeeper, Mrs. Rushton. That woman adores Illyria. Practically raised her from birth.”

“Maxim?” Giovanni questioned. “Is it possible?”

“No. I can’t have children. I had a vasectomy right after I left Russia. There is no way I was going to bring a child into my life. Besides, Illyria is on the pill. It’s impossible.”

“Not necessarily,” Linsey muttered. “Unless you followed up with your three-month checkup and a yearly checkup, it’s possible that you can still have kids, Mr. Fedorov. Vicious has been talking with a doctor about possibly getting the procedure done. The doctor we talked to was very clear. The follow-up appointments are to verify the procedure

worked. He said that about fifteen percent of men who have a vasectomy never go to the follow-ups and end up still being fertile.”

“Did you go to the follow-up appointments?” Layla asked, as I slowly shook my head. I thought it was a one and done. That fucking prick I saw never said anything about needing further appointments. I just wanted the problem fixed.

“She wouldn’t keep something like that from me.”

“Are you sure?” Layla challenged. “Because after what you did to her last year, I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t tell you shit.”

“This is ridiculous. She wasn’t pregnant. There is no baby. It has to be something else. Who else would know about her private life besides Mrs. Rushton?”

“Sal,” Giovanni said. “But he’s not answering his phone. He was running late to the opening. He texted saying he was going to be late. He never showed.”

Just then, Montana’s phone rang. “Whatcha got, kid? Excuse me? How the fuck? I thought you said that damn thing worked everywhere. Worldwide! You know what? Never mind. Just fix it and find her.”

Hanging up the phone, Montana muttered. “We need to head to the clubhouse. Pippen said the tracker isn’t working. He can’t find her anywhere. Vicious, take Linsey home then head to the clubhouse. Giovanni, you are more than welcome to stow your wife at my club. She will be safe there.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Illyria

TRIGGER WARNING: *This chapter is a graphic representation of rape and physical abuse. If you suffer from any triggers, PLEASE-PLEASE, take extreme caution before reading this chapter. Your health is more important to me than my fictional story.*

I thought I knew pain.

I was wrong.

The second I came face to face with Boris Petrovitch, I knew I was in trouble. The man didn't think twice before pointing a gun at my stomach, forcing me to follow him out of the club and into a waiting car. The second the car doors closed I knew what everyone had been trying to tell me. They were right. Boris Petrovitch didn't want Valentinetti Corporation. He wanted me and he showed me exactly how much too when he wasted no time backhanding me across the face as he revealed his true, sinister nature.

By the time we made it to his private plane, I could barely walk and had to be dragged onto the waiting plane. Thrown into a seat, one of his men hauled off and punched me, breaking my nose. There was no talking to these men. Each more vicious than the next.

All they cared about was how much pain they could inflict.

I would have thought that as the plane taxied the runway, Petrovitch would have at least given me a reprieve from his assault, but I was wrong.

So very wrong.

I didn't remember the plane landing.

Nor did I remember the drive from the airport.

All I knew was one minute I was staring at what I thought my worst nightmare was, then the next, he showed me how much of a nightmare he was.

Sitting in a chair, my hands bound tightly behind me, I tried to slow my beating heart. “*Gde nakhoditsya mladenec?*”

“What?” I slurred, as a cane swooshed in the air before landing on my bare thighs, making me scream out in pain.

“Where is the *mladenec?*”

Tears ran down my face as I slowly shook my head. “I don’t understand what you are asking. Please. I’ll give you anything you want. I’ll sign the company over to you. It’s yours. Just please stop hitting me.”

The men around me laughed as Boris Petrovitch bent forward, his arms resting on his knees. “You think this is about your family’s company? You stupid Italian whore. You are a means to an end. You are nothing to me. Just an annoying blip I plan to snuff out as soon as you give me what I want.”

“What do you want?”

“I want your husband dead.”

I gulped.

“You want Maxim?”

The second his name left my lips someone struck me hard with the cane on my back, causing me to gasp in pain.

Growing up, my mother and father never punished me. They didn’t believe in corporal punishment. My father would kill anyone who dared hit me. That’s not including what my brothers would do. Not even Max. As angry as I made him, he never, not once, raised his hand to me in anger. So, it was a physical shock to be struck, slapped, punched, beaten as if I was nothing more than an insignificant nobody.

There was no rhyme or reason to his assault.

He hit me if I answered.

He hit me if I didn’t.

There was no leeway, no middle ground.

I was in trouble.

Even I was smart enough to realize that unless Maxim found me quickly, I wasn’t walking away from this man alive.



Beads of cold sweat slide down my forehead as I try to lift my head, gasping for breath.

I hurt everywhere. In fact, I didn't think there was a spot on my body that wasn't bruised.

The men who took me were angry. I knew that much. They liked to show me how angry they were with their fist. Speaking in Russian, cursing every chance they got. They showed me exactly what they thought of me. The funny thing was, I didn't think it was me they wanted because they kept shouting at me for something else.

They wanted *mladenec*. Whatever the hell that was.

They constantly asked for the *mladenec*.

What the fuck was a *mladenec*?

I didn't speak Russian.

I barely spoke Italian, and I *was* Italian.

Nothing mattered. I knew I wasn't getting out of this place alive.

I wasn't stupid. I knew who took me.

He was the worst of them all. I knew men could be violent. I just never imagined. I never thought. God, I was so fucking stupid. Everything I thought was wrong. So many tried to tell me, but I didn't listen. Now I was going to learn a lesson I didn't want to learn.

I could have told them I was a slow learner. Not that they would listen to me, anyway. They preferred to let their hands do the teaching.

The sheet behind my bed blew against the headboard as the wind drifted into the room. I could smell the sweet scent of rain.

Had it rained or was I imagining it?

I was so confused. I didn't know if it was day or night, summer or fall. All I knew was that the longer I stayed here, the

harder it was going to be for Maxim to find me.

Stumbling over to the window, I looked out into the darkness of the night. Not a star in the sky as clouds settled over the area. There was a definite chill in the air and if I listened carefully, I could almost hear the ocean off in the distance.

Was I on an island?

A beach maybe?

There was a noise outside the door.

I stood as still as I could, and listened, praying they weren't coming to see me again. I barely survived their last visit.

My body couldn't take much more of their abuse.

I heard a key being inserted into the lock.

I wanted to scream at them to leave me alone, but it would do no good.

I was their prisoner, and they reminded me of that every time I saw them.

The doorknob turned.

My heart raced as I panicked.

I slowly slid to the floor, cowering in the darkness. Tears ran down my face as he entered. I feared his men, but this vile fucker was the worst.

"Get her on the bed," he ordered, as he took off his suit jacket, folding it neatly before laying it across the back of a wooden chair. I didn't move when his men approached. I tried not to show any fear, but when his men grabbed for me, I whimpered and tried to scurry away.

Once on the bed, his men handcuffed me to the headboard. They did that, so I wouldn't fight back. They tied my legs to the footposts tightly because the first time they showed me what they thought of women, I kicked out and I broke one of the men's noses.

The bastard still sported two blackeyes from my effort.

"Mrs. Fedorov. I am losing my patience with you."

“What do you want? I told you I don’t know what it is you want,” I said, my voice scratchy and in desperate need of water. “Please let me go. I’ll find whatever it is. I won’t stop until I do.”

I couldn’t remember the last time they brought me anything to eat or drink. Not that I would accept anything from these assholes. I just wanted them to leave me alone.

I was so fucking tired. I hurt everywhere, but they never gave me any rest. Only mere minutes before they returned and started their assault all over again.

“I have run out of patience with you. Where is the *mladenec*?”

“I don’t know,” I muttered, saying the same thing repeatedly. Not that I would tell him anything. Whatever he was looking for, he wasn’t going to get any help from me.

“I will ask you one more time. Where is the *mladenec*?”

“Fuck you!” I screamed, tired of this shit.

Boris Petrovitch sighed, getting to his feet as he slowly removed his white shirt. “Exactly my thought as well.”

What? Thought what? Why did he always speak in fucking riddles?

“Bring in the other. Let him watch,” Boris ordered, as two men left the room. “Oh, *zehna moego brata*, I knew you wouldn’t break. Not my brother’s wife. Maxim would only marry someone as strong as him. Too bad for you that you are a woman.”

“Cut the crap, asshole, and just tell me what you really want. And do us both a favor and speak in English. I don’t speak Russian!”

Boris tsked, shaking his head. Grinning, he sighed. “How could my brother marry a whore like you? Italian scum. You sully our family with your blood.”

“Who the fuck are you calling scum, dickhead?”

Boris roared with laughter. “That’s what offends you? Not whore?”

Before I could respond, the door opened as two of Petrovitch's men dragged a beaten and broken man into the room. His head covered with a sack. He hung limply in their arms. Boris stepped to the side as his men shackled the unconscious man to the wall, giving the unknown man the perfect view of me laying naked on the bed.

The next thing I knew, one man ripped off the sack as another threw a bucket of water on the unconscious man, causing him to wake with a start. Roaring out, he cursed violently as he struggled and fought with the chains that bound him.

Gasping, I shook my head. "Sal?"

"Illyria," my brother's raspy voice barely spoke.

Screaming loudly, I tried to free myself from the bed as Boris laughed. "I'm going to fucking kill you! Dead! You son of a bitch!"

His laughter rang out as he unbuttoned his pants. "Scream all you want. I love it when whores fight me."

Shaking my head frantically, Salvatore growled, "Leave her alone, you son of a bitch! I'll give you what you want. Just leave my sister alone."

That stopped Boris as he gave my brother his undivided attention.

"So, she told you about the *mladenec*? Tell me where the *mladenec* is and I will walk away."

"The what?" Sal's head immediately snapped to mine.

His eyes were wide with shock.

"He keeps asking for the *mladenec*, but I don't know what the word means?" I cried.

"He wants the infant. What infant is he talking about, Illyria?"

No. It was impossible.

I refused to believe he knew.

There was no fucking way.

“Illyria? What is he talking about?”

“Enough talking!” Boris roared, removing his pants as his men walked over to Sal. “Time to show you how real men treat whores.”

“He will kill you!” I screamed, as the vile fucker dropped his underwear and started stroking his dick. “Max will fucking kill you!”

Walking towards me, I fought my restraints hard, trying to get away from him. My brother was shouting, begging him to leave me alone. Boris’s men punched and hit my brother as the fat vile fucker kneeled on the bed between my spread legs.

I cringed, trying desperately to hold back the bile my body desperately wanted to expel as I felt his breath against my face as he whispered. “Scream loud, you Italian whore. I want my brother to hear you from across the country.”

My body trembled in fear as Boris shoved his fingers deep into my bare pussy. Crying out, I tried to pull away from him, but his weight held me hard against the bed, as he pushed his fingers deeper.

“Baby?” Sal’s gruff voice penetrated the screams in my head. Turning to look at my brother, I heard him say as tears ran freely down his face. “It’s gonna be okay, baby. I promise. Just close your eyes and find a happy place. Remember the times with mom and dad on the island? How much fun we had? Remember, baby? Remember the island.”

Doing as my brother said, I closed my eyes and thought of the island. I almost had it pictured in my head, when a sharp pain lanced my face, making me open my eyes immediately.

“You will not ignore me!” Boris shouted, punching my face again as Salvatore roared, threatened and fought to free himself from the wall.

A click of a gun silenced the room instantly as I looked away from Boris to find one of his men with a gun to my brother’s head.

Boris chuckled. “He says another word. Kill him.”

Tears ran down my face as my eyes locked with my brother's.

“Sally?”

There was nothing more we could do.

This was going to happen and neither of us could stop it.

Refusing to give him what he wanted, I laid there.

Motionless.

A loud SMACK followed by his hand wrapping tightly around my throat grabbed my attention.

“You will scream for me if it's the last thing you do.”

“Fuck you.”

Though my body ached from his men's torturous abuse, I refused to give into his demands when he slammed his cock into me.

I turned my head and stared at my brother, who's silently pleaded with me, begging me to stay strong. I wanted so much to tell him I wouldn't break. I was a Valentinetti. My family came from Italy where men were strong, but the women were stronger. My mother raised me to stand firm and to show no fear.

I would survive this.

I knew I would.

As he grunted above me, using my body to exact his revenge, my eyes never left Sal's. My big brother. The one who loved me the most. My best friend. My confidant. I should have told him everything. I knew he would understand. I wanted to so many times. To confide in him. To tell him my biggest secret. But I never did. I couldn't. The risk was too great. I knew he would understand when the time came. Only he would understand the reason for my silence.

He was like me.

We were the same.

Boris hauled off and slapped me hard. Once more, gaining my attention.

“You fucking cunt!” he shouted, pumping his dick into me.
“Scream!”

Turning my head once more, I plainly said, “No,” as I looked at my brother and took solace from him. Every wonderful childhood memory I had was because of Salvatore.

“KILL HIM!” Boris roared, his body frantically terrorizing mine as I watched in horror as my brother whispered, “I love you, baby girl,” before the man holding the gun to my brother’s head and fired.

I screamed.

I screamed until my voice no longer had a voice.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Maxim

“Where is she?!” I roared, grabbing the young Sinner named Phippen by his cut, lifting him off his feet as if he were a ragdoll. Slamming him against the wall, I shouted, “You told me you could track her. Anywhere in the world. So, where the fuck is my wife?!”

The clicks of guns drew my attention. I saw out of the corner of my eye several of the Soulless Sinners all had weapons aimed at me. My friend, Montana, included. “Put him down, Maxim. He can’t find her if you kill him.”

Dropping the young man to the floor, I turned to face the man I called my friend and sneered, “I trusted him. I trusted you. She was in your care when she disappeared. I should kill you where you stand!”

Montana narrowed his eyes and hissed, “You can try it, but I won’t be the only one dying tonight. Now calm the fuck down.”

“Prez,” the young kid said, standing up and righting himself. “I didn’t make a mistake. My tracker works. I know it does. I tried it on my pet rat, Squiggy. I implanted a tracker in him and let him lose in the city. I tracked him for days before I found him. It works. I swear it does.”

“Talk fast kid, the big Russian is about to blow.”

“We all assumed that if Petrovitch took Mrs. Fedorov, he would keep her on the ground. What if he didn’t? What if he took her airborne? I didn’t account for air.”

“What?” Payne asked, lowering his gun. “Like air travel?”

“Like thirty thousand feet in the air.” Phippen admitted.

“You think that bastard has my sister on a plane?” Giovanni spoke up.

Phippen nodded. “It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Can you reconfigure your tracker for air travel?” Montana asked.

Pippen shook his head. “No Prez. There is no way to track her if she’s in the air.”

“That’s not true,” Giovanni said, shaking his head. “There is someone who knows how to track the air. I’ve seen him do it when Reaper and I were looking for Capribella and he’s in this very building.”

“I really fucking hate that kid. Payne, go get the pain in my ass,” Montana ordered, then looked at me. “Max, I need you to think. You know Petrovitch better than any of us. You’ve dealt with him the longest. Where would he take Illyria?”

“If he’s airborne, he could go anywhere. He has safe houses all over the world,” I said, just as the clubhouse doors opened and in stumbled Renaldo Romero, carrying the body of Maria Valentinetti.

Giovanni and I rushed over to him as he fell to his knees.

“Renaldo,” Giovanni whispered, placing his hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“They’re all dead. There were too many of them. We weren’t strong enough,” he said, as tears ran down his face. Looking up at me, he added. “They wanted me to give you a message. The housekeeper is next.”

The seconds Renaldo spoke those words, Happy raced from the clubhouse as if his ass were on fire. As Montana and several of the club brothers ran after him, I helped Giovanni take Maria from Renaldo as he sat, holding his head in his hands.

Placing my fingers at her throat, I closed my eyes and shook my head. “She’s gone.”

Giovanni screamed out as he gathered his cousin in his arms, rocking her lifeless body back and forth. My niece ran into the room, skidding to a stop upon seeing her husband grieve the loss of another family member. Slowly getting to my feet, I turned to Dmitry and Aleksandr. “Find Salvatore Valentinetti and bring him here. I refuse to let my woman lose another loved one.”

“What happened?” Layla whispered, as she stared at her husband, rocking Maria. Walking over to her, I reached for her shoulders and spoke softly, “I’m sorry. There was nothing I could do.”

“Mr. Fedorov?”

Turning, Sypher walked towards me. “Mr. Payne told me. I can find her for you.”

I nodded as the kid quickly turned, leaving the room with Pippen.

“What the fuck happened?” Payne asked.

“What always happens when Petrovitch is around. Death.”



Hours had gone by with still no word as to where Illyria was. The longer she was with him, the more pain he was going to inflict. I tried not to let that knowledge eat away at me, but as the clock ticked away, I knew finding her alive was slowly becoming a dream.

Sitting in the boardroom, I stared into nothing as Montana groaned, rubbing his hands down his face as he leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees. He looked tired. We all were. Me more than any. I hadn’t slept since I learned the fucker had her.

I couldn’t.

Every time I tried to close my eyes, all I heard were her screams, I saw her broken and worn body. All the planning, all the preparations, were for nothing.

“Any word from the families?”

“No,” I growled. “You?”

“Nothing.”

“You got your family locked down?”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Tessa ain’t fucking happy, but I don’t give a fuck. Got the board members quarantined to the clubhouse.”

“Malice?”

“Still hasn’t reported in,” Montana barely said. “He won’t either until he’s found her.”

I knew he was worried about his enforcer, but the man could take care of himself. I’d seen him in action. If he went down, he wouldn’t be going alone. “Have you called and told Giovanni yet?”

“No.”

An hour ago, Happy returned to the clubhouse, a shell of a man. No longer his namesake, he informed us he had found Mrs. Rushton. Someone shot and killed her while she was walking home from the grocery store in a drive-by shooting. We all knew who it was.

Tonight, blood ran in the streets of the city, I claimed, and I feared this was only the beginning. Salvatore Valentinetti was officially missing. No one knew where he was. When I sent my men to find him, they came back empty-handed, telling me someone had broken into his penthouse. The place was a mess, and he was nowhere to be found.

We all knew who it was.

He told me himself.

A knock at the door had both of us turning as Vladimir and Mercy walked in. They both looked like shit. Both haggard and exhausted. Mercy slowly shook his head as Vladimir walked over to me and handed me a piece of cloth.

Flipping it over, I took a deep breath.

“He wasn’t there, boss. We scoured the area. That’s all we found.”

Nodding, both men quickly left as I placed the Golden Skull patch on the table between me and Montana. Sitting back in my chair, neither of us could take our eyes off the patch.

One more sin I was going to have to atone for.

My woman would never forgive me.

“He could still be alive. You know that Maxim.”

I nodded. “Or he’s dead. Either way, our options are running out fast.”

“I can call the Diamondbacks. Kansas will help.”

“You really want to put your baby brother in his line of sight? What about Kali and the kids?”

“No,” he moaned. “I don’t.”

“Then you know what we have to do.”

“He’s been in seclusion for months, Maxim. Refuses to see anyone. We don’t even know if he’s sane.”

“Maybe that’s what we need. Someone who doesn’t give a fuck anymore.”

“Oh, I can guarantee he doesn’t have any fucks to give. The man lost everything, and I mean everything. He’s barely holding onto his sanity by a thread. We bring him back to life and all hell is going to break loose.”

Getting to my feet, I buttoned my suit jacket. “Good. Maybe that’s what we need. Hell on earth just might save us all. Grab his bag. He’s going to need his shit.”

Montana cursed, “Fuck.”

Turning to leave the boardroom, Montana, right behind me, carrying a large duffle bag over his shoulder, we both headed for the stairs that led down into the basement of the Soulless Sinner Clubhouse. The dark musty smell permeated the hall as we passed the club’s mailroom, our attention focused on a door at the end of the hall. I stopped before the door as I reached around my neck for the key I kept on a chain.

Montana did the same.

“For the record. This is a bad idea. We still have people we can reach out to.”

“Don’t care. That motherfucker has my wife. I will burn this city to the fucking ground to get her back and if unleashing the very hell that can make it happen works, then so be it,” I

growled, looking at the bag at Montana's feet. "This is my call. I made a fucking promise to him. Fucking swore a damn blood oath. We both did. He fucking finds out we knew and didn't tell him, he will come after us. Fuck, Montana. His God damned temper is legendary. We all agreed to this fucked up plan. You knew it was a shit plan from the start.

"If that fucking Irish idiot hadn't blown his cover, then none of this would be happening."

"Well, he did," I sighed, knowing the plan wouldn't last forever.

We never intended it to. We had an endgame. "The bastard is in the damn wind, maybe even dead. If he's alive, he's the only one who can find him and you know it."

"For the record, this is a bad fucking idea," Montana barely said, and I had to agree. It was a bad idea all around. Why I agreed to go along with this asinine plan in the first place was beyond me. But it was done. I wanted my wife home and if bringing the dead back to life would ensure her return, then so be it. Petrovitch would never see him coming. Over the last few years, our mole had accomplished the impossible. He infiltrated Petrovitch's organization and gathered a lot of information for us. Everything was working perfectly until it wasn't.

Now we were scrambling to control the fallout.

The bodies were piling up fast, and this was the only way to stop him. "We are out of options. We knew this wasn't going to last. Fucking miracle it lasted as long as it did. He is the only one who will know where to find our Irish mole. We have no choice. Or do you want to walk away and let the chips fall where they lay?"

He growled, "You know I don't."

"Then we are releasing the devil," I said, inserting my key into the lock as Montana took a deep breath and inserted his key next to mine.

Together, we turned our keys and unlocked the door.

The only way we would ever have a chance at finding Illyria and ending Petrovitch was to bring in the one

motherfucker who had nothing more to lose and no more fucks to give. It was a gamble, and this could go very fucking wrong, but we were out of options.

Opening the door, Montana followed me into the dimly lit room as I looked around. The room wasn't much. Then again, the bastard never asked for much.

Just a bed and a lone picture.

Sitting with his back to us, we entered the room.

The first thing I noticed was the large Golden Skull tattoo on his back, mocking us as we moved closer. Almost as if it watched our every move, condemning us for our failure. Never imagined a fucking tattoo chastising me, but there it was, glaring at me.

I bet if I looked closely, I would see it shaking its head in disgust.

Neither of us knew what state he would be in.

Total isolation could drive even the most normal person insane. Considering he was borderline crazy to begin with, well, his mental state was anyone's guess.

When we came up with this plan, none of us knew the outcome.

It was a Crapshoot. A gamble.

We all had our reasons for ending Petrovitch. We all had something to lose.

Montana wanted to protect his club.

I wanted to protect Illyria.

And he wanted to protect his wife.

It had been months since I saw him last.

The night we forced his hand.

I didn't know what I expected, but not the fit, muscular man that was before me. It was as if time didn't touch him. His hair was longer and the beard he sported gave him a more sinister look. He never moved from his spot as we walked closer. Hunched over, holding the only personal effect he had

brought with him. His thumb slowly moved over her beautiful face.

Walking around so I could get a better look at him, I noticed the scar on his forehead. The forever reminder of what he did to ensure her safety and the lies he told to protect those he cared most about.

What this man endured was beyond comprehension. Most men would break, but not him.

Never him.

I didn't know what life he would lead after all of this.

He lost everything that ever mattered to him.

He severed too many allegiances.

Hurt too many people.

Betrayed everyone.

Montana looked at me and said nothing.

What was there to say? We asked him to do the unthinkable, and we were looking at the aftermath. Before us sat a soulless man. A man who lost everything. His family, his brothers, his club, the love of his life. For what? In the end, he was right.

He warned us it wouldn't work. He told us the risk was too great, but with no other options, he relented. His only stipulation. That we protect her at all costs. No matter what, she came first. We agreed, and he ensured she would never return. What he did wasn't pretty. We knew it wouldn't be, but to put an end to the threat, one of us had to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Any of us could have been in his position.

He just drew the short straw.

Leaning against the wall, I sighed.

“We have a problem. Petrovitch discovered our mole. He's in the wind.”

Our friend said nothing as he continued to stroke the picture in his hand, as if it was the only thing in the world keeping him sane.

Knowing him, it probably was.

“Petrovitch has Illyria.”

Still nothing. Not even a flinch of emotion.

“Our plan is unraveling. It’s time. We need you to reclaim what is rightfully yours,” I said, as Montana dropped his bag at his feet.

He sighed, hanging his head, as he gently placed her photo on the bed beside him.

Bending over, he unzipped the bag as the contents shined brightly, clean and ready for their owner. I said nothing as he ran his finger along the long, sharp blades, reacquainting himself with their cold feel. Grabbing the handles of the bag, he picked it up and placed it on the bed.

“Is she alive?” he asked. His hard, gruff voice barely said as his words echoed around the room. I knew damn well he wasn’t talking about Illyria. This was never about her. My woman got caught in the middle because of my involvement and if he refused to help, I would lose her forever.

“Yes,” I affirmed. At least I could give him that.

It was the only small consolation I could give.

Standing to his full height, I pushed off the wall, not knowing what to expect. He wasn’t the man I remembered. What stood before me was a wildcard with nothing more to lose. So, when he turned his eyes on mine, I wasn’t shocked to see death looking back at me. There was no life in him. He was a shell of his former self.

He’d endured too much.

He would never be the man he was once.

This life hardened him.

“We need to bring you up to speed as soon as you’re ready,” Montana stated cautiously as he removed items from his bag, laying them out carefully, as if they were the most precious items in the world.

“Speak.”

The man had been through enough already. I wasn't going to make him wait any longer. Taking the bull by the horns, I informed, "You were right. Sergio Pavlov worked under Petrovitch. You were right about everything. Petrovitch, Capribella and Bianchi were all working together. The orphanage you had us look into was a front, owned and operated by Petrovitch. Capribella sold the babies to the highest bidder. Petrovitch shipped the mothers to Bianchi's in Italy, where he used them for his breeding farm. All three of them used Pavlov's connection to Reynolds to smooth the way. With Benson Graves working the numbers, they had everything wrapped tight. No one was the wiser."

"Maxim's right," Montana added. "Everything you suspected has come to fruition. Thanks to Graves, Petrovitch knows everything about all of us. He's been biding his time, waiting for the perfect time to attack. Well, he struck. He took Illyria and now has eyes on your wife. She's the only puzzle piece we couldn't figure out. There is much about her past that we don't know. But we think it has something to do with her birth parents. Only there is nothing on them. They were fucking high school sweethearts, for crying out loud. They came from normal, everyday families. They were nobodies. So, fucking far off everyone's radar, they should have lived a relatively normal existence." Montana growled, frustrated.

"To make matters worse, if that isn't enough, Petrovitch discovered our mole's identity. Last we heard, he was close to finding everything out when we received his distress signal tonight. By the time our men got to the extraction site, he was nowhere to be found. All they found was this," I said, handing him the patch Vladimir gave me.

He said nothing as he took it from me.

His fist gripped it tightly.

"Is he dead?"

"We don't know," Montana sighed, running his hands through his hair. "I've got my clubs out searching for him. He's been under since the wedding. He could have gone native for all we know. Until we find him and he tells us what happened,

we're in the dark. Let's hope your boy knows how to lie low. But we think he's going for reinforcements."

"Which means he's putting everyone in danger," I stated, adding, "I've sent a message and alerted them, but after everything they've been through, they won't survive another attack."

Throwing on a clean shirt, he tucked it into his jeans. Reaching back into his bag, he pulled out his leather cut. Shaking it out, he quickly put it on. After pocketing the picture, he reached for his blades, slipping them into the leather holster on his back. After securing them, he picked up his two Glocks and checked the clips to make sure they were full.

Ready for war, he zipped up his bag. Holding the handle, he threw it over his shoulder as he walked past us, heading for the door.

"What are you going to do?" Montana asked.

He stopped, turned and looked at the both of us before saying, "What I should have done in the first place."

"And that is?" I asked.

"Reap souls."

To be continued...

To read the stunning conclusion, check out Maxim: Bratva of NYC (Book One).

The Valentinetti Family

Giovanni Valentinetti: The oldest son of Valentine and Nicoletta Valentinetti. Giovanni took over the family business when his father and uncle died in a car bomb at the family's compound in Chicago, Illinois.

Being the eldest son, Giovanni prepared from infancy to lead the Valentinetti Family in the future. Strong willed and determined to do right by his family, Giovanni ruled over his siblings with care and sometimes a firm hand.

Aligning himself with the Golden Skulls MC, Giovanni met the love of his life, Layla Franks, the sister to Dylan Franks, or better known as the assassin of the Golden Skulls, Bullseye.

Layla Capribella Franks. Layla is the daughter of Sabastian Capribella and Donna Franks (sister to Maxim Fedorov). Held captive and tortured by her father for years before being rescued by her brother Dylan Franks (Bullseye) and other members of the Golden Skulls Motorcycle Club.

Giovanni and Layla are married and have a daughter and a son.

To read Giovanni's story, click [here](#)

Salvatore Valentinetti: Hot head of the family. As the second son, Salvatore knew he was the spare. The back-up if anything ever happened to Giovanni. Like his older brother, their father groomed Salvatore from infancy to run the family. Beside his brother, Salvatore learned everything he could, eventually going his own way to make a life for himself, until his family called upon him.

Over the years, Salvatore stuck close to the family, until Giovanni stepped down and handed the family over to him. Salvatore didn't want to be the head of the family. He cared more about his own life than the one he grew up in.

However, Salvatore never told his family no.

Salvatore died trying to save his sister, Illyria.

Salvatore never married and had one son, Henry.

Lorenzo Valentinetti: (Twin) The playboy of the family, Lorenzo took nothing seriously. Preferring to party away his life instead of taking an active role within the family. Until one night changed everything. No longer able to finagle his way out of trouble, Lorenzo sought help from his family when he met Donatella.

The sister of his slain best friend.

Donatella Stevens is a savant. Gifted beyond measure, she prefers spending her time in books and her lab, creating new and exciting innovations to help further society. Donatella wasn't impressed with Lorenzo when they first met as she thought him an imbecile with a feeble mind.

Married to Donatella Stevens.

They have one son.

To read Lorenzo's story, click [here](#)

Luciano Valentinetti: (Twin) The soft-hearted brother of the family, Luciano preferred his paintings and canvas to real life. He loved his family and adored spending time with his sister, Illyria. Always eager to help the family when needed, Luciano looked at life differently than his siblings. He saw beyond the hardships of being a Valentinetti and understood what really mattered to his family.

Luciano died at the Golden Wedding.

Antonio Valentinetti: The youngest male and family attorney, Antonio Valentinetti, tried to distance his personal life and work life from the family, having already met the love of his life. He refused to have his wife tainted by his family.

Grace Meadows is the daughter of Army Col. Nathan Meadows. Believing her father died in Afghanistan, Grace tried to move on with her life when she met and fell in love with Antonio. Their courtship was brief before they married, where she continued to live her life, hidden away from his family.

Antonio is married to Grace.

They have two children, a daughter, Nicole and a son.

To read Antonio's story, click [here](#)

Illyria Valentinetti: Only daughter and youngest sibling in the family. Illyria lived a privileged life, sheltered and protected by her father and older brothers. Raised to be the face of the Valentinetti Family, Illyria did as her family ordered, until she met Maxim Fedorov, the head of the East Coast Bratva.

Maxim Fedorov ran his Bratva cell with an iron fist. Known as the Bloodletter, he gave no second chances, until he met the one woman who would change everything for him.

Together they navigate the underworld, surrounded by lies and deceptions, until the truth comes out about them.

Illyria is married to Maxim Fedorov.

To read Illyria's story, click [here](#)

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