

*Owned*  
by the

# MAFIA BOSS

LAURA J. QUINN

Owned by the Mafia Boss

**The Wicked Billionaires Club - Book 3**



Laura J. Quinn

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## Chapter 1 - The Crash Meet

“Sir, sir, can you hear me?” I call out to the man trapped inside the vehicle. The airbag had deployed. He’s restrained by his seatbelt and remains motionless covered in blood.

Wearing gloves, I reach in and feel for a pulse. It’s faint but steady. “Can you hear me? You’ve been in a car accident, sir. We’re going to get you out of here and take good care of you. Can you tell me your name?”

His lips quiver, but no sound emerges. Blood covers everything, so it’s difficult to determine the source of the bleeding. I push aside the deflated airbag to get a better look. That’s when I catch sight of a gun holstered at his side. I recoil at the sight of it, but then remember I’m here to perform my job.

From above, I hear rustling and see Brian, the EMT assigned for tonight’s ride along, making his descent.

“What’ve we got here?” he asks, carrying a stretcher board and neck brace. “Are they alive?”

“Yes, I’ve got a steady pulse on a white male, adult, early thirties. I can’t determine the extent of his injuries until we can get him out of here.” I touch the man’s face gingerly, his eyes are mere slits. He blinks when I shine the little flashlight into them. “Pupils are equal and reactive.”

Brian peers in at him and then examines the door. “Damn, looks like we’ll need the jaws on this one. Sweet ride though, hope to hell he had insurance.”

“We need to get him out of there, quick,” I say forcing him to focus. Jeez, men and their cars.

Brian hurries off to retrieve the hydraulic scissors that will rip the door off like the lid off a tin can.

While I wait for Brian, I reach over and grip the driver’s left hand. His eyes flicker open as if startled, and they fix upon me with great intensity before they slide shut. But not before I saw their fierce anger, followed by the subsequent relief that I wasn’t...who? Is the gun for protection?

“Sir, can you squeeze my hand?” I grow anxious at his lack of response, fearing he’s slipping into unconsciousness. But then I feel the slight pressure around my fingers. “All right, good job. Now can you tell me your name?”

His eyes open a fraction and his gaze slides over to me as his lips move. “Se...Sebastian.”

“Sebastian, very good,” I say as pleasantly as I can muster. “Sebastian, can you tell me where it hurts? Any neck, hip, or back pain?”

He grimaces. “All...over.”

“Okay, we’re going to take good care of you,” I say, still gripping his hand. “But first we need to get you out of the car. Okay?”

Sebastian manages to groan a response, but at least he’s still conscious. I glimpse Brian making his way back over carrying the portable engine and the hydraulic scissors to cut through the crushed door. Thank God this EMS attendant is built like a linebacker.

I’ve got to prepare my patient for the noisy machine.

“Sebastian, you’re going to hear a really loud noise, don’t be alarmed. It’s the engine that powers the hydraulic device to get you out safely. You ready?”

He groans in the affirmative, turning to me. His eyes are piercing blue sapphires when they connect with mine. I give him a small smile to reassure him.

I signal Brian to let it rip. He fires up the portable engine and hauls over the heavy cutting tool. At about that time, the flashing blue and red lights of a patrol car come into view and we hear car doors slamming. A few seconds later, we see two officers with flashlights making their way down the embankment toward us. Brian makes steady progress in cutting through the door.

“Hi, Officer Reilly and Officer McKenna here,” says the older one in a brief introduction before he crouches down for a closer look at the wreckage. “What do we have here? Geez, almighty.” He turns to look at me. “Is he alive?”

“Yes, I think he’s going to make it,” I reply, willing Brian to hurry.

“You running the tags?” Reilly says to McKenna.

“Yeah, I got it,” he turns the tablet screen toward McKenna. “It’s him, or his car anyway.”

I turn to look at them. They know this guy?

“As soon as he’s talking.” O’Reilly says sternly, “We’ll want to have a word with him.”

Instinctively, I go on defense. The care of my patient is all that concerns me. “Look, the man’s been in a horrific accident, can you give him a minute?”

O’Reilly and McKenna exchange looks. “Do you have any idea who this is?”

“Yeah, he’s my patient,” I say, folding my arms across my chest.

O’Reilly snorts. “Sure, right up until you drop him off at the hospital, then the real doctors take over.”

I incline my head at them. “Officers, I *am* a doctor. I’m just doing rounds as part of my emergency medicine rotation,” I don’t bother explaining that I won’t technically be a doctor

until I graduate medical school a few months from now. I'm too busy enjoying the flustered looks on their faces.

“Oh...well, still,” O'Reilly says, regaining his composure. “Your patient there is none other than Sebastian Petrosky, the crown prince of the Russian organized crime syndicate.” He points at the vehicle. “This was probably some skirmish they were having with the Italians.”

“Jeez,” I say as Brian snaps off the door frame.

“Would you look at that ride,” the younger officer says in an awestruck tone. “That's the Lamborghini Avanzado Spyder.” He shakes his head. “What a fucking shame.”

“Yeah, do a thorough search, I bet we'll find all sorts of goodies in there,” O'Reilly says sardonically.

I think about the gun Sebastian has holstered beneath his jacket. I wonder if I should say something. But if he's carrying it legally, there's no crime committed here. Plus, Sebastian can barely keep his eyes open much less pose a serious threat to anyone. I'll be sure it's removed once we reach the hospital.

“Got it!” Brian says triumphantly, wrenching the door away.

“Let me in there,” I say, brushing past the two officers. I lean in with the neck brace in hand. “Sebastian, we're going to move you now, but first I'm going to stabilize your neck with this brace. Okay?”

Another groan.

I gently ease the brace around his neck and fasten it in place. As I'm doing so, his eyes flick open, piercing me with his

gaze. I'm momentarily transfixed by it before I withdraw from him. The rest of his face is a bruised and battered mess that's beginning to swell. But the bone structure beneath suggests a handsome face.

We ease him out onto the stretcher and strap his head down to prevent any neck injury. The cops are quick to offer a hand to help haul Sebastian up the embankment. Our patient seems slightly more alert now. I notice his eyes dart over to the cops. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear that's a smirk on that punching bag of a face.

"Hey, doc," O'Reilly says to me as we reach the top. "What hospital are you taking him to?"

I shoot him a look, as we lift Sebastian into the back of the ambulance. "Bellevue, but my patient won't be in any shape to answer questions for quite some time."

"Look, you do your job, and we'll do ours." He glares down at Sebastian. "We'll see you there, Petrosky."

I hop into the back with Sebastian as Brian shuts the doors behind us. Momentarily, I hear the engine roar to life and feel the ambulance lurch forward as we get back on the road on the way to the hospital.

I begin checking Sebastian's vital signs. As I examine his chest for broken ribs, my eyes come to rest upon the gun again. With everyone's safety in mind, I carefully remove the gun from its holster and move it to a safe distance. When I turn back to Sebastian, his eyes are open tracking my movements even as he lays immobile.

“All of your possessions will be returned to you,” I explain, holding his gaze.

He seems content with this, or he simply gives into exhaustion because his eyes slide shut.

I continue examining him, unbuttoning his shirt to get a better sense of the extent of his injuries. Despite the bruises and blood, a well-chiseled torso lies before me with abs most men would kill for.

Kill for.

I stare at him again, that battered face tells me nothing. Are the cops right? Is this the crown prince of the Russian mafia?

I start a drip of morphine to help ease his pain. Continuing my examination, I run my fingers down the length of his arm feeling for fractures and breaks. All I feel are hardened muscles rippling beneath his shirt.

My gloved hand slides down to his as I continue my assessment. When my fingers touch his palm, his hand gently encloses mine. Startled, I look at his face to find him staring back at me with those sapphire eyes.

“Please...hide it,” he says, it’s barely a whisper.

I frown at him. “What?”

“Can’t...find it,” he manages.

“Can’t find what?”

“Police...the gun.”

My stomach clenches. “You want me to hide the gun?”

His bruised lips form a half smile.

“Sebastian, is it true?” I say, leaning forward, whispering to him. “You’re Russian mafia?”

“Done...nothing wrong.”

I stare at him, but his eyes have slid shut again. No doubt the morphine is kicking in, mercifully easing his suffering.

I struggle with what to do. I finally land on the fact that he’s innocent until proven guilty. If the cops have a case, they’ll make it and haul his Russian ass away. But he’s asking me to help him...what do I do?

As if hearing my internal conflict, Sebastian’s eyelids rise. “Framed,” he says, “I’m a businessman...graduated from... Cornell University.”

Since when does the mafia attend Ivy League colleges? Who do I believe, him or the cops?

“Look me up...” a slight smile touches his lips though his eyes remain shut. “Google me.”

I chuckle despite the situation. “Believe me, I will, and if you don’t check out, the gun’s going straight to the authorities.”

His tortured smile widens. “What...what’s your name?”

The question catches me off guard. It’s an innocuous enough question that, technically, doesn’t violate any rules. “Uh, Madison.”



“Madison,” he whispers my name like a prayer. “My angel’s name...is Madison.”

I snort with laughter. “Trust me, I’m no angel,” I say, even as I move to hide the gun in my emergency medical bag. “But for now,” I lower my voice and whisper in his ear, “it’s hidden.”

He nods, a gentle warmth spreading across his face as he drifts into sleep.

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“What in the world are you still doing here?” says Dr. Emma Weiss, the new chief resident. She eyes me with a mix of incredulity and wonder. “You’ve worked a double shift. Go home already.”

I stop at the main nurses’ station with her. Her green scrubs hang from her tall slender frame. Her auburn hair is pulled back into its usual ponytail. This woman lives for the job. Rumor is, she’s divorced, and her ex has their two kids. Pot, meet kettle, I want to say. But instead, I reply, “Yeah, I am in a minute. I just wanted to check on a patient before I go.”

Her finely plucked brow shoots up. “What patient can’t wait for tomorrow?”

I shrug. “The valve replacement that came in this morning. I just want to look over her charts before I go, I have some thoughts on her case.”

Emma folds her arms across her chest. “You want to run them by me? I’d be interested to hear.”

“I was reading up on a new procedure that I thought she might be a good candidate for, but it depends on how well she’s responding to the current treatment,” I say, refusing to so much as blink. Emma has only been here six weeks and I’m still trying to determine whether she’s a friend or foe.

She eyes me dubiously, then steps aside. I give her a tight smile and head down the hall. I try like hell to remember which room they placed that patient in. I purposefully stride passed Sebastian Petrosky’s room and curse myself for being so obvious. Or am I being paranoid? Emma could honestly be concerned about one of their brightest medical students burning out.

Between my rounds, and the cops always sniffing around Sebastian’s room, it’s almost impossible to make my daily checks on him. My specific attention is no longer required, but the one time I missed a day from pure exhaustion, Sebastian inquired as to where I’d been and why I hadn’t come to see him. And so, I make it a point to stop in to see him for a few minutes every day.

After I swing by the valve replacement patient (just in case Emma is watching), I make my way back down to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor to Sebastian’s room. I glance down the hall before entering it, relieved to find that Emma is gone.

As I move down the hall, I again question my motives. I did my research on Sebastian the night we rescued him. He is the

eldest son of the late Alexi Petrosky, a Russian who was rumored to be a major crime boss back in Moscow. Alexi moved his family to the U.S. when Sebastian was eleven years old. A year or so later, Alexi had been gunned down during a business deal gone bad. His wife and youngest son returned to Moscow, while Sebastian was left behind in the U.S. to be raised by Alexi's brother, Sergei Petrosky.

As Sergei had no male heirs, it was widely held that Sebastian was his heir apparent. Sebastian for his part performed superbly in school and went on to earn an MBA with honors from Cornell University and was then recruited by Goldman Sachs Investment Banking firm as a securities analyst. Today, he runs several *legitimate* Russian import/export businesses along the East Coast as well as a small financial services company.

After a few days of interrogating Sebastian, it became apparent that the cops had no clear case against him and had found no incriminating evidence in his car. No mention at all was made of a gun or what evil it might have been used to accomplish. Based upon that, I informed Sebastian that I'd tossed his gun into the Hudson River.

It seemed to please him. *I seem to please him.*

I must confess that I did, of course I did, look up images of him as all I saw was a bruised and battered face with brilliant eyes. I'm not one to be caught up in looks and outward appearance, but damn if he wasn't one of the most gorgeous men I'd ever laid eyes on. He has a face that belongs on the

cover of a Calvin Klein cologne ad and a body that looks like it hasn't missed a single day in the gym. He wore his light brown hair a little on the long side for the business world, but he made it work.

Sebastian's been at the hospital recovering for about a week now. He's been moved into a private suite and is visited often by his work associates and a couple of police detectives. When I enter the room, Sebastian is sitting up in the bed tapping a text into his cell phone. His hair is neatly combed and he's wearing a personal pajama top, burgundy, and opened at the chest where I spy a medallion around his neck. When he glances up, his expression is cold and bleak, until he realizes it's me. A warm smile spreads across his face and it's like the sun rising on a cold winter's day.

"Dr. Graham, how good of you to come," he says with only the faintest hint of a Russian accent. "It's good medicine, seeing your smiling face." Though he'd suffered from blunt head trauma, an open tib-fib fracture, and some internal bleeding, he was well on his way to recovering. His face was still a canvas of purples and yellow from the bruising, but at least the swelling had gone down. Every day, his handsome face became more and more visible.

I pull up a chair next to his bed, careful not to knock over the fresh arrangement of flowers. I drop into the chair exhausted. "So, how's my favorite patient doing today?"

He frowns a little. "Better than you, I think. Has it been a rough day?"

I chuckle. “I know, I know, I must look dreadful.”

“Quite the contrary, Dr. Graham,” Sebastian smiles, but he winces as if the mere effort is painful. “Like I said, it’s good medicine to see the lovely face of the angel who saved me.”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t wipe the smile off my face. “Brian deserves just as much credit.”

“But he’s not nearly as pretty as you.”

“Ah,” I wave a finger at him, “that charm won’t knock a dime off your hospital bill.”

He chuckles and winces.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t make you laugh.”

“Sometimes a little pain is good, no?” he says with a devilish wink.

“I’m in the business of relieving pain, not causing it.”

“You wish to relieve my pain?”

That’s a loaded question if I ever heard one. “I haven’t spent four years in medical school for nothing.”

“When I get out of here,” he says slyly, “and they say it’s in a couple of days, will you please have dinner with me?”

Despite my exhaustion, my heart leaps in my chest. This guy, as charming and as handsome as his pictures indicate is still, in all probability, the crown prince of the Russian mafia. This little *thing* we seem to have during the recovery period must end the second he’s discharged from the hospital. I’m not

going to allow this little Florence Nightingale syndrome we've got going go beyond the confines of these hospital walls.

He sets those mesmerizing sapphire eyes upon me, they're compelling me, dragging compliance forth from me. I have to break free of his gaze lest he take me under.

"Sebastian, I don't think that'd be the best course of action."

"Why won't you have dinner with me? Tell me, Dr. Graham," he asks, his voice low, demanding my attention.

"I—" I clear my throat. "As much as I've been enjoying your company, I simply don't have the time to see you outside this place. As a fourth-year medical student, I have zero social life."

He frowns. "No social life at all?"

"Not really and it's only going to get worse," I attempt to explain unable to hold his gaze. "I'm fairly confident I'm going to get the surgical residency at Presbyterian Hospital, the cardiothoracic training program to be specific. At which time, I'll have no life to speak of. So, there's really no point in pretending I will."

The knee-buckling smirk is back, making me grateful that I'm sitting. "It's just one dinner, Madison. You name the place and time, I'll be there." The smile stretches wider, and he points to his face. "In a couple of weeks, the bruises will heal, and I won't be so hard to look at."

A bark of laughter escapes me. Even with the bruises, this man is not hard on the eyes, and he knows it. "That's

definitely not the problem. Besides, you don't owe me any thanks. I was just doing my job."

"Coming here to see me every day," he replies and holds me captive with those eyes, "Was that also part of the job?"

Did the room temperature just shoot up ten degrees? "Well, I work here. I pass by your room every day," I force a laugh in an attempt to deflect his insinuation. "It would've been rude of me not to pop in to say hello."

His expression falls, though his gaze doesn't falter. "What do I have to do to see you again? Wrap my car around another tree? I will if that's what it takes."

"Don't you dare," I laugh nervously. "You were very lucky last time."

"Then agree to have dinner with me, Madison," he gives me a lopsided grin. "To prevent me from doing something rash." His voice drops an octave. "It's just one dinner. Say you'll join me."

I peer at him, study him like a problem that I need to solve. His gaze doesn't waver, not for one second. Why does this feel like it's the first of many battles of wills we shall have?

"You make it sound so simple," I say.

"Isn't it?"

"It's complicated."

"That's what makes it so interesting."

"It?"

“Us.”

“Us?” I laugh. “Awfully, presumptuous of you.”

He shrugs.

I hold up a finger. “*One* dinner,” I say. “That’s it.”

He holds his silence neither agreeing nor objecting as he pins me with his unrelenting gaze.

He does this a lot as if he’s drinking me in, studying every facet of me. I shake my head to break the trance I seem to fall under in his presence. It’s late, I’ve got to go home to get some much-needed sleep.

“Alright,” I say, as I slowly rise from my chair. “Spokoynoy nochi, Mr. Petrosky.”

A wide grin splits his face, apparently impressed by my attempt to say good night in Russian.

Yeah, so I learned a word or two. What’s the harm in that?

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I’m highly anxious as I ride the subway uptown. Silently, I berate myself for putting myself in this predicament. But Dr. Heisler’s invitation to watch the triple bypass surgery proved too irresistible to pass up. But amid the procedure, I nearly panicked when I realized that the surgery would run long past my deadline. And short of an immediate death in the family, slipping out would be frowned upon by the faculty. So, I’d stood there silently willing their hands to hurry, with every success of course.



I just barely had enough time to run back and grab a shower, get dressed, and hop on the L-train. This, of all nights, is the night I'm supposed to meet Sebastian Petrosky for his thank-you dinner.

I can't believe I'm actually doing this!

I'd talked myself in and out of it so many times, that I've lost count. Against my better judgment, I gave Sebastian my number the day he was discharged from the hospital. Three days later he made use of that number. We settled on a time and place for the date.

Ten days after Sebastian and I met, I find myself stepping into Che Pierre's on 9<sup>th</sup> Street. It's mainly French but the chef is half Russian and offered an array of delicious authentic Russian dishes. I check my watch one more time, I'm six minutes late...not too bad.

I approach the hostess and inquire as to whether Sebastian Pestroski has arrived yet. No, she informs me. I head over to the bar and wait. I finally decided on this chic little black cocktail dress. I'm wearing my hair up in a loose bun, a few tendrils down on either side. I've been told it's one of my sexiest looks, but not that sex is on my mind. I just want him to *think* about how great that would be with me.

What? No, that's not what I want. This is two people having a simple thank-you dinner. We'll enjoy a meal and good conversation, and then we'll go our separate ways. Piece of cake.

I place my order at the bar and sit on an empty stool. My size six ass isn't sitting on it for more than 30 seconds before I feel a hand on the small of my back. I start to spin around but hear a familiar voice.

“Dr. Graham, hello,” I feel his warm breath on my neck like a soft feather being drawn across my skin. Goosebumps break out all over. This is not a good sign. I smile as I look over my shoulder.

“I was beginning to wonder if you ran off because I was late.”

“You thought I was punishing you?” he says in a low rumble. “Let's get to know each other first, shall we?”

I laugh. “You're a cheeky little thing.” I stop to take him all in. It's the first time I've seen him outside a hospital bed. He's wearing the hell out of a custom-fit Armani suit. It hangs impressively on his six-foot frame. And his face, finally the discoloration has faded, his natural tones are vibrant. He looks incredible.

I slide off the stool and balance on my knock-off Jimmy Choo shoes. Sebastian's eyes navigate the length of my body, pouring all over it. “You're even more beautiful than I imagined you'd be out of your scrubs.”

“Hospital chic wasn't quite doing it for you?”

“*You* do it for me,” he says evenly and then gestures toward the hostess. “Our table's ready.”

I move forward toward the smiling hostess. I feel Sebastian's hand on the small of my back, guiding me. Normally, this type of presumptuous behavior would set me on edge, but with Sebastian, I strangely find myself liking it.

We approach our table and Sebastian pulls my chair out for me. "You smell incredible," he says as I lower myself into my chair.

"Thank you." I wait for him to be seated. "You're looking good, Petrosky. How are you feeling?"

He unbuttons his jacket. "Most of the pain is gone, nothing that some ibuprofen won't cure."

"Glad to hear it," I reply. "But don't miss your regular checkups. The recovery process requires that you maintain constant..." I trail off reading his expression. "You don't want me playing doctor tonight."

"We'll discuss whatever you'd like," Sebastian replies. "But tonight, I'd like to get to know the lovely Madison, not Dr. Graham."

"What is it you'd like to know?"

"Everything."

I grin. "You're going to have to be a little more specific or we'll be here all night." I'm amazed at how, despite being in a crowded restaurant, it feels as if we're the only two people here.

"Are you seeing someone?" he asks and watches me closely. "You mentioned no social life, but that doesn't mean no..."

playtime with a friend.”

I chuckle. “Friends with benefits.” I shake my head. “No, afraid no time for those either.”

“Good,” he says and glances up as the waitress approaches. Sebastian looks at me. “What will you have to drink?”

“Pear martini,” I reply.

“Whiskey, neat, and a pear martini, please.”

“Coming right up,” the waitress says with a bright smile and then seems to forget to leave for a second. That’s the effect Sebastian must have on women all the time. And why the hell not? He’s a wealthy, smart, and a particularly delectable piece of eye candy. The women must be lining up to throw themselves at him. No matter what, I must keep these truths in mind tonight.

Under no circumstances are you to fall for this guy! Enjoy the fine dining, do a little harmless flirting, and then go home — alone.

I pick up my menu and begin scanning it. “They’re known for their Russian dishes. I’ve never had any of them, but it might be worth trying.”

“Relax, Madison. I come here often for the good Russian cuisine. You chose well.”

I clasp my hands together. “Oh, I’m so relieved.”

“Perhaps, you’ll try some Russian tonight,” he says with a wolfish grin.

I gulp in a dry throat. “I’ll try anything once.”

“It’ll only take once.”

“Oh yeah, and then what?”

“We fall for each other.”

A warm frisson of desire creeps up my spine. I force a laugh.

“Remember, I’ve no time for a social life.”

“We’ll see about that,” he says flatly.

Jeez, the balls on this guy. “I’m sure there are plenty of other lovely ladies out there who’d only be too happy to drop everything for you.”

“None, like you. Not that I’ve met.”

“Like me?” I look askance at him. “What’s so special about me?”

“You saved me.”

“I was doing my job, Sebastian.” I remind him to no avail.

He leans in, elbows on the table. Those eyes impale me. “When I awakened from the crash and saw you staring back, I felt the spark. I know you did as well.” He smirks. “I think it’s what brought you back to my room every day even though my face looked like it had been through a meat grinder.”

I look away under the heat of his unrelenting gaze. “I was curious about you, I admit.”

His eyes narrow a hair. “About what specifically.”

Jeez, is he really going to make me say it? “The cops were so certain they’d be able to take you away. I mean, you have a reputation, Sebastian.”

He cocks a dark brow. “And this reputation didn’t frighten you away.”

“I like to give people the benefit of the doubt.”

He smirks. “I suspected that much when you helped me with my...dilemma.”

“No one was asking for it,” I explain. “It didn’t seem to be a critical piece of the case they were working on.” I look away. “So, why did you have it?”

“For protection.”

“From whom? You’re a legitimate businessman, right?” My hands are bracing the arms of my chair as if I’m ready to bolt if he gives me the wrong answer.

“Even legitimate businessmen have enemies who’d prefer to see them out of the way.”

“Fair enough, but why was the gun a problem? You have a permit for it, don’t you?”

“I’m a Russian national with dual citizenship, such things are a little more complicated for me. It was best that the piece not be discovered on my person.”

I nod, and then glance up as I see the waitress approaching.

We both turn as she brings our drinks. Sebastian hands her a few bills and places an order for appetizers and another round

of drinks. When the waitress leaves, I lean in. “That was fast.”

He shrugs as if this is always the type of service that he receives. Well, sure with that kind of money and those killer good looks...

“So, Mr. Petrosky, tell me about your social life,” I say feeling emboldened. “There must be someone, or likely, several someones waiting for you. Hmm?”

“There is you,” he says softly placing his drink down. “There is no one else.”

I laugh again. “Come on, seriously. You probably have a brothel of eager women just a phone call away.”

Sebastian’s expression sours. “I couldn’t be more serious. I won’t lie, there was a time when such a thing as you describe appealed to me. But ultimately, I’m a businessman and look to partner with those who can be of real value to me to further my position. The women you describe are nothing more than ornaments or bobbles for the foolish. But you, Madison, you are extraordinary, of tremendous value.”

Normally, I’d try to laugh off such broad flattery, but something in his eyes warn me to think better of it. He’s serious, dead serious. I take a sip of my pear martini before responding.

“I hold myself in high esteem for many reasons.” I set my glass down. “But I’m curious as to why *you* find me to be of such tremendous value.”

His grin slowly returns. “For starters, you chose to become a doctor, a highly esteemed field requiring great intelligence and perseverance. If that weren’t sufficient, you’ve decided to become a surgeon. That, in and of itself makes my case. But then you go and decide to specialize in cardiothoracic surgery,” his smile broadens as if he’s taking great pride in my accomplishments. He shakes his head. “You’ll hold life and death in your hands, Madison Graham. Forgive me if I’m a bit awed by that.”

I reflect his smile and can see his genuine admiration. “Sometimes I wonder what the hell was I thinking. You know, like why didn’t I go into obstetrics or become a pediatrician.”

“Because noble as those fields may be, you find them too banal,” his sapphire eyes twinkle at me as if lit from within. “You take the road less traveled because you are destined for greatness.”

Oh my God, did I just giggle like a schoolgirl? I take another drink to cover.

“Perhaps one could understand your single-minded determination and drive if you were less,” he gestures at me.

I look askance at him. “Less what?”

He chuckles. “You’re absolutely stunning. The kind of woman wealthy men seek to drape over their arm as a trophy. But you, Madison, you’d never condescend to that. You want it all on your terms.” He lifts his glass to me. “I admire that immensely.”



I meet his glass with mine. “Why thank you, Sebastian. Maybe someday, when I have a social life, I’ll have a trophy husband on *my* arm,” I say with laughter.

Again, his expression falls. “Or, you could have me.”

I pull back in my chair and stare at him. “We’ve known each other a whole ten days,” I chuckle. “How can you say things like that with a straight face?”

“If one listens very carefully and watches for certain signs... you can learn all you need to know about a person in the space of one conversation. As a businessman operating within a very competitive environment, I must practice this skill on a daily basis to survive,” he says sternly. His smirk slowly returns. “You and I have had at least ten in-depth conversations, suffice to say, I know all I need to know about you.”

I raise a brow at him. “All?”

He chuckles. “All the important things. Regarding the minor details, that’s why we’re here tonight, so you can fill in the gaps.”

I sit back and cross my arms over my chest. “Well, maybe I need to know more about you. In the hospital, you mentioned that you are a hedge fund manager working with many wealthy clients. How did you enter the field?”

His gaze lingers upon me for a few seconds before he responds. “As you likely know, I graduated at the top of my class from Cornell University with an MBA. I was recruited to work for Goldman Sachs as an investment banking analyst but

quickly moved into the private wealth management division where I made several key contacts. After eight years there, I ventured out on my own to become a Hedge Fund manager.”

I nod perceptively and reply, “So you’re not a mafia prince?”

A grin spreads across his face. “How many mafia members attended Ivy League universities and worked for one of the most prestigious financial services firms?”

I shrug. “Probably all of the successful ones anyway.”

His burst of laughter surprises me and his eyes light up beautifully. “Wall Street brokers and gangsters, it’s all the same to you, eh?”

I smile. “Let’s just say, I think they’re all cut from the same cloth.”

He’s still grinning as he nods slowly. “I’m really glad we’re getting this opportunity to know each other better.”

“Is that what we’re doing? I thought we were here so you could thank me,” I say.

“The evening is still young, Madison,” his grin turns wolfish, and his voice drops an octave. “I’d like to thank you like you’ve never been thanked before.”

A nervous laugh escapes me as I envision all the tantalizing ways he could thank me. Each involves us tangled in his sheets. I clear my throat.

“Dinner will do quite nicely.”

“I’m afraid it won’t.”

“And why not?”

“Because I can’t stop thinking about you,” he waits for my gaze to return to him. “Or what we’d be like together.”

Another nervous laugh as I scramble for a response and my next breath. Thank God the waitress is back with our appetizers.

“Here is your bortsch,” she says, placing two bowls before us. “And your pelmeni. Would you like to hear tonight’s specials, or should I come back?”

Sebastian slips her a few more bills and orders her not to return until he indicates that she should do so. Her face flushes with embarrassment. “Yes, of course, Mr. Petrosky,” she says before beating a hasty retreat.

He gestures for me to pick up my spoon.

“Borsch, huh?” I say, dipping my spoon into the soup. He’s eagerly watching me as if my response to the soup is symbolic of my response to him. OK, I can have fun with this. I maintain his gaze I lift the spoon to my mouth, part my lips, and slip it in. I close my eyes and moan softly as I swallow it down.

“Mmm, so good.”

His eyes darken, and he shifts in his seat. “Wait until you taste real Russian.”

“I thought this was authentic Russian cuisine.”

He looks askance at me. He starts to say something but instead spoons some into his mouth. He nods noncommittally. “Next time, you’ll come to my home, and I’ll cook dinner for you, then you’ll judge for yourself.”

My eyes widen. “Who says there’ll be a next time?”

He stares at me in silence, appraising me. “Check your schedule and let me know your next evening off. We’ll have dinner at my place.”

“What makes you so certain that I’ll—”

“Because you can’t stop thinking about me either—,” he says, not as a brag, just as a mere statement of fact.

“I...I don’t—” I stop, knowing I can’t pull off the lie convincingly. Not when he’s pinning me with that arresting gaze like he’s looking right into my very soul. “My schedule’s booked solid for the next couple of weeks. It’ll be difficult to find the time.”

“I’ll wait for as long as it takes,” he opens his mouth for another spoonful of borsh. “And just so you know, there’s no one else, Madison— just you.”

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## Chapter 2 – Recruiting the Doctor

“Yuri, it has to go down tonight, it’s been arranged,” I say into the speakerphone as I take the pelmeni out of my kitchen oven. “You have the crew there by 9 pm, no excuses. Understand?” I stir the borsch as Yuri complains to me in Russian. If the whining prick weren’t my cousin, I’d have had him taken out long ago.

“Because I have other plans tonight. You handle this job and don’t fuck it up.” I go to check on the pot of solyanka and nearly burn my hand on the handle. I grab an oven mitt and stir the pot. “Yeah, I’m sending Dmitri to be on lookout.” One of the pots threatens to boil over, and I lunge over to turn off the burner. “Figure it out, Yuri. I’ve got to go.” I reach over and end the call.

I’d promised Madison that I’d prepare her an authentic Russian meal at my place, but after spending the whole goddamned afternoon preparing it, I’m beginning to wonder why I didn’t order it all from Che Pierre’s and throw it into baking dishes before she arrived.

But the truth is— I want to do this for Madison. I want her to see how much care and thought I put into the little things, so she'll trust that I'll do the same for the more important things when the time comes.

She'll be here in forty-five minutes, and I still have to sort the kitchen out and grab a shower. What the hell was I thinking? I've never tried this hard to impress a woman, never had to. But this was no ordinary woman - this is Dr. Madison Graham. My plans for her involve more than just getting her into bed.

And why not? Not only is she about to become a highly esteemed cardiac surgeon, but she's also one of the most stunningly beautiful women I've ever met. I pause to think about those dazzling hazel eyes, the high cheekbones, the tip of her slender nose slightly upturned in an eternal state of disdain, perfectly sculpted lips, inviting and sensuous, and that flawless sun-kissed skin. A thick mane of wavy, dark hair framed that angelic face and fell past her shoulders.

She'd filled in the details about her family. Her father's side of the family is from Ireland but had migrated to the U.S. about two generations ago. Her father, Major Steven Graham, is a retired Navy Pilot living in Anchorage, Alaska. He met her Panamanian mother while he was stationed at Rodman Navy Base in the Panama Canal. The two married, and after fifteen years of trying, they finally had Madison. Sadly, her mother died of a rare heart disease before Madison turned twelve.

This in turn set Madison on the path to study cardiology and eventually make it her life's work.

As I begin wiping down the countertops and putting dishes into the dishwasher, I recall how our first date went. It was a success in that she agreed to a second date. I was a little annoyed that it's taking place two weeks after our first one, but it was the first evening her demanding work schedule permitted.

The dinner conversation had been...like playing a sensual game of chess or some bizarre dance of push and pull. But in the end, I knew Madison wanted to see me again. It's like she has an itch that only I can scratch. And I intend to scratch the hell out of it tonight.

Which is why everything needs to be perfect. I place the last of the dishes in and turn on the dishwasher. I check the dinner table set for two, complete with fine China, white table linens, and candles. I've got a bottle of wine chilling and all I need to do now is get myself ready.

While in the shower, I reflect back to how the date ended. I insisted that Madison let me drive her home instead of taking the train at such a late hour. I was grateful that it gave us more time to talk and kept us in close proximity to make a good-night kiss less of a pipedream.

She lived in a townhouse apartment in a neighborhood she could afford on a student's budget. Her three roommates are fellow medical students on their way to becoming doctors like Madison.



She told me she enjoyed our time together and would let me know when we'd see each other again. I didn't leave room for the awkward pause. I was dying to kiss her, and she wanted me to. It was written all over those dazzling hazel eyes.

So, I leaned in and pressed my lips to hers. Instantly, a powerful rush of longing and desire gripped me. Her softness, the sweet scent of her skin, and the way she so willingly surrendered to my need turned me the fuck on. The heat between us erupted into a raging inferno as her mouth parted to mine and our tongues sparred as our hands eagerly groped each other. Neither of us could get enough. If a mere kiss felt this good, the ultimate act would blow our fucking minds.

My God, I wanted her so bad. Take her and make her scream my name. But I was in it for the long game, which meant I had to pace myself, not take everything all at once.

It took every ounce of self-control to pull back when she clung to me. The thickly fogged windows bore witness to our heated make-out session with us both breathing heavily, our heads reeling from the effort of stopping short of what we both so desperately wanted.

"I'd better walk you to your door," I'd said, officially calling an end to our date. If I didn't get her out of my car right then, I couldn't be responsible for what would happen next.

Madison had given me a mischievous grin, glancing down at the straining tent pole in my pants. I can't remember the last time my dick had been that hard.

Somehow, we made it to her door. Not daring to start something I couldn't stop, I brushed my lips against her soft cheek and whispered, "Until next time."

Next time is finally here. Tonight, I will have Dr. Madison in my bed, warm, naked, and very satisfied. I will claim her, mark her as mine.

The mere thought of her perfectly toned, naked body tangled in my sheets has me hard as fuck and I desperately crave release. Besides this state of arousal is unacceptable, I need to be in full control when Madison arrives. So, I give in to desire, gripping my cock firmly, stroking it rhythmically as I dream of Madison's firm round ass in that tight black dress. How silky smooth and hot her skin felt under my touch. The way she arched into me, pressing those full breasts against me as she moaned my name in that sinfully sultry voice. I think about how she'll cry my name when I fuck her hard up against the wall, on the dining room table, bent over my desk, fisting handfuls of her dark hair. Within seconds, I'm coming all over that sexy as fuck, beautifully bronzed body of hers.

I take a moment to catch my breath and to come down from that high. I step out of the shower, dry off quickly, and prepare for Madison's arrival.

At exactly eleven minutes past seven, I hear my doorbell ring. She's late. We'll work on that.

"Hello," she practically purrs as she leans against the door frame. Her hair is down, falling about her shoulders and she's

wearing a long, stylish coat. A pair of dark high-heeled pumps set her at about 5'7 to my 6'2.

“Dr. Graham.” I step aside and gesture for her to enter.

She saunters in, her hips swaying beneath her coat and I'm dying to see what's beneath it. Her scent is rich and alluring, pulling me in.

“This place is incredible,” she says, gazing around at the high ceilings of this warehouse converted into an upscale home. She admires the beams and rafters, as well as the skylights in the ceiling. She then spies the table and breathes in deeply. “Something smells absolutely wonderful and I'm starving.” She turns to look at me. The hint of makeup accents her eyes and kiss-me-now lips.

“Your coat,” I say with an outstretched hand.

“Sure.” Madison holds my gaze as she unfastens the sash. She pulls the coat back off her shoulders revealing a short, shimmering red, cocktail dress, which showcases her long-toned legs that go on for miles. It's a loose-fitting number, hanging off the shoulders. It's easy to access and uncomplicated. The message is clear. She's here to get laid and I don't intend to disappoint.

“Please have a seat,” I say, gesturing toward the living room sofa. On my way to the coat closet, I tap the remote to turn on some mellow tones that Madison mentioned she liked. I start with Keep Shelly in Athens' rendition of The Reaper. I note the satisfied smile that spreads across her face as the haunting

melody pours from the surround sound system. “Some wine? Red or white...ah, Pinot Noir, right?”

She bites her lip and nods. Damn, I don't think I'll make it through dinner despite rubbing one out in the shower. Exceptional brains and beauty, who knew it'd be such a fucking turn-on?

I hang up her coat and proceed to the kitchen to pour us some wine. She's lounging on the couch, looking very much at home in my place, like she belongs here. I like that.

I hand her a glass of wine. “So,” I say as I sink into the couch next to her. “How many lives did you save today?”

Her brows hike up in surprise. Yeah, I'm not fucking you just yet, sweetheart.

“I had two GSWs and one cardiac assist.”

“GSW,” I respond, “Gunshot wound. You're pretty good at those.”

She snorts. “Working at Bellevue, I see so many. I could do them blindfolded.”

“It doesn't faze you?”

She shrugs. “You learn to switch it off and just do your job. I hate to see it, but what are you going to do?”

“Bellevue's fortunate to have such a gifted doctor.”

She cants her head to the side. “You do know I won't officially be a doctor until I graduate medical school in 4 months.”

I wave a hand dismissively. “You’re a doctor, it’s just a formality. You’re going to be brilliant. You *are* brilliant.”

She smiles at me. “I think you’ve got a little hero-worship thing going there, mister.”

“You did save me.”

“You’d have survived just the same no matter who found you there.”

“But I got you,” I say, “this sexy as hell, beautiful doctor.”

“And what do I get?” she asks, peering at me. “You swear, your business is legit and not some front for something less... reputable?”

“Madison, I’ve told you what I do for a living.”

“I know but my medical career means everything to me,” she says, pulling her dress sleeve back up onto her shoulder as if having second thoughts. “I can’t get serious with someone who could potentially compromise that. A dinner or two is fine, but I can’t really see this going beyond that if...you’re part of something I can’t be involved with.”

My jaw clenches but I force myself to relax. “Is that why it took you so long to get back to me?”

“I needed time to think clearly about what’s best for me. And,” she breaks away from my gaze, “I don’t know that you are.”

I stare at her for a moment and then stretch my hand out to stroke her cheek with the backs of my fingers. She closes her

eyes and leans into it. “What are you so afraid of, Madison? I swear that nothing I do will ever jeopardize your career. I love that you’re a doctor, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

She opens her eyes and stares into mine. “I hope so because I’ve done a little digging which makes me think that if I had any sense in my head, I’d walk out of that door and never look back.”

“Why would you do something so ridiculous?” I stroke her face again. “When this is exactly where you want to be.”

She groans softly and I suddenly want her more than I thought possible.

“You’re so...” she rubs her cheek against my fingers. “Everything...at best, you’ll break my heart, at worst, you’ll break my heart and destroy my career. Do you know how hard it is to perform a laparotomy when all I can think about is you and the way you taste?”

I shift slightly at the onset of an erection.

“Your fears are unwarranted, Madison. Trust in me, I won’t ever let you down.”

She places her hand on her brow and squeezes her eyes shut. Suddenly, she looks as if the weight of the world were upon her delicate shoulders, and I want to take it all away.

“I’m scared, Sebastian.”

“Of what?”

“Of you...and what I’m feeling. What if you’re the worst thing that ever happened to me?”

“And what if I’m the best? What if we’re made for each other? What if the stars aligned perfectly for us to meet that night?”

She smiles sadly. “You really believe that?”

“I know that for the first time in my life, business isn’t the most important thing on my mind. And that over the past few weeks, I’ve turned away some of the finest women in this city because I only want to be with you. Not just for tonight, but for all my nights.” I move closer to her. “So, yes, I believe we’re meant to be, and I know we’re going to be so fucking unbelievable together.”

“Oh God, please don’t say things like that.” She sighs deeply and leans her face into my hand. “You make me feel things that terrify me.”

When she lowers her gaze, I place a finger under her chin and gently lift it until she’s looking me in the eyes.

“Madison Graham, the only thing that terrifies me...is not being with you.”

“Sebastian...” she laments, but before she can launch any more objections, her stomach grumbles loudly and she grabs her flat belly looking absolutely mortified.

“Goodness,” I chuckle unable to resist teasing her. “I’m glad to see you brought your appetite.”

She laughs bashfully. “I told you I was hungry.”

“I know and I’m being a rude host,” I say, climbing to my feet and offering her my hand. “Come, eat, and then we’ll see where the evening leads us.”

As I lead her to the table, I find myself ridiculously pleased to be satisfying this woman’s hunger. And even more pleased to know that afterward, we’ll spend the night sating each other’s hunger.



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### Chapter 3 – Bedding Sebastian Petrosky

“Oh, my gosh,” I say after taking my first spoonful of the bortsch. Honestly, no matter what, I was determined to say I liked it. But damn if this gorgeous hunk can’t cook! “This is so delicious.” I quickly spoon another bit into my mouth. It’s only after my third bite I look up to notice he’s staring at me with a bemused smile.

“What?” I laugh. “I haven’t eaten all day. I used my lunch hour to finish all my paperwork so I could make it here on time.”

“Ah, then I’m flattered,” Sebastian says, taking up his spoon.

I peer at him. “You know, I turned down a last-minute procedure in the O.R. to be here with you.”

He pauses mid-bite. “Really?”

“Admittedly, it was a procedure I’ve already assisted on – aortic aneurysm repair – but I never turn down the opportunity to assist on a surgical procedure.”

The genuine smile this news produces forms deep dimples on his cheeks. “I’ll have to make sure tonight lives up to your expectations.”

I gesture at the spread. “So far, I’ve no complaints.”

He nods for me to continue eating. “It pleases me to see you enjoy it. I know my effort wasn’t wasted.”

“Oh, come on,” I say teasingly. “Did you really prepare this yourself?”

He smirks. “Yes, I did. Is that so hard to believe?”

For a moment, I’m deeply moved until... “Ah, is this part of your second date schtick? Invite the girl back to your place for an amazing gourmet meal prepared by your hand?”

A shadow falls across his face. “I’ve never done this for anyone. Never even wanted to.”

“Oh...” is all I can manage to say, sensing I’ve offended him. I attempt to lighten the mood. “Who knew Russian food could taste so amazing?” I take another bite.

Sebastian closes his eyes for a couple of seconds and takes a deep breath as if trying to calm his nerves. “What? Did you think we only ate gruel and stone-hard bread in Russia?”

Uh-oh, this just took a turn for the worse. “No, of course not. Honestly, I never really gave the matter much thought. But,” I gesture at the meal. “Now I know, Russian cuisine is some of the finest in the world.”

A hint of a smile touches his lips. “You must let me show you Moscow someday...soon.”

I nearly choke on my bortsch. Is he joking? No, his expression tells me, he’s dead serious. “Wow, uh, that would be...interesting,” I say for lack of a better word.

He shakes his head. “Madison, Moscow is a very beautiful city filled with incredible history and unmatched artistry. And the food,” he waves a hand at my half-empty bowl. “is obviously to your liking. Wait until you taste the dishes prepared by our finest chefs.”

I nod at the prospect. “You make a convincing argument, and if the food is anywhere near as good as this.” I stick my fork into my plate of pelmeni and take a bite. The flavors explode in my mouth in a beautiful symphony of savory, sweet, and tangy notes, culminating in a culinary crescendo that leaves me yearning for another bite. “My God, Sebastian. I think you may have missed your calling.”

His sapphire eyes come to rest upon me with a new intensity. “I mean to satisfy you in every possible way, Madison.”

I swallow down my dumpling and try to steady my pounding heart. “Well, you’re off to an excellent start.”

He gives me a sly grin that would have buckled my knees had I not been seated. Damn, he’s looking sinfully gorgeous sitting there in the crisp white dress shirt, opened at the collar, and black slacks, which fit his form well without being too tight. Though, I think I’d prefer to see him out of them...

“Save room for dessert,” he says as I fork my last bite.

I glance over at the kitchen. “Oh, don’t tell me you have a delicious custom-made dessert back there.”

“No, it’s up there,” he says hitching his chin toward...the bedroom upstairs in the loft.

An involuntary chuckle escapes me as a quivering stirs between my thighs. “Wow. I can’t wait to taste it.” Did I really just say that?

A low chuckle rumbles through him which sends a mix of arousal and trepidation through me. I’ve been dreaming of this scenario for weeks now. Even as I equivocated on whether or not to go on a second date with him, I knew I had to sleep with him...at least once. A guy this fucking hot doesn’t come along every day and for some strange reason, he’s fixated with me.

Sebastian keeps referring to a future together but I’m here for one night of pleasure and that’s it. Hell, I have to be back at the hospital for a 6 a.m. shift. I’ll slip out early before he rises and that will be the end of my short stint with Sebastian Petrosky, Russian mafia prince extraordinaire. Okay, so I don’t know if any of it is true and there is a good chance that he is legit. I mean, he attended an Ivy League university and earned an MBA just to what? Become a lowlife mobster?

I don’t know...I can’t think straight, especially when Sebastian looks at me that way. Like he’s undressing me and really enjoying what he’s seeing.

We manage to make it through dinner without thrusting aside all the dishes and going at each other like animals right here on the dining room table. I smile at the lurid thought.

“What are you thinking about, Madison?” he asks in a sly tone.

“What?”

“A smile *that* wicked requires an explanation.”

Busted! “Oh, no, I was just thinking that I have to be up at the crack of dawn for my 6 a.m. shift.”

His expression falls. “Hmm.” He rises from the table. “Then we’d better make good use of the time we have together.” He extends a hand to me. “Dance with me.”

“Dance?” I place my napkin on the table and accept his peculiar request. I mean, sure, there is some dreamy music playing in the background and the lights are low. But I thought we were moving this party for two to the bedroom. It’s not that I’m some horny freak or something, but with my crazy schedule at the hospital, it’s been a year since I’ve slept with anyone.

If fate’s thrown a mega-hot Russian god in my path, who am I to turn it down? I’m a doctor, not a saint for crying out loud.

He leads me into the living room. I glance at the couch, it’s comfy, and it could do in a pinch. Suddenly, Foreigner’s *Waiting for A Girl Like You* spills from the sound system filling the place with an otherworldly feel. Sebastian gently pulls me into his arms and slips them around my back. He

smells incredible and I just want to breathe him in, devour him whole. I slide my hands up his muscular arms thinking about the sleeve of tattoos adorning his right arm. I want to see it, I want to see all of that toned naked flesh...my hands drift across his broad shoulders and clasp around the back of his neck.

Our bodies move in time, swaying easily to the rhythm of the sensual music. Sebastian steps closer to me, closing the breath of space between us. Our bodies are flush against one another, our breathing grows heavier. I lay my head against his chest, he rests his cheek against the top of my head.

Our bodies move in unison to the music, and his leg eases forward, parting my thighs slightly. We hold each other so close, that our heartbeats feel like one. He shifts himself so our groins align as we move against each other. The gyration is subtle, but enough to feel Sebastian's growing erection. My panties grow moist in response. This is such sweet torture. How long is he going to make us wait?

Our bodies mesh and we move as one. His heart thumps like a bass drum against my cheek. He's aching for it, every inch of him declares it. Yet he remains fully in control, moving us slowly, his thigh between mine, our hips nearly emulating the sex act.

His hands slide down my back, to my waist, and he pulls me closer. He is *rock-hard*. It can't be much longer now. I fear I'm so wet I'll leave a mark on the fabric of my dress. His hands slip down further, cupping my ass.

A groan rumbles through him as he squeezes my butt. That does it. His mouth finds mine and there is nothing subtle or gentle about his kiss. It's all passion and burning desire unleashed. His tongue slides in deep as he pulls me closer still, slowly rubbing me up and down the length of his hard cock.

I moan as the tension grows and we're full-on dirty dancing, pelvises grinding as a tantalizing appetizer to the main course.

The buzzing sound cuts through the air followed by an annoying electric guitar riff ringtone.

"Fuck!" Sebastian growls as he starts to pull away from me.

I grip him. "Can't it wait?" I pant, refusing to surrender him to the caller.

"I'm sorry, I have to take this," he says as he hurries toward the kitchen for his phone. "Hold tight, I'll just be a minute."

You have got to be fucking kidding me! I'm seriously about to lose it when he goes into his home office and shuts the door behind him.

I'm so angry I could leave, but damn it I want him more than I ever have. And I refuse to leave without being properly fucked, gosh darn it!

I hear Sebastian yelling, and barking orders but it's all in Russian so I haven't a clue what he's saying. Whatever it is, it doesn't bode well for getting laid tonight. Crap on a cracker!

I begin pacing the floor, not sure what to do with myself. At this rate, a cold shower seems in order. I stare holes through



the door Sebastian has disappeared behind. But the door remains shut as his tirade continues.

I go over to my purse and retrieve my phone to check messages. I'm shocked to see a text from Lisa Meadows, a fellow medical student. She's begging me to switch shifts with her tomorrow. She wants me to take her noon shift in exchange for my 6 am so she can get off in time for some event she needs to attend.

Yes! I think and suddenly I'm glad Sebastian was called away otherwise I'd never have seen Lisa's message until it was too late.

I quickly text back that yes, I'll switch shifts with her. I wait a few seconds before I see the three dots indicating that she's replying.

—Thanks, I owe you!!— she says.

—No worries (smiley face) — I reply.

Delighted, I walk over to the sofa and flop down on it. I check the time. It's only 8:45 p.m. The night is still young and needn't be ruined over one phone call. Besides, it sounds like the discussion is finally winding down. Sebastian should be out any second.

But now a second conversation starts up. It's less heated but there's a distinct sense of urgency in the tone. That urgency had better be about getting his hot ass back out here.

Oh, God, listen to me. I've got to seriously get my hormones under control.

I lay back on the cushions, the exhaustion from back-to-back shifts is finally hitting me. It would serve Sebastian right if I fell asleep on him. And now Fleetwood Mac wafts through the air, the ethereal voice of Stevie Nicks sings Sara.

I freaking love this song! “Places, undoing the laces,” I’m singing along to it when I finally hear the door open. I keep my eyes shut and sing softly along with Stevie.

Sebastian moves before me on the couch, probably looking down at me, but I keep singing as if oblivious.

“That’s when I met my match...”

I startle at the feel of his warm hands on my thighs, my eyes fly open to find him on his knees between my legs. I stare at him. Stevie Nicks is now singing Dreams.

“No apology?” I say testily, only halfway meaning it. “You just going to go right in there, huh?”

His hands freeze in place, but a wolfish grin spreads his lips. “You’d prefer I waste more time talking? Or that I put my tongue to better use?”

Holy fuck. I relent, relaxing back onto the cushions. “Proceed.”

His eyes lock with mine as he gently pushes the fabric of my dress up to my waist. He slips his fingers into the waistband of my panties and draws them down off my hips, down off my thighs, down over my knees. He never breaks eye contact with me. I don’t even care how wet they must feel in his hands as he tosses them aside.

Sebastian lowers his head and begins drawing hungry hot kisses up the length of my quivering thighs. He takes his time, his mouth steadily making its way toward my slick vagina, driving me wild with anticipation.

When his tongue finally slides over my throbbing bud, the moan escapes my throat unbidden. He slips his long fingers up inside me, in and out, in and out as he sucks and teases my clitoris with his tongue.

This is the best apology — EVER!

I grab fistfuls of his long chestnut-brown hair and grind my sex against his mouth. It's been so long, and Sebastian feels so fucking good. The sweet torture is quickly reaching culmination, I'm so close. If his cell rings now, I'll personally hunt down the caller and make them rue the day they were born.

I'm watching him, my legs are spread wide apart. Sebastian's head bobs up and down between my thighs as he feasts hungrily on my pussy. The sight of him devouring me with such abandon is all I need to take me over the edge. As I do, I'm panting and crying out in ecstasy. My verbal way of giving him a gold star for a job well done.

He lifts his head and kisses my belly, even as he's pulling my dress up over my head. Desperate to get to my breasts, he pulls down the cups of my strapless bra and goes to town sucking on my hard nipples and squeezing my breasts.

His other hand slips down to his belt, and within seconds he's unfastened his pants.

“Condom,” I say in a heated whisper.

He has one ready at hand. His hard cock practically springs from the confines of his pants. It stands at full attention, big and throbbing.

I groan at the sight of it and my hand has a mind of its own. I grip him and it feels so hot and huge in my hand I’m trembling with anticipation. He rolls the condom down over the head and down his shaft.

I’m creaming so badly, I fear I’ll ruin his couch.

He shifts over me, caging me in with his hands on either side of my head.

“You’re mine, Madison,” he says in a low menacing tone.

I nod eagerly.

“Say it,” he snaps.

“I’m yours, Sebastian, please just fuck me,” I beg.

Without further hesitation, he sinks that big shaft deep inside of me and we both cry out in relief and anticipation of the pleasure that’s about to erupt in us. He starts at a steady pace, making sure I’m good as he strokes that big dick in and out of me.

But now he’s eager for release, his momentum increases thrusting me back into the cushions as he brings his weight to bear with each powerful lurch of his hips. His muscles ripple and roll under his exertion, and I’m so fucking turned on by the sight and feel of it, I’m about to lose my bleeding mind.

The couch is rocking off its footing and creaking loudly under the assault.

I wrap my legs around him, locking my ankles behind his back. I lift my hips in unison with each of his body-wracking thrusts. He's so deep inside me, I feel impaled on his big hard cock and I'm loving every second of it.

He slips a hand down between us and begins working my clitoris again. He's desperate for release but needs me to come with him.

Oh, hell yeah!

His hips pound away feverishly driving us both madly toward the edge of oblivion. I'm coming undone as if I'm losing all control of all bodily function. He's in complete control of me, of us, of all of it.

Fuck, yeah!

My body convulses hard with the most powerful orgasm I've ever experienced. One more thrust and Sebastian groans a deep, throaty sound and now I feel his semen pulsing out in release. We are both breathing hard as we remain firmly locked in our embrace.

My mind is reeling from the wild ride, so I'm not clear on what all just happened. But one thing is for sure — He's indelibly imprinted himself on my pussy and I'm in deep, deep trouble.

Please, oh, please let those phone calls have been for legitimate business...

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## Chapter 4 – Uncle Sergei Petrosky

**M**adison and I have been dating for about 3 weeks now, catching moments here and there between her demanding work schedule at the hospital and the part-time work she does at the local clinic. She explained to me that though her father is helping to put her through medical school, she still pays for her living expenses, namely food and rent. She also manages to send some money back home to an elderly aunt who helped raise her when her mother passed away.

The problem is— that leaves Madison precious little time for me.

That has to end. I want Madison in my life and these mere glimpses of her aren't enough. I need to be front and center in her world, not a mere afterthought to be squeezed in at her discretion. I'm about to change all of that but must handle the matter delicately, present it in a way she'll find acceptable.

As we dine at a cozy, upscale Italian restaurant in Manhattan, I slide the envelope across the table to Madison.

She gives me that adorable, ‘What the hell is this?’ look.

“Open it.”

She does as told, examining the contents of the envelope. She freezes and fixes me with a hard stare. “What’s this all about?”

“Consider it a loan, Madison. One you can repay once you’ve completed your residency and start your private practice.” I nod at the check. “It’s just a loan, it comes with a promissory note and all applicable terms.”

She raises a brow as she picks it up and takes a closer look. Her lovely hazel eyes go wide. “Are you kidding me?”

“I never kid about money,” I say in a very serious tone. “If you don’t pay it back, I’ll send two guys around to break your lovely legs.”

A laugh escapes her. “Sebastian, this is a hundred thousand dollars. You’re loaning me this in exchange for what?”

I smirk. “Relax, it’s not what you think, missy. I’m loaning the money with interest and expect to be paid in full after seven years.”

She sits back in her chair, leaving the check on the table. “And what do you get out of this?”

“My girlfriend can give up that job at the clinic and focus her time on medical school and,” I smile broadly as I lean forward, elbows on the table, “me.”



She folds her arms across her chest. “That’s very kind and generous of you, but we’ve only been dating for a month. What if in a couple of weeks, we broke up?” She hikes a brow. “Should I expect the two guys to come and threaten to break my legs if I don’t return the money in full?”

I laugh despite myself. I find myself doing that often in Madison’s company. “First of all, that comment was clearly a joke. Second of all,” I go silent and just gaze at her for a moment, letting our feelings speak for themselves. “We both know that the only thing that will change in two weeks, is that we’ll be even more crazy about each other. No one’s breaking up.”

“Hmm, maybe.” Her head lulls to the side as she gives me that sexy-as-hell smile. “It’s very sweet and tempting, but I pride myself in making my own way in this world. This is...” she gestures at the check, “too much, too soon.”

My smile falls away and I look at her in earnest. “I’ve never made this type of offer to anyone, Madison. Don’t take it lightly. I want, no, I need to see more of you. I respect and admire your desire to pay your own way and to help out your aunt.” I lower my tone while increasing the intensity. “But frankly, it’s getting in the way of what we both want more than anything. And that’s spending more time together.” I push the check closer to her. “Take the loan, Madison. You’ll pay it back when you’re able to. It’s as simple as that.”

Slowly, her resolve begins to melt away and her arms unfold to rest on the chair. “It’s not that simple, Bash. The clinic is

severely underfunded and serves a low-income community. If the medical students don't work there, they go without. Sometimes, when there's no money left in the budget, I offer my services for free because that's how desperate they are. I can't leave them shorthanded."

"I know, babe, which is why I made a sizeable donation to the clinic to keep them afloat and fully staffed for the next twelve months. "

Her hazel eyes fly wide. "You did what? When?"

"Yesterday, you'll probably hear about it when you go in tomorrow."

Her eyes tear up. Perfect! That's exactly the response I was banking on when I concocted this plan. I need to endear myself to Madison, make her fall so deeply for me, that she'll agree to anything that I ask of her. This is essential for my plan to work.

"Sebastian, I...that was so incredibly generous of you." She shakes her head. "Why?"

"What do you mean, why? I need to see more of you. I know your time at the hospital is non-negotiable, but now the clinic can manage just fine when you cut back your hours."

Shaking her head in disbelief, she says, "I'm overwhelmed, Mr. Petrosky. I can't believe you'd do all of this just so we can spend more time together."

"I'd move heaven and earth for that. Haven't you figured that out by now?"

Laughing, she replies, “I think it would take a lifetime to figure you out.” She takes the envelope, but adds, “I’ll take the loan as a bonus for saving you from that little car wreck.”

I chuckle as I spread my hands wide. “There you go, payment for services rendered.”

“You’re getting off cheap now. Wait till I start my private practice, you’ll hardly be able to afford me.”

But by then, you’ll likely be my wife, I started to say but held my tongue. The thought had come unbidden, but it felt so right as if it were the most natural progression for our relationship.

In the following days, Madison gave notice to the clinic and paid the remaining six months of her apartment lease. And just like that, her life now consists of two things, medical school and me.

We’ll work on the priority.

Four weeks in, Madison regularly comes home to me after completing a shift and spends the night at my place. I fostered this arrangement, slowly encouraging her to move in with me without explicitly stating it.

I know she thinks I’m just a love-sick fool for her. To a certain extent, she’s right, but she still doesn’t understand that I’m not just looking for a girlfriend. I could get that at the snap of a finger. No, I need so much more from Madison.

Her appetite for me is insatiable and it seems to energize her even after pulling a 12-hour shift at the hospital. I find it

amusing and I take great pride in ensuring I leave my woman highly satisfied yet eager for the next time.

Last night, I was out on business when she arrived. I've given her a key to my place so she can let herself in. When I got home, she was sound asleep in my bed. Too exhausted to change, she'd fallen asleep on top of the comforter still wearing her hospital scrubs.

As much as I wanted to climb on top of her for some late-night nooky, I knew she desperately needed her rest, so I spread a throw over her and climbed in next to her to sleep. But that morning, we more than made up for it in the shower. We took our time and did it right, over and over.

"You keep feeding me like this," she says at the breakfast bar of my kitchen. "And I'm going to get fat."

I glance at her appraisingly. "I'll still fuck you."

She smacks my arm as she takes the last bite of the omelet I'd made her.

"A few more pounds wouldn't hurt you," I say and playfully slap her ass. "A real man likes to have something to grab onto."

She points her fork at me and laughs, "Don't you start, I'm already going to be late for work as it is." She hops off the stool wearing one of my t-shirts. I've been encouraging her to leave a change of clothes over here as well as toiletries, but she's been slow to comply. I don't push it, I know she'll come

around soon. Besides, I like seeing her scamper around in my things.

“How late do you work tonight?” I don’t need to ask. I know her schedule. I know everything there is to know about Dr. Madison Graham. But I must maintain the illusion.

She’s halfway up the stairs. “Remember, I’m working a double shift so I can have off Saturday.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

She pauses and stares down at me from the loft. “You’re supposed to be taking me for a drive up the coast for dinner at Belmont.”

I frown at her as if confused. “Oh, was that for this Saturday?”

She plants a hand on her hip and cranes her neck like she’s about to rip me a new one. I can’t resist smiling at her and she sees it.

“Jesus, Bash,” she laughs, “stop jerking me around like that.” She sticks her tongue out at me and then disappears into the bedroom to get dressed for work.

The doorbell rings. Who the hell? I don’t have any meetings planned for this morning. I glance at my security cam screen located in the kitchen.

Fuck!

It’s Uncle Sergei back from Moscow. He wasn’t expected back until tomorrow night. I glance up at the loft, but Madison

must be in the master bathroom brushing her teeth.

Shit! Their paths weren't to cross. Not for a very long time.

I make my way to the door and open it. Sergei is standing there with a bottle of Russian vodka. It's times like these that I'm reminded of how much he looks like my father. He's the younger brother by two years, but he has the same gray eyes, thick brow, and a nose that looks like it's been broken more than once. My looks are equal part mom and dad, my dad's rugged features refined by mom's beauty queen genes.

"Uncle Sergei," I say enthusiastically and throw my arms wide. "I didn't expect you back until tomorrow night."

He gives me one of his big bear hugs, thumping me on the back. "I know, I know. Hey, it keeps everyone on their toes, not knowing exactly when the master returns." He holds out the bottle to me. "Here you go. Nothing but Russia's finest for my nephew."

I take it and examine the bottle. "Ah, thank you, uncle."

"Well, don't be stingy with it," he says, walking toward the kitchen. "Pour us a glass. Come, drink, we'll talk."

"Ouch!"

We both turn and stare up at Madison who's hopping around on one foot while holding the other. She's oblivious to us and is still in her bra and panties.

A slow grin spreads across Sergei's face. "Why didn't you tell me you had company? That's a fine piece of ass. But what else should I expect from my boy?"

I chafe at his words. It's not the first time he's seen a girl over here and usually, it is just that...a convenient piece of ass.

"It's Dr. Graham, you met her at the hospital," I say a little more defensively than I intended.

"Ah, I didn't recognize her out of her scrubs. So, she's making house calls these days?" he says, his eyes lingering upon Madison. "I wouldn't mind a visit."

I want to yell at Madison to shut the door, but I can't let on that his ogling her is bothering me. "Come on." I wave him into the kitchen to distract him. "We can't let good Russian vodka go to waste."

He follows me in and takes a seat where Madison had been. "So, you know the problem with the Medici captain was taken care of, right? We reminded those fuckers who they're dealing with. You did well taking out the shooter, but I aimed higher, eh?"

I glance at him as I pour our drinks. I will him to lower his voice, so Madison won't hear these incriminating statements. I motion for him to be silent as Madison comes down the stairs.

"I hope traffic isn't bad this morning because if I'm late again this—" she pauses mid-sentence when she catches sight of Sergei. "Oh, hi." She looks at me expectantly.

"Madison, you remember my uncle, Sergei, you met him at the hospital during my recovery."

He rises from the stool and faces her with an ugly smirk. "Good to see you again, doctor." His eyes flick toward the

bedroom. “Glad to see you’re still taking good care of my nephew.”

The color rises in her honey-toned skin. She looks at me. “Uhm, I’d love to stay and chat, but I’m late for work.” She’s upset and doesn’t bother kissing me goodbye and under the circumstances, I’m grateful. But then she goes for the car keys on the bar. I’ve been insisting she take one of mine instead of public transportation.

Sergei gives me a curious look.

She throws her hand up at me. “See ya tonight.”

I nod in response as she heads out the door. I feel Sergei’s heavy gaze upon me.

“What?”

His thick brow furrows. “She drives your car and knows she’ll see you tonight?” he says incredulously. “What is this? You’re *dating* her?”

I shrug. “We’re fucking.”

He chuckles, and a salacious grin spreads across his round face. “I get it, this doctor of yours is a grade-A piece of ass, but you know better than to get too serious.” He inclines his head at me. “Natasha Orlov will be arriving from Moscow in three weeks.”

I sigh heavily but make no reply.

“You remember Natasha,” he says, gripping my shoulder. “Your fiancée, the woman you’re marrying in seven months.”



“Don’t remind me.”

“You know everything rides on you sealing the alliance between Petrosky and Orlov. Without it, there’ll be blood in the streets.”

“I still don’t understand why a marriage between your daughter and Orlov’s son wouldn’t seal the deal.”

His face contorts with derision. “What’s wrong with you? You want Orlov’s idiot son sitting on the throne. You’re my heir, Sebastian. You’ll rule this family after me if you don’t screw it up.”

I’ve heard this speech a thousand times before and bought into making the sacrifice for the family. I assumed I’d legally marry Natasha and we’d both discreetly live separate lives. There’s no love between us. Yes, she’d be an astonishingly beautiful ornament on my arm. But the fact that she’s been Sergei’s lover since she was eighteen makes me want to hurl my breakfast up. He claims he ended their three-year affair before the betrothal announcement, but I’m still revolted by the notion. He has daughters Natasha’s age for crying out loud.

The truly sickening part is that Sergei knew this would ultimately be the arrangement, that she was to become my wife. And yet, he still chose to make Natasha his personal plaything. It was as if he was sending me a message. I may be crown prince, but he’s still the king who takes what he wants when he wants it – including my future bride.

“I’m only going to tell you this once,” he says leaning in. “Don’t let this bitch become a problem. Fuck her and put her

out before Natasha arrives. That's an order."

My hackles rise. "This isn't just about sex, Sergei. Madison's a valuable asset, she can be recruited."

He draws back and scowls. "Recruited for what?"

"To work on our cars," I say sardonically. "She's a highly skilled doctor, Sergei. What do you think she can be recruited for?"

Those ice-cold gray eyes fix upon me with a deadly warning. "Careful, little prince," he says coolly. "You may be my nephew, but nothing's written in stone." It's times like these that treasonous rumors spring to the surface. All agree that my father was gunned down in the street and that the assailant was never caught. Some said that it was fratricide, that Sergei arranged the hit on his older brother. Those who made the mistake of verbalizing this opinion are no longer breathing.

"Think of the timing, uncle," I say urging him down a different path. "You know we just lost our house surgeon, but I think we've found a new one. I can bring her in, but I need time."

He broke out into raucous laughter, grabbing his round belly. "Go ahead, pull it out," he says gesturing at my groin. "I must see this magic cock of yours that turns respectable, law-abiding doctors into mob surgeons."

I'd like to punch him in the throat right now. But I don't. I just sit back patiently and wait for him to get it out of his

system. At last, he wipes his eyes and takes a swig of the vodka.

I press the case. “I’d be sitting in a jail cell right now if it weren’t for her. She took care of that critical detail because I asked her to and,” I wait a few beats and then smirk to take the edge off my next words. “I didn’t need my dick to persuade her.”

He snorts. “These daft women, they look into those eyes of yours and turn to putty in your hands.” He jabs the countertop with his thick index finger. “That’s why none of my daughters are named my heir. They think with their hearts instead of a cold, calculating mind.” He now jabs that finger at my chest. “And now you need to prove you can lead with that Ivy League brain of yours, and not with some weak, bleeding heart.” He grips my shoulder again. “I’ll give you two weeks to bring your doctor to me to prove she’s truly recruited. That or you break it off with her, full stop. Got it?” He heaves himself off the stool without waiting for my reply.

My muscles wind up into tight coils at the mention of bringing Madison to him. He calls it the initiation. Some stupid shit he claims they did back in the old days. The king had first rights to all the females that were brought into the fold. Only wives were off limits, mistresses were fair game for the king.

My fists clench and the tension spreads through my shoulders up my neck. I’m ready to pound the shit out of him if he even thinks about putting his hands on Madison. And

now I'm in this impossible situation. Bring Madison in or break it off with her, the best thing that's ever happened to me in a long while.

Hell, if Madison finds out about Natasha, it's all over anyway.

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## Chapter 5 – The Heat Is On

“**G**ood work team, very impressive,” Dr. Warner says as we follow him out of the OR to get cleaned up. He turns to me, “Nice assist in there. Keep up the good work and you’ll go far as a cardiac surgeon.”

I ignore the furtive glances from the other residents eager for such praise from the esteemed surgeon. “Thank you, Dr. Warner. I’m always glad to serve where I can.”

I’m honored to be called into more cardiac procedures than most other medical students, save Simon Kinnard, my greatest competition for the surgical residency spot. We are both considered rising stars, nearly neck and neck in terms of procedures we’ve performed or assisted on. It will be down to the wire which of us will win the coveted spot. That’s why I work the crazy hours that I do and never turn down an invitation to surgery even if that means pulling a double shift here and there.

Sebastian isn’t thrilled about the demanding nature of my work, but he gets that my career has to come first, and we

simply must work around it. One rainy afternoon, he surprised me by showing up at the hospital with café lattes and my favorite raisin cinnamon bagels. I took a quick fifteen-minute break from writing up post-op notes to catch up with him. Before he left, he pulled me into a supply closet and pressed me up against the wall for a world-class make-out session that left me panting for more.

“If you want this,” he’d said while holding my hand against his hard cock. “Be home before midnight...it’ll be waiting for you.” Trust me, I made it home in record time that night and was very, very well rewarded...

As I peel off the bloody gloves and smock in the washroom, I wonder if Sebastian’s uncle has gone home. It’s hard to believe that the two men are related. While Sebastian is the very picture of an Ivy League business executive, his uncle’s a bear of a man built for street brawling. And the way that man looked at me gave me the god damned creeps. He spoke to me as if I were some stripper there to entertain them instead of being Sebastian’s girlfriend.

“There you are.”

I turn to find the chief resident standing there with arms folded. “Oh, hey, Dr. Weiss. I’ve been in surgery for the past three hours,” I explain a little perturbed as she should’ve known this.

“Yes, well those two detectives from the night of your EMT ride-along are back and they’re asking to speak with you.”

My spine goes rigid at the prospect of being grilled further by them. It's been six weeks, what more do they need to know? Does it have anything to do with Sebastian's uncle being back in town?

I force a smile. "Thanks for the heads up, Dr. Weiss. I'll just finish washing up and I'll be right out." Again, the looks from the other residents. Do they all know I'm dating Sebastian Petrosky? I've told no one, but Sebastian's sweet little café latte surprise may have raised an eyebrow or two.

"They're waiting for you in my office," she replies evenly. "I'll let them know you're on your way."

"Great, thanks." I scrub my hands in the sink and then grab a towel to dry off.

On my way to Emma's office, I run into Andrew Cooper, a second-year ER resident who's been trying to get me to have dinner with him.

"Madison, hey how are you doing?" he says, stopping in the hall, compelling me to do the same.

"Andrew, hi, I'm doing all right. Crazy busy as usual of course."

"Yeah, tell me about it," he says raking his fingers through his short, dirty blond hair. "I heard you just did another quadruple bypass yesterday," he said with genuine admiration.

"It was just an assist, Andrew. You know that."

"Yeah, but they're asking for you by name," he smiles and his sweet brown eyes light up. "How many medical students



can say the same? That's pretty damned impressive."

"Simon's getting just as much O.R. time as I do, but thanks anyway." I point down the hall. "I've got a meeting I need to get to in Emma's office." When I see his expression fall, I quickly add. "But we'll get coffee sometime soon and talk shop."

Andrew's choir boy smile is back. "Count on it."

I head down the hall and take the stairs down the two floors to Emma's office. When I enter the room the two officers rise from the chairs and turn to look at me. For all the world, they remind me of Tubbs and Crocket from that 80's Miami Vice cop show.

"Hello Ms. Graham," says the older Crocket-looking officer. "We met a few weeks ago, but in case you've forgotten." He extends his hand in greeting, "I'm Detective Hart and this is my partner Detective Snyder."

"Yes, I remember you, both," I say shaking their hands. "How can I help? I've got a ton of patients out there needing my attention."

"Yes, yes, of course, we won't take up much of your time," says Hart. "Please have a seat."

I walk around the desk to Emma's chair and lower myself into it.

"You were the first person to reach Sebastian Petrosky on the night of his accident," Hart begins, "And while we found shell casings in his automobile indicating a gun had been fired from

within his automobile, no gun was found on his person or within the vehicle.”

I nod and listen in silence offering nothing.

They exchanged looks. “Are you certain you didn’t see a weapon on Mr. Petrosky?”

“Positive,” I say without flinching. “Are you sure you looked really hard, got up under the seats and everything? Maybe it flew out the window when the car tumbled down the embankment.

“We took the whole car apart and scrubbed the whole area,” Hart said tersely. “If it was there, we’d have found it.”

I shrug. “Like I said, I’ve got a ton of patients out there that need my help. If there’s nothing more,” I say as I start to rise.

“That’s a nice ride you’ve been cruising to work in these days,” Snyder says, his perfect white teeth contrasting marvelously against his rich brown skin. “One has to wonder how a medical student could afford a \$200 thousand automobile.”

I’m fully on my feet. “Frankly, that’s none of your business detectives.”

“No,” Snyder says, rising himself. “But what is my business is the dead body we found riddled with bullets fired from Sebastian Petrosky’s gun.”

“Oh,” I say, crossing my arms across my chest. “So, you found his gun after all? Surely you must have otherwise how would you know the bullets were fired from it?”

“The markings from the bullets are consistent with the ones from the shell casings recovered from Petrosky’s car.”

This brings me up short.

“You didn’t know that,” Snyder smirks. “Don’t let the pretty boy good looks and Ivy League degree fool you, Ms. Graham. That guy is bad news, Russian mafia through and through.”

I think about Sebastian’s uncle sitting there leering at me. He had mobster, gangster written all over him. But Sebastian? Was he really capable of murder? Or was he simply defending himself?

“Look, if you cooperate with us now, we’ll go easy on you, no need to disrupt your medical career,” Hart says. “But if you keep stonewalling us, we’ll torch your career.” He leans forward, elbows on his knees. “Now tell us what happened to the gun.”

I look Hart dead in his pale gray eyes. “I haven’t got a clue, but I really hope you find it so you can stop wasting my time.” I move around the desk and head for the door.

“You’re making a big mistake, lady,” Hart calls out.

As I make my way down the corridor, I hear Snyder’s hurried footsteps behind me. “Hey, Madison, wait a sec, please.”

The compassion in his voice gives me pause and I let him catch up to me.

“Look, I know Hart’s being a belligerent ass and those are his good qualities.”

I favor him with a small smile. “What is this? The good cop, bad cop routine?”

He smirks and dimples appear on his cheeks. “Look, I’m going to level with you. From what I hear, you’re one of the top students in this medical institution and people are expecting great things out of you.” He genuinely smiles. “I, for one, am rooting for you. You’ve got the potential to really go far...but you won’t if you get mixed up with the likes of Sebastian Petrosky. Whether you’re involved with the gun or not, you need to stay away from that guy if you value your career, not to mention your life.”

I hold his gaze and those dark brown eyes are emanating a platonic genuine concern for my wellbeing. He’s honestly afraid for me. And now suddenly, I’m afraid for me. What made me remove the gun for Sebastian when I didn’t even know him? What compelled me? I had acted completely on instinct. Just knew that it was the right thing at the time.

I still can’t believe Sebastian’s a killer, not when he’s so tender and caring with me. He wants a future with me and knows I could have nothing to do with a criminal.

I paste on a smile. “Look, Detective Snyder, I appreciate what you’re trying to do. And I’ll take your words to heart because you’re right, my career means everything to me, and I won’t let anything or anyone jeopardize it.”

He nods. “I’m really glad to hear that. You’ve got to look out for you. No one else will.”

“Yeah,” I glance at my watch. “I’ve gotta go, I’m going to be late for rounds.”

“If you think of anything,” he glances over his shoulder at Hart who’s watching us. “Reach out to me, not him.” He slides me his card. “All right?”

“Sure thing,” I say as I head down the hall. And now my head is buzzing with all sorts of questions. Maybe I should just cut my losses and end things with Sebastian. My heart drops precipitously at the thought. It’s only been six weeks since we met and only three since we started quasi-living together.

This is all so bizarre. How did I go from not a single date for over a year to practically moving in with a...mafia prince?

I enter the empty elevator and press the third-floor button.

And what about the gun? They can never tie it back to me. I wore surgical gloves so left no prints. But was I right to help Sebastian? My heart says, yes! But my mind, the medical student in me, says I’m getting in way over my head and should break free while I still have a chance.

I lean my head against the wall and groan, why does it feel like a mass of dark gray clouds just rolled across my sun?

One way or the other, Sebastian and I are going to have a very serious discussion tonight.

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## Chapter 6 – The Hamptons

**W**e're in the Hamptons walking along the silvery shore. The salty air is refreshing and the cool Atlantic breeze takes the edge off the afternoon's humidity. Madison has been unusually quiet which she blames on the last double shift she pulled. She spent the night at the hospital, not bothering to come home for the first time since she started sleeping over. I know her work is important, and it only happened once, but I don't want her making a habit of it.

As we continue our leisurely stroll, I give her hand a light squeeze. She glances up at me with a smile that fails to light up her eyes the way it usually does. This troubles me.

I slow to a stop and turn to her. "What is it, Madison? What's bothering you?"

She stares out at the ocean. "It's work, the pressure."

I take her by the chin and gently turn her face back toward me. "Work is work, what's changed?"

She closes her eyes and sighs heavily. “Those police detectives came back Thursday afternoon, I was practically yanked out of surgery to go talk to them.”

Alarmed, I reply, “What did you say to them, Madison?”

“They threatened to torch my career. They’re leaning on me hard, Sebastian.”

“What did you say to them?” I repeat more sternly.

She stiffens at my tone. “I told them to go fuck themselves, what do you think?”

I relax. “Okay, I don’t want you to worry about a thing.” I cup her face. “And that’s no reason to stay away. You talk to me if something’s bothering you, okay?”

She lifts her gaze skyward. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“What do you mean?”

“They said they found a dead body full of bullets from your gun.” She stares me in the eyes. “What really happened the night you crashed? Did you kill that guy?”

I laugh and kiss her brow. “Is that what has you so upset? You think I’m a killer?”

She rolls her eyes. “No...I mean, why did you have the gun?”

“For protection, Madison. My family sent me to college to learn how to run our business in the most efficient and profitable manner possible. The numbers have never looked better, and our competitors think the unprecedented success is



all due to me. Take me out of the picture and it's theirs for the taking. So, I protect myself, sometimes I even have a bodyguard accompany me. My enemies are a bunch of cut-throats, but if they want to fuck with me, they discover they're the ones getting fucked."

She nods. "All right. Then tell me exactly how your car ended up wrapped around that tree."

I remain silent for a moment as I peer down at her. "Are you with me, Madison?"

"Would I be here if I weren't?"

"Answer me."

"Yes, Sebastian, I'm with you."

"Then I expect you to be in my bed every night. No excuses."

A look floats across her eyes, but defiance gives way to mutual desire. It's what she wants too.

"That night I crashed, I'd just met with the Vinicio family. They didn't like our business expanding into their turf. I told them what they could do with their beef. They rode up on me and tried to run me off the road. They fired into my car, and I fired back."

Her eyes light up and she's smiling. "It was self-defense, you were only protecting yourself."

"Damn right, I was. It seemed to work, so I put my gun away thinking that was the end of it. But they fired off one more

round that blew out my tire which caused me to lose control of the car and that's how I went over the embankment."

Apparently satisfied, her hazel eyes are dazzling as she stares at me like I'm the most wonderful thing she's ever laid eyes on.

"I blacked out and then the next thing I heard was the voice of an angel saying, 'Sir, sir can you hear me?'"

She's smiling radiantly. "You remembered."

"How could I ever forget? You were so beautiful, so caring. I just had a gut feeling I could put my faith in you. Like something had passed between us the moment our eyes met. You know?"

"Yeah, I do," she says sweetly, tilting her head to the side. "That's why I helped you. I just wanted to make your troubles go away."

Something inside me breaks at her words, like the swell of the ocean cresting high and breaking over the bow of a great ship. I gather her into my arms determined to never let her go. "Madison," I say, but it comes out as a plaintiff wail.

Alarmed, she pulls back and looks up at me with eyes filled with concern. "What is it, Sebastian?" She tenderly touches my face. "What do you need?"

I smile sadly and kiss her fingers. "I just need you. That's all."

She slips her arms around my waist and rests her head against my chest. "You have me."

“Always?”

She hugs me tighter. “Always.”

After the stroll on the beach, we returned to the house secure in our relationship and ready to make up for missing last night together. Madison immediately slips into a sexy white bikini and tells me she’ll be waiting for me in the hot tub on the deck overlooking the ocean. I quickly change into my swim trunks and only stop to grab some glasses and a bottle of Cristal from the kitchen. Just as I’m leaving my cell phone rings.

Nicolaus? Why’s my little brother calling? It must be important.

“Nicky, what’s up?”

“I need to get out of here,” he says without preamble and in his thick Russian accent. “I’m sick of these Americans on the campus and these classes are bullshit.”

“I’m doing fine and you?” I say sardonically.

“Sebastian, are you listening to me,” he asks exasperated. “I want to come stay with you awhile before I go nuts.”

“Calm down, it’s November so winter break will be here in a few weeks. Come stay with me then.” He’s a sophomore at my alma mater Cornell University following in my footsteps.

“No, I come for the fall break, you know for their...their, what do you call it?”

“Thanksgiving break.”

“Yes, it’s in three days. I will come then, yes?”

I sigh heavily. The last thing I need is more complications with Madison and my upcoming nuptials. But Nicky sounds like he's about to blow a gasket and I'd prefer he not jeopardize his college career by knocking out a fellow student or god forbid a professor. Besides, he couldn't care less about Natasha, it's the notion of explaining my new steady girlfriend that's giving me pause. In our world, we have wives, and on the side, we see one of the initiated girls from the joint harem. You sure as hell don't go on the outside and date well-educated doctors.

Nicky's not from the old school. If I can trust anyone with this, it's my little brother.

"Alright, when should I expect you?"

"I have to turn in this damn paper then I'm out of here. I'll arrive Friday afternoon. I'll call you from the road."

"Sounds good, see you then, Nick."

"Bash."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

I chuckle. "Later man." I switch off my phone. No more interruptions. I snatch up the bottle of champagne and glasses, then head out to meet Madison.

She's reclining with her head tilted back, arms outstretched, and a light smile on her lips. She must sense me because her eyes spring open and settle upon me. Her smile widens appreciatively.

“Damn, babe,” she says as her eyes pour hungrily over me. “You look good enough to eat.”

“Bon appetit,” I say as I set everything down and slip into the warm, gently churning water. I sit next to her and close my eyes, enjoying the soothing play of the bubbling water on tense muscles. I hadn’t realized just how much tension had been wound up in me until it started to melt away.

Madison slides a long-toned leg across mine and I pull her into my lap.

“Privet,” she says the Russian word for hello.

“Well, hello to you too.”

“Potseluy menya.”

I stifle a chuckle over her pronunciation of “kiss me”, but I applaud her effort at learning Russian for me. I kiss her softly and she slips her arms around my neck.

She leans back and smiles. “I love it here. It’s perfect. You’re perfect.”

I’ve only reserved the place for the weekend, but suddenly I know the perfect gift for her graduation from medical school. A little over the top maybe, but I can imagine all the incredible memories we’ll create here.

“It’s you that makes this place perfect,” I say, staring into her eyes. “Every morning when you leave for work, I hate it because the place suddenly feels so void and empty. You’re the sunlight in my gray world. I’m not quite sure how I managed before I met you.”

She closes her eyes, her head lolls to the side as if she's melting at my words. "You scare me when you talk like that because it makes me feel so good. If it ever stopped, I don't —"

"It won't ever stop." I cup her face in my hands. "Just trust this thing, okay? Don't overthink it."

She runs her hands along my shoulders. "I want to...but you seem too good to be true."

I chuckle. "Me? What about you? Drop-dead gorgeous, brilliant cardio surgeon with a heart of gold. You tell me which one of us is dreaming here."

She grows serious and nods pensively. "I am a hell of a catch, aren't I? Maybe I should go market myself as—"

"Come here, you." I pull her closer as she laughs and wiggles in my lap. "You're mine now, heaven help the man who tries to steal you from me."

"As long as you stay true to me," she tilts her head to the other side, "and keep looking at me the way you do...no one will ever steal me away."

We hold each other's gaze for a tender moment before our mouths meet in a slow burn of a kiss. She presses forward in my lap, her full breasts press against my chest, and she spreads her legs wider. She feels my growing erection and moans in anticipation of the pleasure it will bring her.

We continue savoring the feel and taste of each other, in no particular rush as we have all night to sate our desires. I think

of how we'll grow even closer once I bring her in. She'll not only be my lover, but a valued asset in my organization. A key player, my partner in every sense of the word.

Our breathing grows more heated as things progress. I untie the strings of her bikini and the top falls away letting those full c-cup breasts bounce free. Those stiff brown nipples beckon my mouth forward and I take them in hungrily. She arches her back in response, giving me greater access to those tantalizing tits.

Her groin undulates against me getting my dick so hard I can't take it a second longer. As if sensing it. She liberates it from my trunks, stroking it with a firm hand.

"Ride me, baby," I groan, lifting her hips.

She obediently slips aside her bikini bottom, positions herself over my cock, and slides down the length of it. We groan in unison at the sheer pleasure of it. She then grips my shoulders and begins riding me like a wild bronco. Her energy and stamina are incredible, and my dick is grateful for it.

But now it's my turn to bring the thunder, I grip her hips and pump up into her as she's sliding down creating an erotic synergy that's about to make us both lose our minds in a frenzy of copacetic copulation.

Her moans grow so loud, that I suspect the neighbors can hear. Fuck them, I pump even harder giving and receiving sinfully sublime satisfaction.

She cries out, hitting a new high note I'd never heard before. Seconds later, I'm gripping her so tight as my load pulses into her and the orgasm spreads throughout every inch of my body.

"Jesus, woman," I whisper as I hold her close. "My God, I love you." We both tense slightly at my declaration. We both knew it was on the tip of our tongues, it's no shock or surprise. But still, it is the first time either of us has explicitly named what we're feeling.

Only she hasn't said it back...yet.

I'm still deep within her when she finally pulls back and looks into my eyes. "I never thought I'd meet someone like you. Someone who'd come to mean as much to me as my career. I know now that I need both to be truly happy. There's only one explanation for this." She almost looks bashful now. "I've fallen hopelessly in love with you, Sebastian."

I hold her gaze. "A little scary, isn't it?"

She nods and then looks as if she's going to cry. I hug her to me.

"No, no, babe. Your heart's safe with me. And I know mine is with you. So, don't cry, this is something to celebrate. All right?"

She nods against my chest. I let her remain as she is as I reach over and pop the cork from the champagne.

She squeals with delight as it shoots out and sprays all over us. Half of it is wasted but the sound of her laughter is better



than the finest bottle of Cristal. I only pray she continues to feel the same when I tell her everything.

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## Chapter 7 – The Other Shoe Falls

It's 11:06 pm and it's pouring down rain as I pull out of the hospital parking deck. The shift was relatively light today and I was able to catch up on a lot of paperwork, in between minor non-death-threatening procedures. According to the Chief Resident, I'm a very strong candidate for the cardiothoracic residency program at Presbyterian Hospital. Simon is also a major contender, she concedes but she thinks I can edge him out. It will be a photo finish race to see who wins the prize. I completed my application in the ERAS system two months ago and completed my step two exam with flying colors. The Presbyterian Hospital interviews went flawlessly but I imagine that Simon's did as well. We won't officially find out until the big ceremony in March when all the students get together to open their match letters. I'll either be jumping for joy or crying my eyeballs out.

My cell phone buzzes as it sits in its mount on the dashboard. The text is from Sebastian urging me to drive safely in the rain. He's so sweet that way. Always sending

little text each day to let me know he's thinking about me or to just tell me about his day.

Things with him are unbelievably good. Despite my initial fears and apprehension, Sebastian has been the dream boyfriend so far – kind, thoughtful, generous, and a freaking god in the bedroom. The best part – that man loves me, truly and deeply. He makes me feel like – I'm not just a *part* of his life, I *am* his life.

He shows such keen interest in my career, that I can speak with him in medical terms that only doctors would be expected to understand. It's like he wants to go the extra mile to prove he'll fit into my world and hold his own amongst the medical professionals with whom we'll frequently socialize.

Well, I'm proud of him too for being such a successful businessman. I hate that his life could be put at risk. I even encourage him to keep two bodyguards with him at all times when conducting business. He always gives me that enigmatic grin and tells me not to worry.

I smile back, then remind him how we met. So, yes, I worry.

As I pull out onto the main street, I spot one of the residents, Andrew Cooper, standing under the bus shelter waiting on public transportation. That's when I remember he'd mentioned his car was in the shop. The poor guy doesn't even have an umbrella.

I check the time and try to estimate how long it would take to give him a ride before I head home. Home. Yep, I have de facto moved in with Sebastian since he insists, and I

wholeheartedly concur, that we should spend every night that we can together.

I glance back at Andrew. It won't take me too far off my path to give him a lift. I'm feeling so good, I have to do something kind for someone else or I'll explode. I pull up to the bus shelter. When I see that I have his attention, I roll the window down an inch to prevent the rain from streaming in.

“Andrew, do you need a lift?”

He peers in at me with furrowed brow, but then they spike up. “Madison, hey, that'd be great!” He hurries over, opens the door, and quickly hops in.

“Oh, jeez,” I say, leaning away from him as the water pours off him.

“I'm so sorry, I'm soaked.”

I reach into the side of the door and pull out a wad of napkins. “Here you go, buddy.”

“Thanks,” he laughs as he tries to dry off a bit. “I really appreciate this. The bus isn't bad as long as the weather holds.”

“No worries. You still live over on Wilkins at Greenmore Apartments, right?”

“Yeah, you remember?” he says in a tone that suggests he's flattered.

“You and your roommate threw the Halloween party there last year. It was fun.”

He gives a toothy smile. “Well, I’m a fun guy.”

I force a chuckle and glance out at the weather. “Man, it’s probably going to be hell tonight in the ER. You know how it gets in this kind of weather.”

“You know, we never did get that coffee. I don’t know about you, but I’m a little too wired to go to sleep. What do you say to coffee and a donut?”

I have to make this stop. “Andrew, as inviting as that sounds, I think you should know that I’m seeing someone, so that’s probably not the best idea.”

“Oh, yeah...sure,” he sputters. “I-I just meant as friends.”

“Oh, I know, I just meant for appearances’ sake, you know? I mean, I offered you a lift because it’s pouring down rain and I wouldn’t wish that fate on a dog.”

He blanches at that.

“Oh, not that I’m calling you a dog. I just meant I hated to see you out there like that. That’s all.”

“Yeah.”

We pull up at a light. I take the opportunity to switch on the radio to alleviate the awkward silence. We rode the rest of the way without exchanging another word. When I pull up in front of his apartment building, Andrew kindly thanks me for the lift and I peel out of there.

I chuckle. “Won’t be making that mistake again.”

It's 11:40 pm. I should arrive home in the next ten minutes. I'm on the highway about one minute before I hear that all too familiar ringtone, Foreigner's "Waiting for a Girl Like You".

I answer immediately. "Hello, lover," I say in my best sexy voice.

"Where are you?" comes Sebastian's terse reply.

"I just got on the Long Island Expressway, I should be home in about ten minutes."

"I thought your shift ended at eleven."

"Yeah, it did."

"So why aren't you home?"

I frown at the phone not caring for his tone. "I'm on my way, you do know it's raining cats and dogs out here, right?"

"You're saying the rain made you late?" the edge to his voice grows sharper.

"In a roundabout way, yes, the rain caused my delay." That's the only reason I gave Andrew a ride.

"Madison, I'm going to ask you one more time," he says. "Why are you late?"

"Jesus, Sebastian. I gave a co-worker a ride home because they were standing in the pouring rain. What's your problem?"

"When I ask a direct question, I expect a direct answer."

"Okay. What's with the attitude? I feel like I'm missing something here."

I hear him breathe out on the phone followed by silence.

“Sebastian...you there?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. It was raining hard, and I was worried about you.”

“Well, that’s sweet of you. I’m sorry, it took a little longer than I expected because of the rain.”

More silence, then, “Who’s the co-worker, which one?”

I hesitate a second sensing where this might be headed.  
“Andrew Cooper, he’s a second-year ER resident.”

“Cooper...isn’t that the doctor who’s been trying to get you to go out with him?”

“Look, Sebastian, it was raining, he needed a ride. That’s all. I even told him that I’m seeing someone to prevent him from misinterpreting my actions.”

More silence.

“Sebastian?”

“Just get home.”

The line went dead. I snort my incredulity. He can’t seriously be getting this upset over something so innocent. Surely, he was just anxious about me driving in this weather. And can’t possibly think that I was up to no good.

Can he?

The closer I get home, the more worried I become that this could turn into a major argument. Is our first argument going to be over something this banal?



I turn off the main street and drive the Porsche down the alleyway toward our place. I press the garage door button and drive in. I hop out of the car nearly snagging my jacket on the door. I bound up the outside stairs leading to the front door. I fumble with the keys, dropping them once before I open the door. When I enter our house, it's dark save for the kitchen light.

“Sebastian,” I call out. I switch on the hall light and glimpse Sebastian standing there in the kitchen leaning against the counter with his arms folded across his chest. Though he's removed his tie, he's still wearing his suit from work.

“Look, Sebastian. I didn't mean to worry you, I'm sorry about that. But there's nothing to be upset about.”

He holds his hands up gesturing for me to be silent. “Relax, Madison.” He says in an eerily calm tone. “It's my fault. We should have discussed a few ground rules from the beginning. I gave you that car for your transportation, to keep you safe, not to drive random dickweeds around town.”

He holds a finger up when I try to speak.

“I don't want to ever hear about you having some other guy in that car. I'm not done yet,” he says, all in an even tone. “No double standards for us, the same rules apply to both of us, Madison. I don't want to deal with this kind of bullshit, so let's just agree that nothing like this will happen again.”

Despite the nature of his words and the tension in the room, he hasn't once raised his voice at me. He unfolds his arms and sticks his hands in his pants pockets.

“Are we in agreement?” he asks, and now there is a little edge to his voice.

“Yeah, got it, no dickweeds in the car,” I say and walk over to the fridge to get a bottle of Fuji water.

“You think this is a joke?”

I unscrew the lid and take a swig of water. “I think there was an innocent misunderstanding, it’s been addressed and now you need to let it go.”

Though he doesn’t move, his ardent stare is immobilizing. The ferocity it conveys is chilling.

But this is silly making a mountain out of a molehill. I walk toward him, giving him my warmest smile.

“I’m home now, babe. Let’s not waste any more time on this.” I rise onto my tippy toes to kiss his lips. He neither moves away nor reciprocates.

“I’m tired, I’m going to bed,” Sebastian grumbles. He steps around me and heads to the staircase without looking back to see if I’ll follow.

Okay, that just happened.

Have I finally found the kink in Mr. Perfect’s armor? Maybe he just had a rough day and my getting home late was just the straw that broke the camel’s back. Whatever, I think as I turn off the kitchen lights and make my way up the stairs to our bedroom.

Sebastian is in the bathroom brushing his teeth. I slip out of my scrubs and into one of his t-shirts that I love to sleep in. I run a brush through my hair and pull it back into a ponytail. I then head for the bathroom as he's exiting it. I brush his hand as we pass, he ignores it and heads for the walk-in closet to get undressed.

I wash my face and brush my teeth. By the time I finish, he's climbed into bed and turned out the lights. I slip under the covers and nuzzle into him. Again, he neither pushes me away nor reciprocates. I swear, he might as well be a life-size Ken doll lying next to me.

Fine, let's see him ignore this. I slowly caress his lower abdomen. My fingers play with the patch of hair trailing down from his belly button. I slip my hand lower into the waistband of his boxer briefs. By the time my hand reaches his dick, it's already semi-hard. I begin kissing his shoulder and chest, slowly making my way down his abdomen, all the while fondling his manhood.

He's fully hard in my hand, and I've grown wet with anticipation. But first I plan to give him a rare treat. I part my mouth and lean in.

"Not tonight," he says tersely, shifting away. "I'm tired."

I can't believe he's playing this hard to get. Based on the abundant evidence, he's totally *up* for it. I persist. "I think he'd beg to differ," I say, and reach over to stroke his cock.

He grips my wrist firmly and thrusts my hand away. "I said not tonight, Madison. Just go to sleep." With that he rolls over,

turning his back to me.

I sit there stunned, not to mention, extremely frustrated. It's either going to be a cold shower or my vibrators getting a good workout. Shit, I didn't bring it. I never thought I'd need it being with someone as insatiable as Sebastian Petrosky.

At least now I know, piss him off, and you get the cold cock treatment.

The next morning, I awaken to find Sebastian's side of the bed empty. I check the time, it's only 6 a.m. Has he gone to work already without saying a word to me? This is getting ridiculous.

I throw off the comforter and pad across the hardwood floors to the bathroom. I step inside the large glass enclosure and turn on the rain shower head. I stand under it for several minutes trying to figure out what exactly is going on. Sebastian's reaction seems way over the top. Or am I under-reacting?

How would I feel if I gave Sebastian a high-end performance car and then I found out he was late coming home because he was out driving around a female colleague who had the major hots for him? Just the thought of it suddenly makes my blood boil. I would be furious.

And then if I called him on it and he responded in a callous, flippant manner, how willing would I be to give him some good loving that night?

Oh, jeez. What have I done?

I finish showering and wrap a towel around me. I've got to call Sebastian and apologize, really apologize this time.

I pick up my cell phone and ring him. He usually picks it up before the second ring, we're on the 5<sup>th</sup>, and no answer. It goes to voicemail.

I try again. "Come on, Sebastian, pick up!" No luck, I get voicemail again. "Damn."

Should I go see him at his office? Or would that only make things worse? Besides, he's on the opposite side of town, there's no way I could make it there and make it to work on time. I'll just have to keep trying him throughout the day.

As I quickly dress, I silently curse Andrew for inadvertently causing this mess. Or maybe I should blame the rain. Better yet, my bad judgment.

I pull on my shoes and grab my bag. I fly down the stairs determined to make it to the office in time to compose a sufficiently apologetic text to Sebastian. I'm in such a hurry that I almost don't notice him sitting in his office at his PC. I slide to a stop on the polished cement floors.

"Sebastian," I say full of relief and joy at seeing him. He hadn't left without a word.

I drop my bag and rush into the room as he eyes me dubiously.

"Sebastian, I am so sorry. It was so stupid and thoughtless of me to give Andrew a ride. Nothing like that will ever happen again, I promise. I'd have been just as angry if you'd done the

same. I wasn't thinking, but now I get it and I'm really, really sorry."

He remains seated, his expression is inscrutable as he stares at me. I stand there patiently awaiting his verdict, hoping like hell this worked.

He finally holds out his hand to me.

I'm forgiven! I reach out to take it.

"No," he snaps, retracting his hand. "I want the keys to the Porsche, if you have so little respect for my gift, you can go back to riding public transportation."

My mouth drops open in shock.

His face springs into a broad smile. "I'm kidding. Apology accepted."

"Arrgh, you!" I growl playfully as I lunge at him.

He's laughing as he grabs me and pulls me into his lap. My emotions are all jumbled as I'm thrilled to be back in Sebastian's arms but annoyed at the whole sorry scenario. Time is precious for us, and we just blew a whole evening on this nonsense.

I squirm in his lap as he nuzzles my neck, it feels heavenly but the timing sucks.

"I'm going to be late for work," I say, twisting away from him, but he holds me tight.

"If you can manage to bring your fine ass home on time, I'll have a nice dinner waiting for us," he says in that deep sensual

voice of his. “We’ll give a whole new meaning to the phrase make-up sex.”

“Yeah?” I snake my arms around his neck. “How about a preview kiss?”

He cups my face and proceeds to lay the most sumptuous, tongue-tangling kiss on me that sends heat straight to my core.

A meeting notification pops up on his laptop.

I groan knowing I need to leave for work anyway.

“All right, lady,” he says and playfully smacks my bottom. “I’ve got a meeting and you’re going to be late for your shift.”

He glances at the screen as I hop up. His expression clouds a bit.

“Oh yeah,” he says, rising from the chair. “We’ll have a house guest in a few days.”

My stomach drops. “Not your uncle?”

He looks askance at me. “No, my brother Nicolaus. He’s a sophomore at Cornell University.”

“Oh,” I sigh in relief. “Well, good. How long will he be staying?”

“Just over the Thanksgiving break, three or four days tops,” he points off to his left. “He’ll stay in the spare bedroom across from my office.”

“Okay, do we need to do anything special for his visit? I don’t suppose there’s any need for a big Thanksgiving feast.”

He shakes his head. “No, nothing like that. I’ll handle everything, I just didn’t want to blindside you with it.”

“Cool.” I step back over to him and lift for a goodbye kiss. As I turn to walk away, he slips his hand into mine.

“And just so you know, turning away from you last night was the single most excruciatingly painful thing I’ve ever done in my life. I was dying to give in and just fuck the hell out of you.”

I look him up and down. “Yeah, well, you just make sure you exercise that same level of restraint the next time some big boobed bimbo pushes up on you.”

He laughs. “Go to work, doc.”



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## Chapter 8 – Trouble Brewing

**T**ime's running out and Uncle Sergei is leaning hard on me to bring Madison in. He had the gall to make threats to the effect that if I didn't end it, he'd end her. I could strangle the bastard for even insinuating that he'd hurt her.

I told him I needed more time, and that this is a delicate situation that requires finesse. Meanwhile, I tried to convince Natasha to postpone her move to the U.S., but the bosses are pressing for the big wedding to heal the rift between the families.

And now, Stieg Korbet wants to meet with me. He's my father's cousin and former best friend. Over the years, he's been like a big brother to me. He also happens to be one of Sergei's captains. Some say he's next in line if I don't toe the line.

Stieg runs one of the biggest strip clubs in the city. Madison would have my nuts in a vice if she saw me walking in this joint, but this is where a lot of the business takes place. Half the girls in the harem pool are sourced from here.

It's dark inside the club, heavy base music is pounding through the sound system. The girls are on the stage plying their trade, pole dancing in nothing more than G-strings. But I keep my eyes straight ahead making a beeline to the bar.

The bartender looks up at me. "Hey, Sebastian, you want your usual? We just got a new shipment of—"

"No, that's alright," I wave him off. "I'm here to see Stieg. Where is he?"

"In the back office upstairs."

"Thanks, Ron."

I pass a few other workers on my way, they give nods of greeting as they step aside respectfully. But one doesn't step aside...the striking blond walks right up to me, eyes narrowed, and hands planted on her hips.

She's wearing a red halter top that barely restrains the big fake tits and hot pants showing off legs a mile long.

She waits until the corridor is empty to start. "What's wrong with your phone, Sebastian? Didn't you get any of my messages? I haven't seen you for weeks." She pouts and slinks forward in those impossible stiletto pumps. "I miss my Bashy."

I grip her wrist when she tries to slide her hand to my crotch. "Sorry, Arianna. I should've made it clear, it's over."

"What?" she says with eyes tearing up. "No, Sebastian. What did I do? Tell me."

“It wasn’t anything you’ve done. It’s just over, but you’ll be well taken care of, so don’t worry.” I step around her, but she grabs my arm. “Wait, is it because Natasha is coming? I know the rules, Bash. I won’t make any trouble for you, I promise.”

I wrench my arm free of her. “It’s over, Ari. Don’t make me tell you again.”

I’m not trying to be an asshole, but it’s the only way she’ll get the message. Sympathy at this point would only give her hope. Making a clean break is the best to let them all know, those days are behind me.

I hurry up the stairs taking them by twos. I’ve got to get the hell out of this place. This is the last time I’ll take a meeting in this stinking dive.

I knock once on the door and turn the knob. “Stieg, you wanted to see me?” Stieg had been over here longer than anyone else. He’d gone to high school here and played varsity football, as quarterback. Would’ve been recruited to one of the big colleges if he hadn’t torn his rotator cup. Despite the graying hair, he managed to maintain an athlete’s physique.

“Hey, Sebastian, come have a seat,” Stieg says then motions for the two other guys to beat it. The room smells of stale cigarettes, moldy wood, and stripper ass.

I take up a chair across from Stieg’s desk. “What’s on your mind?”

“You heard about the hit on the Medici family,” Stieg says sitting back in his chair. His leather jacket creaks with the

motion.

“They tried to kill me.”

“You fucked his girl, what did you expect?”

A tight ball forms in the pit of my stomach. “What the hell was one of Medici’s girls doing here at the club?” I say in my defense. “Besides, that was over six months ago.” Long before I met Madison.

“The point is you handled it, put a bullet right between the son-of-a-bitch’s eyes.” He shakes his head. “The Medici boss would have been willing to let it go since it was a low-level guy. But then Sergei had to go fuck it up by taking out one of their captains. Just when I was making in-roads with the Italians, Sergei pulls this shit.” He pounds his fist on the arm of his chair. “He’s out of control, Sebastian. He has been for a very long time.”

I hold my counsel just as I hold his gaze. I need him to keep talking so I know exactly what he wants from me. His brown eyes search mine. The corner of his mouth curves up.

“Sometimes I forget how much you look like him, your old man.”

I nod. “He put his stamp on me and Nicolaus.”

“He should’ve been here, Sebastian. To raise his two boys.”

I nod again but remain silent.

His eyes dart about the room before coming to rest upon me. “I was there with him that night, you know. We’d just finished

collections on East Fifth and were heading over to Little Nikita's for a bite. The ambush took place at a light. I heard them talk, they were Albanians." He points to his left hip and ribs. "Caught two bullets here and here. I should've been gone too."

I scratch the bridge of my nose having listened to this story a dozen times during my lifetime.

"I know, you think you've heard it all before, but I've some new info for you."

I sit up a little straighter in the chair.

"Medici told me that a couple of days later some Albanian punks were hanging around bragging about taking out a Russian mafia don. Said one of our own had paid him to do it."

I snort and glance over at the calendar featuring a girl in hot pants splayed out over the hood of a Lamborghini. I cringe and feel the dirty atmosphere clinging to me. How hadn't I noticed all this before Madison?

"We've heard the rumors for years, Stieg. Why are you dredging this up now?"

His dark eyes narrow at me. "Alexei was my best friend, but he was your father, you think you'd give a damn."

A bitter spark flares up in me. "You give me solid proof and I'll wipe the motherfucker off the face of the planet. But I need hard proof, Stieg, not idle speculation and rumors."

“Look, I get it. You have to be the respectable face of the business, that’s why we sent you to school and all. We keep you protected, keep your hands as clean as possible when we can. All I’m asking here is that you give your,” he raises a level hand, wobbles it slightly, “your approval. You know, turn your head while we handle business.”

The cold hand of dread grips my gut. I stare at the grimy window on the far wall. “Who you gunning for?”

“We helped Medici out of a fix with the feds a few weeks back. In exchange, he gave me this intel. The bastard who put the hit out on your father did it for a power grab, but more importantly, because he had it bad for your mother.”

My eyes snap to Stieg and my head begins to pound. The distinct nugget of truth resonates with me and feels plausible. My mom had literally been a beauty queen in Moscow and had fallen hard for my dad which made him the envy of countless men.

“You ever wonder why she fled back to Moscow instead of staying here to raise you and Nicolaus?”

“She only came here to be with dad, when he died she returned to her family.”

“Ekaterina didn’t *return*, she ran. She ran from the man who killed your father so he could have her and eventually, the position as boss.” He levels his gaze at me. “You know she wanted to take both of you, but your uncle kept you hidden from her. He meant to use you as a bargaining chip to keep her

here.” He shrugged. “It was difficult for Ekaterina, but she made her choice.”

That certainly explains why several years passed before I was able to see my mother. And even then, it was because I flew to Moscow to see her and my brother.

“Sebastian...it is time to avenge your father. His blood has been crying out since the day he slumped over the steering wheel riddled full of bullets.” He shifts forward, elbows on table. “Just look the other way, and say nothing.”

Is it true? A hard lump forms in my throat and my vision blurs. “I give you my word that I will stand down, but first I need hard evidence, Stieg. I have to know we got the right man.”

He nods in silence, then pulls open one of the desk drawers. He withdraws a manilla envelope and slides it across the desk to me. I hesitate a second before I take it. After unfastening the clasp, I retrieve the 8 x 10 photos. The first one shows my mom and Sergei sitting alone at a bar, likely this one. They’re sitting on the stools, the place appears to be empty. The next photo shows Sergei’s large hand on Mom’s thigh. There is a look of outrage in her eyes. The next photo is of her attempting to slap him, but he appears to have caught her by the wrist.

A red mist hazes over my eyes and my hands tremble. I force myself to look at the next photo. Mom’s face is a look of sheer horror as Sergei’s hand seems to tear at her blouse. The next photo shows Mom smashing a glass against his brow. The



final photo shows her running away. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"Where the hell did you get these?" I say.

"The feds had them. Been holding onto them for years."

"How'd you get them?"

"Medici's man on the inside leaked them to us as payment for alerting them to a sting operation."

I process this information and file it away. "So, this proves Sergei is an asshole pig who tried to force himself on my mom. The sick fuck will pay for that, but how does this pin him for the murder?"

Stieg sighs and rolls his eyes. "Why do you have to be such a boy scout, Sebastian?"

"If someone wanted me to sign off to a hit on you, wouldn't you want me to make damn sure of the evidence?" I let him digest that for a bit. "And boy scout?" I sneer. "You give me the evidence and I'll personally chop that motherfucker to pieces."

His eyebrows hitch up at the venom in my tone. He nods approvingly. "I'll get you what you need. Don't worry about that."

"No moves until you do, right?"

He throws his hands up. "You have my word."

"Your word's always been good enough for me, Stieg." I lean over to shake his hand. He grips mine firmly and grins.

“So, Natasha will be here in two weeks.” He laughs and points at my face. “That’s not happiness I see there, my friend.”

I stand. “Would you want Sergei’s sloppy seconds as a bride?”

He shakes his head. “The boss really fucked you over on that. He knew she was slated for you.”

I stare evenly at him, letting him know his tactic failed to provoke me. “Just the same, Stieg, don’t move on him without showing me the evidence.”

“You’ll have it soon enough,” he says, walking me to the door. “Meanwhile, this stays between you and me.”

“Of course.”

“Have a drink before you go.”

I grimace. “Nah, I can’t. Ari’s out there. I don’t want to deal with that.”

Stieg chuckles. “Yeah, she’s been chewing everyone’s ear off asking about you. What, you gone sour on her?”

“I’ve been busy and with Natasha coming...I’ll set Ari up with a place and give her some cash, but I’m done with her.”

He hitches a brow and grins. “Ari’s back in the harem pool? No wonder she’s pissed. You might want to slip out the back to avoid that hornet’s nest.”

“Good idea.” We turn and head the opposite way down the corridor out the back exit.

“All right,” Stieg says. “I’ll be in touch soon.”

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## Chapter 9 – Meeting Nicolaus Petrosky

I'm two hours into an assist on a thoracotomy where among other things will perform a biopsy on the patient's lungs. This is another key procedure that I can cross off my list and to be working with such gifted surgeons is a dream come true for me.

I love my job. I *love* my job!

An hour later, I'm allowed to close up under the watchful eyes of the lead surgeon. It goes flawlessly and I'm really beginning to feel that cardiothoracic surgery is my true calling despite it involving several more years of intensive training.

Thank God, Sebastian is so understanding about all the late hours I keep. He's always there waiting for me at home with a delicious meal and a mind-blowing, back-breaking fuck. What more can a girl ask for?

I recall the night I returned after we'd had our little tiff over me driving Andrew home. I entered the place greeted by the

aroma of a home-cooked meal and saw the table set for dinner. Sebastian was still in his office tapping away on his laptop.

I sauntered into his office and greeted him with a big, I miss the hell out of you kiss. He was into it, but pulled back and said he had to finish the work he was doing. I glanced down at his screen but he turned it away from me.

He smirked. “Do you mind?”

“Well, excuse me,” I quipped as I sat on the edge of his desk. As I watched him work, a few strands of hair had fallen down over his eyes. He shook it out of his face and continued tapping away at the keypad.

The second time it happened, I reached out and stroked his hair back out of his eyes. He glanced over at me, smirked, and kept working. “Just a minute more,” he muttered.

I pushed off the desk and moved behind him off to the side. I bent over and kissed his neck. He paused for the briefest of seconds and then continued typing. Now it’s a battle of wills and I’m determined to win.

I began kissing his neck, softly at first, lips brushing his skin. But soon, I parted my lips and ran my tongue down the length of his neck. All the while, my hands caress his body, his shoulders, his chest. I feel the pounding of his heart, I know I’m getting to him, but he types away undeterred.

I began nibbling his ear as my hand works its way further down his chiseled abs. He smells and tastes so unbelievably

good, and I grow heated with anticipation. He denied me last night, but I will break him this time.

“I missed you,” I breathe the words in his ear. “Thought about you all day. Could barely concentrate in the O.R....all I could think about was your big throbbing cock and how good it tastes.”

He sucked in a deep breath as the provocative words reverberated through him. His hands paused, hovering over the keyboard.

“I was such a naughty girl last night,” I breathed into his ear. “I need to be punished, fucked into submission. Dominate me, baby. Fuck me hard and dirty.”

I’d never seen him move so fast. He shot up out of the chair, the look in those sapphire eyes was feral. It was as if I’d tapped into some primal forces within him. He grabbed hold of me and began kissing me with a fierce passion. He pressed me back up against the desk. His dick is big and hard against my belly. His breathing was hot and heavy as he devoured my mouth and neck. He actually ripped my t-shirt to get to my breasts. He hefts me up on the desk and yanks down my bra, my breasts pop out with nipples hard waiting for his tongue. He doesn’t disappoint, there’s a direct line from my nipples to my clitoris, it feels like he’s sucking on both simultaneously and I’m coming undone, losing control.

I spread my legs wide in anticipation, but he lifts me and flips me over, and smacks my ass hard. I gasp even as I grow wetter under his control.

With one fierce yank, he tears my panties away and slides his fingers inside me as he unfastened his belt and pants. His wet fingers confirm how ready I am. Without any preamble, he shoves his big cock inside me all the way to the hilt.

I moan aloud in surprise and pleasure having never seen this side of Sebastian. He begins stroking fiercely away, no tenderness, no mercy, just pure, perfect power-fucking me up onto my toes. I am so sloppy wet it's embarrassing as my horny cunt screams MORE to him. He's only too willing to bring it.

While one of his arms is wrapped around me in an immobilizing death grip, the other hand moves below and begins working that clit like a seasoned pro. And I'm about to lose my fucking mind!

A mind-splintering orgasm explodes from within me making me cry out in some unintelligible language. Sebastian grips me by the back of the hair as he continues his relentless assault, punishing me for my impertinence.

A guttural growl rips from his throat and I feel the powerful pulse of his ejaculation shoot into me.

Holy. Fuck.

He falls back into his chair and I slide to the floor completely spent. My head is spinning from the wild ride and I don't know if I'm coming or going. I blink several times before I look up at him.



He stared down at me, his chest rising and falling from the exertion, but the feral look has vanished from those sapphire orbs.

“Careful what you say, lady,” he smirked. “I can’t be held responsible for my actions when you turn me the fuck on like that.”

I tilted my head back and grinned. “Duly noted, Mr. Petrosky.”

“You hungry?”

I looked at him in astonishment. “Oh, for food,” I laughed as the afterglow fog lifted. “Yeah, I’m starving.”

As I walk down the hospital corridor, I’m still wearing a goofy grin on my face at the steamy recollection. I wipe it away the moment I catch sight of the chief resident approaching.

“Madison, I heard they let you close on the thoracotomy.”

“Yes, it was pretty exciting. I’m so grateful for all the opportunities I’m receiving here. And I really appreciate all your support, Dr. Weiss.”

She hikes a brow. “Glad to hear you say that.”

Uh-oh. I force my smile to remain in place.

“We’re a little short-handed tonight,” she scrunches her nose. “I need you to pull a double. Can I count on you?”

I stretch my smile wider. “Of course, you can. Happy to do it.”

“Great,” she says, patting my arm. “You’re such a trooper, Madison.” She carries on down the hall and I’m left to deliver the bad news to Sebastian.

“Jesus, Madison,” Sebastian sighs over the phone. “You know Nicolaus arrives tomorrow afternoon, but you’ll be too exhausted to do anything but sleep.”

“I’m sorry, babe, but this is what we signed up for.”

“Yeah, but I think that Emma takes advantage of the fact that you never say no.”

“Well until they officially offer me the cardiothoracic residency, I’m kind of at their mercy.”

He goes silent, no doubt fuming.

“Come on, babe, you know pulling a double results in two days off. I’ll rest up for a bit and then we’ll all go out for dinner or something. It’ll be great, you’ll see.”

“Yeah, I know. I just don’t like anyone taking advantage of my girl, especially when it means I have to sleep alone tonight.”

I smirk. “Trust me, babe. I’ll make it up to you.”

“You bet you will,” he chuckles.

“All right, I’ve got to go do my rounds. Love you.”

“Love you best.”

My heart swells at the endearment. I’m smiling ear to ear when I end the call and see Andrew trudging up the hall looking completely beleaguered. When he catches my eye, his

goes wide. Oh, God, please don't ask me out again. I start to make a hasty retreat, but he beats me to it suddenly turning and heading in the opposite direction. What the hell? Should I go talk to him to clear the air?

I shake it off, I'm not going to fall into that trap again. Andrew's a big boy who can take care of himself.

When I get home, I'm so exhausted I fall right into bed still wearing my scrubs. When I awaken, I see that they've been removed and I'm snug under the comforter in my bra and panties. The door is shut and the drapes have been drawn to maintain the darkness so I could rest undisturbed. Sebastian can be so sweet.

It's 4:53 pm which means I've had about seven hours of sleep. His brother should have arrived earlier this afternoon. I'm not certain if they're still here or have gone out. Either way, I need to get up and make myself presentable. I pad across the floor and hop into the shower.

Forty-five minutes later, I'm fully dressed and I've applied a little mascara and lip gloss. For the sake of time, I've blow-dried my hair and pulled it back into a ponytail. I think the jeans, silk blouse, and jacket ensemble should do the trick.

I head out onto the landing and peer down to see Sebastian and a younger version of himself having a rather intense discussion in Russian complete with pinched brows and flying hand gestures. Nicolaus's hair is a little wavier than Sebastian's straight locks, but the color is the same chestnut

brown. And the eyes, which suddenly flick up to me, are every bit Sebastian's.

His expression softens a smidgen and the discussion ceases. Sebastian glances up at me but is still frowning as if I've disturbed a very important discussion.

"Hello," I say with a little wave as I ascend the stairs.

"Hi," Nicolaus replies, smiling now. I'd say he was equally as handsome as Sebastian but at twenty-one, he's yet to completely lose the boyish look. While they have a similar build, Nicolaus hasn't quite filled out with the same muscle mass as his brother and is about half an inch shorter.

Sebastian meets me at the bottom of the stairs. He pecks me on the cheek and then presents me to his brother.

"Nick, this is Dr. Madison Graham," he says as he slips his arm around my waist.

Nick shoots out a hand in greeting. His grip is solid and tips me forward slightly.

"Wow," he says in a thick Russian accent. "Bash told me you were beautiful, but he did not do you justice."

"Down boy," Sebastian jokes, gripping Nick by the shoulder.

"Very nice to meet you, Nick," I say. "So, Bash tells me you're a sophomore at Cornell University. How are you liking it?"

"Ah, it is a big waste of time and money," he says rather heatedly. He then directs his gaze at Sebastian but speaks in

English. “I can learn everything I need to know about running a business by actually running a business. Not sitting in a stupid classroom listening to ancient dribble. If you want to run a business you run the business not talk about it.”

And now I know what they are arguing about.

“You know Ekaterina wants you to finish your degree, Nick. It’ll break her heart.”

“No, I have had to spend too many years thinking about momma. I have to put me first now.”

“This is about your education and how you establish your credibility in the business world. We have to be the face of this company,” Sebastian says, “you and me.”

“No, you be the face,” Nick counters, “and I’ll learn from the ground up, working in the back of the scenes.”

In the background, I mentally correct him.

“Nick, you’re not dropping out of college, that’s final.”

Nick fires back in Russian. The next few exchanges are conducted in their mother tongue. But I get the gist of it. Sebastian comes across as the more sane, rational voice while Nick is getting angrier and louder by the moment.

Any second now, he’s going to blow and then go storming out of here into the cold. I scan the room for his coat. I have a feeling he’ll be needing it soon.

“Fine,” Nick says throwing his arms up. He turns and heads for the door.

“Nick,” I call out.

Apparently surprised to hear me, he turns and waits as I grab his coat. I hustle back over to him with it. “We really wish you wouldn’t go, Nick. But if you must, at least wear your jacket, it’s cold out there.”

He rolls his eyes, but a smile tugs at his lips. “You sound like my mother.” He takes the jacket. “Thank you.” He casts one last baleful look at Sebastian and then slips out the door.

“Idiot,” Sebastian says.

“He probably just needs to blow off some steam. Once he calms down you can try talking some sense into him.”

Sebastian shakes his head. “I worry about him. All he wants to do is take the shortcut everywhere. He just doesn’t get it.” He rakes his fingers through his hair and looks at me with a despondent expression. “He’s flunking out, his grades are shit.”

“Oh, no. Is it too late to get him some help?”

“He doesn’t need any help,” Sebastian says, walking toward the kitchen. “On his standardized test, he scored in the 90th percentile just like me. He’s just a lazy and immature kid who needs a boot up his ass.”

“Okay,” I say following him in. I suspect he’s not in the right space to rationally discuss this so I let it go. “So where are you taking me for dinner tonight?”

He leans back against the island and rubs his eyes as if stressed. “I hadn’t really thought about it.” He looks at me.

“What are you in the mood for? Italian, Mexican, Asian?”

“Italian, how about Cordellos? I haven’t been there in ages.”

Sebastian is staring out into nothingness and makes no reply.

I walk over to him. “Babe,” I say, rubbing his arms. “Are you okay? I’m sure it will be fine. He’s going to calm down and you’ll get it all sorted out.”

“I just don’t want him to do anything stupid. He’s saying he’s going to take his case to my uncle, see what he says about dropping out of college and going straight into the business.”

“And you’re worried he’ll support Nick’s position?”

He shrugs. “It’s hard to say. I can’t think about this right now, I’ve got enough on my mind. Let’s just go eat.”

“Bash, if you’d rather not go out, we can just order in and watch a movie or something.”

He looks over at me seeking sympathy. “Would you mind? I’m just not in the right head space right now.”

I take his face in my hands. “Babe, I don’t care how we spend the evening, as long as we spend it together. Okay?”

He nods. “Thanks, love.”

And we do just that. Order some Italian via Doordash. We find a good movie, one of my favorites, *The Last of the Mohicans*. We lay the spread out over the coffee table and sit on the couch across from the 60” flat screen tv on the wall.

We eat to our hearts content, downing a few bottles of beer for good measure. After the movie, we watch a few mindless

funny videos before we start nodding. We climbed the stairs to the loft. We crawled into bed, made gentle, missionary-style love and fell asleep in each other's arms.

How was I to know that this would be the very last day of life as I knew it?

I'm dreaming about performing a procedure where I'm the chief surgeon leading the team toward a successful heart transplant. One of the nurses has left her phone on, we can't find it but it keeps ringing and ringing.

Finally, it stops, and I hear Sebastian's voice. "Hello?"

It really is Bash. I open my eyes and turn over to see him on his cell phone, the light making his face glow like an apparition.

"Wait, what happened? Nicky!" he leaps out of bed. He starts yelling hysterically in Russian.

"Bash, what is it? What's happened to Nick?"

Sebastian runs to the closet rummages around all the while screaming in Russian. He returns and tosses my clothes at me.

"Get dressed we have to go!"

I glance at the clock, it's 2:43am.

"What? Where are we going?"

"Get dressed, Madison, please hurry!"

The terror in his voice frightens me. I quickly begin to dress hoping that will encourage him to explain what the hell is going on.



“Babe, come on, we have to go.” He urges me, taking me by the arm and grabbing up my shoes. “Put them on in the car.” We haul ass down the stairs and out the door.

Once we’re inside the car and flying down the road. I demand an explanation.

“Nicky’s been shot.”

“Oh my God, is he alright? What hospital have they taken him to?”

Sebastian takes a hard right and the tires squeal loudly in protest. I cling to the armrest and will him to slow down before we end up in the hospital. His knuckles are white on the steering wheel and there is a frantic look in those sapphire eyes. He is terrified for Nick and I want to offer words of comfort but I’m completely in the dark as to Nick’s condition and the extent of the damage. I only pray that the doctor’s on staff will be able to successfully treat him.

“Do you have any other details?” my curiosity getting the better of me. “How did this happen, where was he shot?”

He gives a terse shake of the head. “He was trying to do a deal on his own, trying to prove himself to Sergei.” His face contorts with rage. “Why didn’t Sergei stop him? Now my little brother is dying!” He pounds the steering wheel.

“You don’t know that, Bash. The doctors may be able to save him. Let’s just get to the hospital and I’ll talk to them. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

The further we drive it occurs to me that we're not headed to Bellevue which is the closest hospital. But then again I don't know what part of town this "deal" went down in. Maybe we're headed for North Central Medical Center.

Bash turns off the main road and we start going down a rather sketchy looking area with storefronts with bars on them or blaring lights offering all manner of substances and services. What hospital could possibly be over here? Maybe a clinic?

We pull up in front of what appears to be an auto mechanic shop. I turn to look at Sebastian in complete astonishment as he puts the car in park.

"What in the hell are we doing here?" I exclaim. "We need to get to the hospital."

"This is where Nick is," he hops out of the car. "Come on!"

"What?" I say as I open the door. "What the hell is he doing here? He needs to be at a hospital."

He grabs me by the arm and pulls me along with him. We run around to the back of the garage. Sebastian fumbles with some keys and then opens the door. Suddenly the picture starts forming in my mind. Nick was involved in some criminal activity and was shot but instead of taking him to the hospital, for some insane reason, he ended up here in a filthy mechanics shop.

We walk through a dark corridor and then turn off to the left. We go down a short stairway and then stop at what appears to

be a storage closet. Sebastian uses the keys to open the door. At the far end of the closet is yet another steel door with a latch handle like what might be on an industrial freezer room. My heart is pounding wildly as I wonder what we'll find on the other side. I imagine Nick lying on a filthy floor holding his gut while life bled out of him.

When Sebastian opens the door, I am shocked to walk into what appears to be a gleaming white and mint green, sterile looking operating room. It was like stepping into a state-of-the-art medical facility. In this place? What the hell was going on?

My attention was quickly drawn to Nick lying on the operating table his chest covered in blood. A woman in full scrubs stands at his side administering what I assume to be pain medication. Another man young man stood in the corner still in his street clothes, looking scared and shaken. He must have been the one who called and brought Nick here.

“She’s just a nursing assistant,” Sebastian explains. “She’s sedated Nick, but can’t do any more to help him.” He looks at me, earnest eyes filled with pleading. “He’s been shot twice, in the chest and stomach. You’ve got to help him, Mads.”

All of the questions about how and why fled from my mind as my doctor brain took over. I hurry over to the sink and begin scrubbing up. Knowing time is of the essence, I do the best I can in thirty seconds and then the nursing assistant is there helping me put on gloves, mask and, cap, no time to pull on scrubs.

I ask no more questions and simply go to work, bound and determined to save Nick's life.

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## Chapter 10 – The Doctor is In

Watching Madison at work was a vision to behold. She was a maestro at work conducting a symphony of medical excellence and artistry. For three hours straight, she worked diligently on Nick. She stopped the hemorrhaging, stabilized his vital signs, retracted the bullets from his chest cavity and gut, closed off the blood vessels, and finally sutured him up.

As afraid as I was for Nick, watching Madison in her element was incredible.

I'd washed up to assist wherever I could. Between me and the nursing assistant, we were able to keep the process flowing relatively smoothly, giving Madison what she needed when she needed it without too many delays.

All things considered, it went extremely well, and Nick's prognosis is very promising. But now comes the real challenge, the one I've both dreaded and dreamed of.

“Okay, Nick’s in stable enough condition to be safely transported to a hospital,” she says pulling off her surgical gloves and wiping her brow. She gives me a harsh look of disapproval. “I can’t believe you’d gamble with your brother’s life this way, he should’ve been taken to the hospital immediately.”

“Mads, I love my brother very much. If I wasn’t absolutely 100% certain that you could’ve saved him, I’d have taken our chances at the hospital and with the police. But this way, this incident doesn’t have to go on his permanent record. He won’t be expelled from college. I was trying to keep this from ruining his life.”

She listens but gives me a questioning look. “But what about *my* future, Bash? This was a gunshot wound. I have to report it, or I could be barred from practicing medicine, and possibly prosecuted for failing to report a violent crime to the authorities.”

And there’s the rub.

“Babe, I know that, but no one’s going to know what happened here. Nick’s going to recover at home and be fine. It’ll be like it never happened.”

She brings her hands to her temples. “You’re putting my career in jeopardy.”

“Gods, no,” I say indignantly. “I’ll do *everything* in my power to protect your career. This must remain off the records and all of our lives will go on unsoiled by it. You did the hard part, now let it go for all our sakes.”

Her face contorts in grief. “First the gun, now this? Sebastian, I can’t be a part of this world. If any of this gets out—”

I take her by the shoulders. “It won’t get out. That’s what I’m telling you. Your career is safe, Nick is safe. That’s the end of it.”

“Even if that were true, what’s next? Are you going to start asking me to smuggle drugs out of the hospital pharmacy? Bring home equipment? What’s next, Bash?”

“Now, don’t go off on a tangent, just know that we’re all safe and our lives will go on as planned. You’re getting the cardiothoracic residency precisely as planned and you’re going to be the most brilliant surgeon that hospital has ever produced. Count on that!”

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. I give her shoulders a comforting squeeze trying to knead some of the tension away.

“You did an incredible thing here. My God, you were magnificent,” I say, stoking her ego while speaking truth. “I think I fell in love with you all over again just watching you perform. I’m so honored to be with such an amazingly talented and beautiful woman.” I stroke her face. “I’m looking forward to watching you become one of the most respected surgeons in your field. I want ...” The words spring into my head unbidden but feel so right. “I always want to be by your side, loyally loving and supporting you for the rest of our lives. Mads, I want to be your husband.”



Her hazel eyes fly wide at my words, but at least the tension has broken. “Bash, stop. I can’t think straight right now,” she objects, but I notice her struggling to stifle a smile.

“Fine, I’ll save my marriage proposal for a more appropriate time.” I cup her chin in my hand. “But know, that’s what I want for us. You and I are forever, Mads.”

She returns my gaze in silence but doesn’t object or counter my vision of our future together.

“Just promise me, no more nasty surprises like this. If you truly love me, you won’t keep putting my career at risk like this.”

I kiss her brow. “I know, and I’m sorry for putting you in this position. Your career is everything to me too. Please trust that.”

As she stares at me, an odd expression falls across her face. Slowly, her lips curve into a smile. “I must say, it was quite the adrenaline rush, being the lead surgeon with no one guiding or supervising me. To hold Nick’s life in my hands and to save it.” She blows out a breath. “*Wow.*”

I smirk. “Ah, and queue the God complex.”

She playfully smacks my chest. “It’s not like that,” she says, and then scrunches her nose. “Well, maybe a tiny bit.”

“I already worship you, so why not?”

Her head drops back. “As exhilarating as it was, I’m still not ready to work without a net. We were very fortunate tonight.”

“My girl doesn’t need any goddamn net. Tonight, you just proved you’re a freaking rock star in the O.R.”

Madison’s beaming from ear to ear, high on her success and my adulation. I’ve never felt closer to her, never felt more confident that I can bring her in. I turn to the nursing assistant who’s busy cleaning the place up.

“He’ll need to remain here on the monitors for the next twenty-four hours. It’ll be a couple of days before you can bring him home.”

I nod, hating the idea of leaving him here. “Tessa will stay with him the whole time and alert us if his condition changes.”

She checks the time on her phone. “Regardless, I’ll come back in five hours to check on him, and make sure no infection is setting in. He’s out of the woods and I’d like to keep it that way.” She glances around as if seeing the space for the first time. “This place is fairly impressive, a lot of money’s been invested here.” She casts an appraising look at me. “Where’s your usual surgeon?”

“He was unavailable, out of town,” I say without missing a beat.

She frowns. “What would you’ve done if you didn’t know me?”

I shrug. “We’d have been forced to take him to the hospital.”

“Well, he’d better get back soon. I only did this because Nick’s your brother.” Her eyes narrow at me. “You understand that, right?”

“You love me and wanted to help me out in a pinch, I got it.” The shock of what she’s done will wear off in a few days. After a few weeks, she’ll come to see that no harm whatsoever has come to her career, and all is well. Only then will she be ready to handle the difficult truth.

Two days later, we make the call to bring Nick home to let him recover under our care. I couldn’t have planned the whole thing better myself. Though I still want to wring Nick’s neck for pulling such an asinine stunt going out on his own like that. But this setback will give him pause, not to mention a healthy dose of reality. If anything will send his naïve ass back to Cornell University, it’s this. I’ve already contacted Nick’s professors to notify them that he’d been in an accident and wouldn’t be able to return for the rest of the semester. Forging the doctor’s excuse was easy enough.

Sergei and I nearly came to blows over his tacit approval of Nick’s plans to prove himself. I needed one of us to remain unblemished by this world. It’s too late for me despite their efforts to keep me clean. Now I’m in too deep to even think about leaving.

I’d reconciled myself to this life. I was going to marry Natasha, have her pop out a kid or two, and keep any number of girls from the club pool on the side. And then someday, when Sergei meets his end, I would become the new boss. That was the plan.

And then Madison Graham came along and wonderfully wrecked all of that.

How do I reconcile her to my world? I know I should just let her go. Isn't that what love dictates? Maybe I'm just too selfish a bastard to let the best thing that ever happened to me walk away. She makes me feel things that I thought weren't part of my DNA. Lord knows I've had more than my share of women from the club pool, drop-dead gorgeous ones that most men would give their left nut to be with. I've enjoyed them immensely, but I'd be lying if I said a single one of them made me want to claim them exclusively for my own or stamp the Petrosky name behind theirs. None of them inspired me to dream of a future with them, much less, contemplate monogamy.

I find myself happily contemplating all of the above with Mads. I didn't realize I had a dream girl, but Madison Graham is it.

And I knew that she was bright and talented, but seeing her at work today in the O.R....I wasn't exaggerating when I said she was a rockstar, which would make me the horny groupie waiting to get backstage to fuck her clean into next week.

My cell pings with a text. I'm hoping it's Mads, telling me she's thinking about me or just wanting to tell me about some new procedure she just assisted on. But it's from...Natasha.

How the fuck did she get this number? Only five people have it, and she isn't one of them.

Sergei. That fat bastard!

*Hi Sebastian – it's Natasha. I will be arriving in ten days. We should talk, make plans. Kissy face emoji.*

Suddenly I feel as if a thousand-pound anchor is around my neck, weighing me down, taking me under. How do I keep her away from Madison? I have to buy myself more time to craft a bulletproof plan to free myself of this engagement without turning the streets red with blood.

Shit!

Not to mention Sergei's constant reminders that the clock is ticking to bring Madison in. He's cracking mad if he thinks she'll ever be part of the club pool. The thought of anyone, much less Sergei, touching Mads makes me want to turn the streets red.

My gut tells me that the best thing to do would be to come clean with Madison concerning the betrothal and to let her know that I'm working on a plan to release myself from it. She needn't be threatened by her. Mads has exclusive rights to my heart, and more importantly, to my cock. No one, especially not Natasha, is going to take that from Mads. Hell, if Mads wants, I'll even wear a cock ring to which only she'll have the key. No unsanctioned erections for me unless my lady grants it.

I know she'll be angry, scream, and maybe cry, but she'll know I belong to her and that this betrothal means nothing. She'll just need to be patient with me as I look for a means to extract myself.

I tap in a reply to Natasha's message.

*This line is for club business only. Use 980-546-2289 going forward.*

*Get the fuck over yourself!*

And here we go.

*What's that? Didn't hear you with Sergei's dick in your mouth.*

I block her number before she could reply. Hopefully, she gets the message that this won't be all sunshine and roses. Everyone knows she's coming here to see Sergei, not me. I don't believe for one second that the affair is over. Hell, the two belong together, who am I to come between true love?

My problem is - how and when do I tell Madison?

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## Chapter 11 – Meet Me at the Art Museum

**I**t's been eight days since I risked my career by treating Sebastian's brother for a gun wound without reporting it to the authorities. To his point, no one there would ever speak of what happened there in the make-shift O.R. They all had their reasons to keep quiet about it.

In all truthfulness, I have very little cause for concern as no complications arose and Nick is well on his way to a full recovery. Thankfully, all talk of dropping out of college has abated and it's nice to have this time to get to know some of Sebastian's family.

Bash informed Nick that I was the one who treated him. Since then, his eyes seem to follow me around like a little lost puppy dog. It's sweet really. Once when I was changing his bandages, he asked me how serious me and Bash are. Surprised by the question, I was a moment forming my reply.

“Well,” I smiled big, “we're living together if that tells you anything.”



He told me that this was the first time he'd seen his brother this serious about anyone, but he understood why.

He asked if Bash's chosen profession troubled me.

"He's a hedge fund manager and runs several import/export businesses. I don't ask for details. Don't really want to."

He nodded pensively and said nothing more.

No, Nick, I'm not that naïve, I wanted to say. I know that not everything Sebastian deals with is above board. But then again, neither are the dealings of most Fortune 500 CEOs. At least that's my opinion anyway. I don't believe that one single person who's accumulated extreme wealth has achieved it by strictly legal and ethical means. Maybe I'm cynical, but I can't ignore the article that I read where it was reported that a good percentage of CEOs are sociopaths.

And maybe...that's part of Sebastian's appeal. That and the ever-so-slight Russian accent that he tries so hard to suppress. I really love it when the sex is so good he speaks in his mother tongue. When I finally figured out some of what he was saying, I nearly fell out of my chair. That kind of talk would make a sailor blush.

But as good as the sex is, it's the way Bash makes me feel about myself that's his selling point. I mean, don't get me wrong. My self-esteem is fairly strong for good reason. But Bash makes me feel like a goddess and he's merely a humble servant here to worship me...and fuck the hell out of me.

And I can't get enough of him. He's the ultimate mega-hot bad boy whose savage heart has been tamed by the love of a good woman. Isn't that what we all dream and fantasize about?

I'm still not certain whether it was the excitement and relief of the moment when we saved Nick but...Bash kind of, sort of proposed.

And yes, my heart leaped into my throat, but I realized that under the circumstances, I shouldn't take it to heart. It's hard to believe that it's only been three months since we met at his car crash. It feels like we've been together for ages, like we've known each other forever. Living with him feels like the most natural thing in the world. Being apart, now that would be strange and ugly.

But marriage? Someday, sure, but knowing how hectic my life is about to become, I'm in no rush to start making big plans. Let me get through my residency first, then we can talk nuptials. Oh, geez, don't even get me started about starting a family. I'm likely going to be one of those women who don't start having children until their forties.

I check the time. It's 5:38 p.m., it's one of those rare occasions where I'm home but Sebastian's still at work. He's asked me to meet him uptown at the Art Gallery because there is a famous Russian artist on exhibition, he'd like me to see. We'll have dinner afterward.

I don a pair of khaki slacks, a white linen shirt, and a navy blue blazer. I slip on a nice pair of Gucci pumps that he bought

me to spice up my casual look and so I'm not so short aside his six-foot-two frame. A headband holds my hair back from my face, but I keep it loose in the back.

I'm to meet him at 6:30, with traffic I should leave now so I won't be late. I roll my eyes at this. Apparently, tardiness is one of Bash's little pet peeves.

Before I leave, I pop in to check on Nick, and see if he needs anything.

I knock lightly in case he's asleep.

"Come in," he says in his thick accent.

"Hey, how are you doing?" I lean in still holding onto the door.

He's propped up on his pillows and we've set a little tv tray next to him for his meals.

"I'm doing ok, just a little uh...stir crazy."

I chuckle. "You just let your body heal a little longer then we'll get you up walking around."

He smirks. "Yes, doctor."

"I'm about to go meet Bash. Do you need anything before I go? Something to drink, fluff your pillows?"

He frowns a little. "I will be alone?"

"Tessa's just running a little late, but she'll be here in about fifteen more minutes."

His expression grows somber and he nods. "I will be fine. You go."

I look askance at him. “You sure? I can stick around until she arrives.”

His face breaks into a mercurial smile and he chuckles. “I’m just pulling your foot.”

I laugh. “My leg?”

“Sure, why not?” he grins.

“Ha, you made a funny. Anyway, I gotta go. Be good, you.”

He waves his hand and I shut his door back.

I text Sebastian. *Tessa won't be here for another 10 minutes. I don't want to leave patient-Nick unattended.*

I immediately see the three dots on the screen indicating he’s replying.

*That's fine. Text me when you're on your way.*

*Will do. XOXO*

*Smooch emoji*

I smile and slip my phone into my back pocket. It occurs to me then that I’ve medically treated both of the Petrosky brothers. I move over to the fridge and pull out a bottle of Fiji water while I wait for Tessa to arrive. Turns out she was in nursing school but dropped out to help take care of her younger siblings and then ended up working for the family when her brother got into trouble with them. It started out as a means to repay a debt. But now she enjoys the work and the extra cash. I encouraged her to return to nursing school, but

she looked at me as if I told her she should take a trip to the moon.

“Not possible, I work for the Petrosky family now. Besides, the money is better.” She then looked up at me and nodded. “I’m glad you’re here now. I didn’t like the last doctor so much.”

“Oh, no,” I explain, “I was just helping Sebastian in a pinch, I don’t work for Petrosky.”

She just gave me a strange look then shrugged and went about her business.

The doorbell chimes and I hop off the stool not bothering to check the surveillance camera because I’m certain it’s Tessa.

When I open the door, I discover it’s definitely not Tessa. It’s a statuesque blond bombshell who’s peering equally bewildered at me.

“Uh, can I help you?”

She sneers as she looks me up and down. “You must be the cleaning lady?” she says in a thick Russian accent.

No, bitch! I want to say, but I take the high road. “I’m Dr. Graham. Who are you?”

“I’m Natasha Orlov. Where is Sebastian?” she barrels in practically shoving me aside.

“He’s not here. I’m sorry, are you a friend of his?”

She snorts and plants a hand on her hip. “I’m his fiancé, what the fuck are you doing here?”

My brain frazzles. Does fiancée mean something different in Russia? “You’re his what?”

She laughs an ugly laugh. “He didn’t tell you about me, huh? The bastard.” She takes a cigarette out of her purse and lights it up.

Is this some kind of sick joke. I hold up a finger. “One sec.”

I hurry over to Nick’s door. I knock twice, but don’t wait for his response.

“Still here? I thought you—”

“Nick, do you know a Natasha Orlov?”

The color drains in his face. “Yes...why?”

“Who.Is.She?”

He swallows and his Adam’s apple bobs up and down. “Sheeee,” he draws the word out and I grow impatient.

“Is she Sebastian’s fiancée?” I say through gritted teeth.

I hear her footsteps coming up behind me.

Nick grimaces but nods his answer.

Right then, Natasha pokes her head in the door. “Nicky –” the rest of her words are in Russian.

There’s a bit of a heated exchange between them and the protective doctor in me comes out.

“Natasha, you need to leave,” I say to her. “Nick shouldn’t be upset in his condition.”

She flips her head at me. “Fine, you stay here in this hovel like all his club pool girls. I made him buy me a big home in the Hamptons because I will be his wife.” She shoves her phone in my face showing me a picture of the exact same house me and Sebastian stayed in a couple of weeks ago. It’s where he first told me he loved me. But he bought the place for *her*!

Nick yells at her in Russian, from the looks on Natasha’s mortified face, I can tell it was a scathing insult.

She turns to me in her outrage.

I fold my arms across my chest. “You heard him. Out!” I bark pointing at the door.

She throws her cigarette on the floor and smashes it with her shoe while muttering in Russian.

I follow her as she storms out buzzing like an angry nest of hornets. She grabs her purse off the bar. I open the door to keep this hot mess moving on out. I don’t want to argue and sure as hell don’t want to fight. I just want her to get the fuck out.

She crosses the threshold but turns back to me. “I don’t even know what he sees in you. You are ug—”

Slam! Right in her face. I lock the door for good measure. I’m so boiling angry I don’t even know where to direct it first. Sebastian’s engaged! The asshole has been romancing me, proposing to me when he’s already engaged to that painted-up piece of garbage?

My eyes burn with tears. Has he just been playing me all along?

Hide my gun so I won't get in trouble. Treat my brother's gun wound so he won't get in trouble. Oooh, Mads, you're such a rockstar.

I'm such a "Fucking idiot!" I scream into the air.

"Madison," Nick calls out from his bedroom. "Please, come here."

"No, I'm leaving." I start for the stairs, but there's another knock on the door. My hands ball into fists, if she's come back to cause trouble, I will knock this bitch back to Siberia.

But a glance at the screen tells me it's Tessa. I quickly wipe my eyes and open the door.

"Tessa, hey," I say, not looking her in the eye lest she see mine filling with angry tears.

"Is everything alright, Madison?" she says, her voice filled with genuine concern.

"Yes, I'm fine. Please go see, Nick," I say turning away. I run up the stairs, crying harder knowing it will be the last time. I can't believe he played me like that! Was all of it lies? Was it all pure bullshit to keep me useful and distracted?

A groan of anguish bubbles up inside and erupts out of my throat. Nick and Tessa will think I'm crazy, but I don't care. It feels as if my soul's been raked across razor blades and then dumped in a vat of stinging alcohol. I can barely see for the tears as I search for my bags to begin packing my things. I'm



throwing clothes and shoes out of the closet, unclear of what's mine or his.

The whole time, my phone has been vibrating madly in my back pocket. I pull it out and see two missed calls from Sebastian and a text from Nick.

*Please don't go. Bash on way home. He will explain!*

“Explain? Explain what?” I scream at the phone screen and hurl it against the wall. He's been lying to me the whole time with his big bridezilla tucked away in Moscow. Motherfucker! He's been using and manipulating me this whole time. And I fell for it like a stupid dumb ass.

I'm stuffing all my shit into my bags when Tessa knocks on the door.

“Madison...” she says, holding her cell phone out and edging toward me like I'm a deranged psychiatric patient. “Please, Sebastian asks you to please stay here.”

“Tell him to go fuck himself!” I scream. “Tell him I hope that he and his god damned bride are very happy!” I grab my stomach and collapse on the floor wailing like I'm dying inside.

Tessa is beside me with her cell to my ear. I hear Sebastian's voice. “...everything to me. I'm so sorry, but you have to believe me. I'm going to end the betrothal, it's over. You're all that matters to me, Mads. Please, don't go. Please!”

“No...” I cry. I don't want to be persuaded by his words just so he can find new ways to fuck me over. What did I ever do

to this guy to make him toy with me this way?

“Mads, ple—” his voice breaks. “Mads, I’m nothing...I can’t,” he can’t get any coherent words out and he starts swearing in Russian. Oh, God, he’s really upset. Good, that’s what he deserves for making a goddamn fool out of me.

I grab Tessa’s phone. “Good-bye you lousy two-timing RAT BASTARD!” I hurl her phone too, but fortunately it bounces on the bed remaining intact.

“Sorry,” I say in my hysterics.

“You’re too angry and upset to drive,” she tries to reason with me. “Please wait for him.”

That’s when it occurs to me that he’s been providing my transportation this whole time. I’ll have to carry all of my bags on the subway. Screw that! I’m taking the damn car to get home and then I’ll strap a brick to the pedal and send his precious Porsche over a fucking cliff.

Ignoring Tessa, I grab my bags and haul them out of the room. I struggle to get down the stairs with the heavy load. When I reach the bottom, I see Nick leaning against the doorway of his bedroom, he looks ghastly like he’s about to pass out. “Madison, please let Bash explain.”

“What are you doing out of bed?” I turn to Tessa. “What’s he doing out of bed?”

Tessa’s hurrying down the stairs so fast, she slips on the last one and lands hard on her ass. The impact causes a set of keys

to pop out of her pocket. The Porsche keys. She screams out in pain and grabs her back.

“You’ve got to be freaking kidding me!” I drop my bags and go to her. “Are you alright?” She outweighs me by about fifty pounds, but I wrap my arm around her back and help her to her feet.

“Thank you,” she says and glances at the keys. “Sorry, but he told me to hide them so you wouldn’t leave.”

“Just sit over here. I’ve got to put Nick back to bed.” I march over to him. “You know you shouldn’t be up,” I say, wrapping an arm around his torso. “Lean on me, come on.” We both nearly fall when he shifts his weight onto me.

He groans aloud and grabs his gut.

“Okay, take it easy now,” I say as we slowly make our way back to the bed.

“Is not what you think, Madison. Bash doesn’t love that girl.”

My attention is drawn to the bright red spot on his bandage. “You’ve ruptured the wound, Nick. Crap.” I help him lay back in his bed and I examine the bandage. This is not good. If infection and sepsis set in both Nick and my medical career are toast. I’ve got to treat him.

I access the medical supplies chest we brought from the ‘mobster’ O.R.

“He was forced by the bosses, Sergei is making him do it.”

I grab fresh bandages, antiseptic, and gauze. “Let me have a look at the wound.” I reach over to remove the bandage, but Nick grabs my hand.

“Please, I know you are angry, but you are wrong.”

“You knew all along that he had a fiancée. Did you two get a good laugh watching me act like I was his one and only?”

“You are, Madison. That is what I am telling you.”

I close my eyes and count to three to calm my nerves. “Nick, I’m just here to treat you. Please don’t talk to me about Sebastian. No matter what you say, he still lied to me. He told me there was no one else but me when all along he had a fiancée. How can I trust that man?”

“He was scared to tell you, was working up the courage. He was going to tell you at the museum.”

“At the museum?”

“Yes, he wanted a quiet place to tell you where you could not yell...like you have been for the last five minutes.”

“That’s why he wanted to go there...so I couldn’t yell at him? The manipulative prick!” I rage then remember this is not good for my patient. “That’s it, not another word about him, Nick. Just let me work.”

He nods and lays his head back against the pillows as I delicately peel the bandages off his abdomen.

“Ah, good. It’s not as bad as I thought. But you did pull one of your sutures out.” I reach for my materials. “I’m going to

clean the area, apply a little anesthesia and antiseptic, and then close that section.”

He nods, though he remains silent, his eyes plead with me. I ignore them. There’s no excuse for what Sebastian did, none at all.

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## Chapter 12 – Damage Control

**M**y plan to come clean to Madison about my fiancée has been ruined by that fucking cunt, Natasha! Now, no matter what I say, it will sound like I'm just trying to cover my ass. Mads will say I'm only telling her because I got caught.

I lean on the horn when the light turns green and the asshole in front of me just sits there talking on his cell phone. I gun the engine and whip around him. I've got to get home before she leaves. My heart sank like a stone when I received Nick's frantic call telling me to get home immediately – Natasha is here with Mads!

I'm still shaking with anger and fear as I finally turn onto our street. I can't lose Mads over this stupid shit! She's refused to answer my calls. Even after Tessa gave Mads her phone so I could speak to her. She was wailing and ranting like a woman deranged. She's so angry and hurt that nothing I say will calm her down.

Tessa had called me back to say that Nick, in an effort to persuade Mads to stay, ruptured his sutures. Madison being the

consummate professional that she is has put her own broiling emotions on hold while she stitches him back up. This may be my one chance to make her hear me.

I pull up behind the Porsche instead of beside it so she can't leave without giving me a chance to explain. I race up the stairs to the front door. I hurry into the living room toward Nick's bedroom. At that very moment, Madison is exiting it closing the door behind her.

She freezes as our eyes meet. Hers are filled with unspeakable pain and anguish. I want nothing more than to take her in my arms and ease her suffering.

Tessa enters from the kitchen. "I've made some coffee." She halts when she sees me.

"Go home, Tessa," I order.

"Yes, sir," she says and quickly grabs her bag and hurries out of the place like it's on fire.

My hands are trembling, and it feels like a thousand frantic birds flapping in my chest. "I was forced into the betrothal, but I'm working on a plan to free myself of it. Natasha is Sergei's lover, and I've *never* laid a finger on her. Since the day we met, there's been no one but you, Mads." I take a step closer, encouraged that she seems to be listening. "That's why I wanted you to move in with me, to sleep in my bed every night. I wanted you secure in the fact that you're it for me." I lower my eyes and nod. "Yes, it was wrong of me to keep that information from you, but I was terrified that if you knew, you'd have nothing to do with me." I lift my eyes to hers, the



expression is stern but at least she appears to be processing my words, weighing them carefully. “You can accuse me of lacking the courage to tell you, but you can’t accuse me of being unfaithful or two-timing you. There’s only you, Mads. My heart is yours.” Her jaw clenches and her warm hazel eyes go cold. Definitely not a good sign.

“Fine,” she says, the word laced with venom. “Give me a call once you’ve managed to break the engagement. Until then, stay the fuck away from me.” She goes for her bags.

But I lunge forward pulling the bag away. “Please don’t leave like this, Mads. Yell and scream at me, hit me if you want to, but don’t go like this. Please.”

Her face twists in derision. “You bought that cunt that house in the Hamptons, the one we stayed in where we first said we loved each other. *You bought it for her!*”

“No!” I nearly explode. “I bought that for you, it was to be a graduation or wedding gift. I don’t know how the hell she got wind of it. She must have just assumed it was for her.”

“She said I should stay here like all your other club pool girls,” she says bitterly. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? Who are these fucking club pool girls.”

I feel the color drain from my face.

Mads snorts and shakes her head. “So that part is true.”

“No, I mean, that has nothing to do with us. Regardless, you’re the only person I’ve ever invited to come live here with me.”

“Who are the club pool girls?” she persists.

I take a deep breath, I don't think that I can get much lower in her eyes. “My cousin Stieg owns an establishment in the red district. He recruits some of the dancers and waitresses to become part of the...group of women who volunteer to be... on call to meet certain needs of the bosses.”

A derisive laugh escapes her. “So, it's your private brothel consisting of strippers and waitresses.” She closes her eyes. “That's what Natasha is associating me with?” She shakes her head. “Fuck this.” She moves to get around me, but I block her path.

“She was just trying to needle you, get under your skin. She knows you're a physician and have nothing to do with the club.”

“But you have something to do with it, don't you? Do you still go there, to that *strip* club?”

“Stieg conducts business out of there so occasionally we...” I think better of it, “You know what, I'll never step foot in there again for any reason. All right?”

Her face screws up. “No, not all right. What other nasty little surprises do you have in store for me? Maybe the next knock on the door will be one of those club girls with a baby in her arms claiming you're the father? For that matter, do you have any kids you need to tell me about?”

I don't care for her condescension, but under the circumstances, I hold my tongue and take my lumps. “There

are none, I've always been very careful about that sort of thing." I splay my hands out. "I only want to have children with the woman I love. I want them with you, Mads."

"Jesus, Bash," she shrieks and buries her face in her hands. Her shoulders tremble as she cries.

"Babe, I'm so sorry," I say as I go to gather her in my arms.

She flings my hands away. "Stay away from me, Bash. I'm not okay with this."

I lift my hands away but stay close. "I love you, Mads. Nothing has changed. I know you're angry at me. But we both know we're going to get passed this."

She leans her head back staring at the ceiling. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do. I know you love me and we're not going to allow that fucking slag to wreck what we have. We win, not her."

She shakes her head, but the slump of her shoulders and the softening of her brow tell me my words are doing their work.

"Look, I know you want nothing to do with me right now." I gesture at the sofa. "I'll sleep down here tonight, for as long as you need me to. You take the bed."

She closes her eyes and sighs. "Bash."

"I fucked up, I should've told you," I rub my neck. "I know you won't believe it, but I was going to tell you tonight."

“At the museum,” she says quietly then cuts her eyes at me.  
“So, I couldn’t yell at you.”

I look askance at her.

“Nick.”

“Ah, of course.”

She wraps her arms around herself like she doesn’t know what to do.

I go to the kitchen and open a bottle of pinot noir. I pour a glass and carry it to her. “Please have some, Mads.”

She stares at it for a moment. Finally, she lifts her hand, it’s shaking when she takes the wine glass.

I could crack Natasha’s head open for doing this to Madison.  
The miserable bitch!

She takes a sip. Ponders it a few seconds, and then downs the whole glass.

When I see Sergei, I’m going to rip his lard ass a new one for not informing me that Natasha was in town. The fat fuck probably gave her this address.

I take her empty glass to refresh her drink. While I’m in the kitchen I notice her collapse onto the sofa and flop back onto it, staring at the ceiling.

As smoothly as possible, I deliver the second glass of wine and deftly scoop up her bags to return them to our bedroom.

I look down from the loft. Madison is still on the sofa nursing her second glass of wine, the Porsche keys are still on

the counter bar. Feeling it best to give her time to process her feelings, I descend the stairs and go to check in on Nick.

He sits up alert. “Is Mads still here?” he asks in Russian. “Is everything good?”

I gesture a so-so-hand movement. “She’s resting now, having some wine,” I reply in Russian.

Nick sits back and sighs his relief.

“Your call saved the day.”

He waves me off. “She’s a good girl. Smart, funny, and really pretty.” His smile morphs into a frown. “But she won’t stick around for long with Natasha here. Your wedding’s in five months.”

“I’m not going through with it.”

Nick gives a derisive laugh. “You can’t break the contract, Bash. You know that.”

“Sergei’s still fucking Natasha, the bosses all know it. Who could blame me?”

“Orlov is just looking for an excuse to wet his blade, you know it,” Nick says, holding his gut. “And Uncle Sergei will rip you apart, Bash. Make Madison understand that.”

“There’s got to be another way, new contracts can be negotiated.”

Nick shakes his head. “Not at this late hour. Look, Bash, she’s a great girl, but it’s not worth the hell you’ll bring down on us.”

“I’m not letting her go.”

“Then make her understand our ways,” he says, rubbing his eyes looking exhausted. “Convince her that the marriage will be in name only. You love Madison, she’s the one you’ll make a home with.”

I feel like putting my fist through a wall. “She’s not a fucking club pool girl, Nick.”

“Why did you even start with the doctor? You knew the score. Why bring this trouble down on yourself?”

“I’ll not have my life dictated to me,” I say through gritted, careful not to let Madison hear. “I’ve got some plans in the works, I’m going to find a way around this.”

Closing his eyes, he lays back on his pillows. And I recall how Tessa said Nick climbed out of bed to try to stop Madison from leaving before I got here. The poor guy.

“You feeling any pain? Can I get you something?”

His eyes remain shut. “No, Mads gave me some Percocet. It’s kicking in now, I’d better rest.”

I walk over to him and straighten his comforter out over him. “All right, Nicky. You get some sleep. I’ll check on you later.”

The second glass of wine I gave Madison is empty and her eyes are shut. I’m not certain if she’s merely thinking or whether she’s fallen asleep. I walk over and sit next to her. For a moment, I just stare at her beautiful face in repose and think about how differently this whole thing could’ve gone down.

Tomorrow, I'm going to make Sergei pay dearly for this, hit him where it hurts most.

When I brush my fingers across her hand, her eyes flutter open to half slits. Her gaze drifts toward me. "Bash."

I stroke her face and wish I could wipe the sadness from her eyes.

"If you love me..."

"Baby, you know I love you."

"Don't lie to me anymore. Promise."

"No more lies, Mads, I promise you."

She closes her eyes and nods. But then they pop back open. "You're calling off the engagement. I can't see you while you belong to someone else."

My jaw clenches. "It's already over as far as I'm concerned, but I have to unwind the contract that I signed. That will take a little more time, but I'm working on it."

Her brow furrows slightly.

I take her hand in mine, and kiss it tenderly. "Your happiness is all that matters to me, Mads. I'll move heaven and earth to make this happen."

The creases in her brow smooth out and her shoulders sink into the cushions.

"You need your rest, honey. Let me put you to bed." When she doesn't object, I move closer to her and scoop her

effortlessly into my arms. As I stand, she rests her head on my chest and slips an arm around my neck.

I carry her up the stairs to our bedroom. I help her undress and pull the covers back for her to climb in. When she turns over curling up with the pillow, I know she'll quickly fall into a wine induced slumber.

I unpack her things and put them away. I don't want to leave behind any memories of what almost happened. I even put her bags away in the hidden storage closet. She won't be needing them because she's not leaving me. Not now. Not ever.



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## Chapter 13 – Dark Skies on the Horizon

I slept for twelve hours straight. Partly because my overworked body desperately needed it and partly because while I was asleep, I didn't have to think about Sebastian's lie of omission. I wonder how I would have handled it if I'd reached the museum as planned and he'd informed me himself. I would have been angry about him concealing it from me for two months, but I would've tried to understand that it was a business arrangement thrust upon him by the powers that be in his world.

I think it was the shock of seeing Natasha at the door, who for all the world looked like a young Charlize Theron, marching in like she owned the place and hurling insults at me. I was pissed at Bash for putting me in that position and letting me get blind sided. I felt like the butt of a particularly humiliating joke that everyone else was in on.

I can't help but wonder how she felt, after all, I'm the girlfriend, she's the fiancée...and yet she was the one being

ordered out of her fiancée's home. That also had to be humiliating.

Is it true that she's Sergei's lover? I shudder at the thought of anyone laying with that beast. I recall the way his eyes crawled hungrily over me. If I never see him again, it will be too soon.

And Sebastian – what must it have been like to know you'd have to marry someone, kiss the person who'd been sucking Sergei's dick? I shudder again.

Sebastian. I don't know whether to punch him in his face or to console him. The terrified look in his eyes when he came home was almost enough to undue me. It was then that I knew his heart was breaking as much as mine. The way his hands trembled and his voice broke, I knew the tumult of emotions going through him were real, visceral.

If Nick were to be believed, and why would he lie? Sebastian was planning to tell me the truth last night. If this were the only unexpected challenge we faced, I could forgive Bash and give him the time to unwind his betrothal contract. But it's just one more jarring jolt in the series of bumps on the road we're travelling. When will the bumps end and the ride finally smooth out for us?

I should leave him. Cut my losses and run for the hills. And yet here I remain, curled up in the warmth of his bed unable to resist his allure. Our intimate moments, punctuated by the smooth cadence of his mother tongue, feel less like spontaneous expressions of passion and more like deliberate

incantations woven to bind me to him. Has he cast a spell over me, inducing this desperate craving for him that engulfs my mind, body, and soul?

Is that what it feels like to fall hopelessly in love against all reason?

I grapple with the dichotomy between my professional aspirations and the tempestuous relationship that has consumed me. Yet, at the most fundamental, primal level, Sebastian feels like my perfect match, as though destiny itself has orchestrated this connection. Perhaps, like cardiothoracic surgery, the path to love is strewn with challenges and uncertainties, but the allure of what lies beyond is too potent to resist.

I sigh heavily when I consider how inexorably he's drawn me down a path I never thought I'd follow. This dangerous path included – hiding his gun from the police, neglecting to report a GSW to the authorities, and forgiving him for hiding a secret fiancée from me for months. Oh, and the greatest one of them all...surrendering my heart to a *potential* crime lord. Where was the line between his legitimate business dealings and the bratva life? How tainted was he by the latter?

Frustrated with myself, I sit up abruptly in the bed. It's 8:03 a.m. Sebastian's side of the bed is empty. Last night, he'd laid down next to me for a bit, but then rose to leave, intending to keep his word about sleeping on the couch. But I grabbed his arm and pulled him back to me. Let him wrap himself around me as I drifted to sleep.

In the morning, I felt him stirring around in the bedroom as he got ready for work. Felt his lips tenderly kiss my brow before he left. I had pretended to be asleep, not ready to kiss him goodbye as if all was well.

I see a note he left on the pillow along with a brand-new cell phone since I destroyed mine in my rage.

*Fresh croissants and coffee in the kitchen. I'll be home by lunch. (Heart Kiss) Bash.*

No mention of last night, no additional apologies. He means to move on like nothing ever happened. Though, I have a strong suspicion that he left first thing this morning to deal with the situation on his terms. Suddenly, I'm afraid for both Bash and whoever he's about to clash with.

I climb out of bed and head for the bathroom. I notice that my toiletries and bath robe are all back in their places as if last night's blow up never occurred. For a second, I get a queasy feeling as if it were just a terrible dream. But my puffy, red eyes bear witness to the very real tears I cried when I thought my heart was being ripped out.

The image of a heart pumping in an open chest cavity fills my vision. I'd rather be performing a one-handed quadruple by-pass surgery than go through last night again. Funny how accustomed I've become to looking at what most people would consider gore.

Is that why I don't shy away from Sebastian's questionable business dealings? How did I become so jaded and cynical about how most wealthy people amass their fortunes. Or is it

simply we make all kinds of excuses to justify the acts of the ones we love?

I turn on the shower and try to wash all these troublesome thoughts away. Afterward, I get dressed and go look in on my patient.

“How’re you feeling this morning?” I ask Nick.

He’s sitting up in his bed and appears to be in fresh bed clothes. Sebastian must have tended to him before he left this morning. His face brightens at the sight of me.

“Getting stronger every day,” he replies as he tries to prop himself up a little more.

“That’s music to my ears, Nick,” I say as I walk over and fill his glass with water from the pitcher. “Let’s have a look and confirm your prognosis.”

He unbuttons his pajama top. “How are you this morning?”

I force a smile. “The doctor is doing fine. A good one never lets personal matters affect their work life.”

“Oh, I thought doctors were human too.”

I smirk but keep my attention on examining the wounds. The bandages have a little brownish dried blood, but no fresh blood or pus.

“You’re healing well, Nick. Keep up the good work and you’ll be back on your feet in no time.”

“He really loves you, Madison.”

I shake my head. “Please don’t worry about us. You just focus on getting better.”

“I have never seen Bash get this way over anyone. But our ways, they are different.”

I give him a curious look.

“The betrothal, it means nothing. He’ll never let that cow into his bed,” his accent is getting thicker the more passionate he becomes. “His heart is only for you. But it will cause great trouble if he breaks the engagement.”

And now I clearly see Sebastian’s dilemma. Tell me about the betrothal and risk me walking out on him, break the betrothal before I ever learned about it and all hell breaks loose.

“He’s put himself into an impossible situation,” I say thinking out loud. “He never should have started with me.”

Nick inclines his head with a wry smile. “Who can tell the heart what to feel?”

I sit in the chair next to the bed.

“He told me that he fell for you during his hospital stay,” he nods at me. “You came to see him every day. You were falling for him too, yes?”

“Oh, great,” I say throwing my hands up. “So, this is my fault.”

“Yes, for being so smart, funny and beautiful.”

I snort-laugh. “Bash attended Cornell University, the place is filled with smart, funny, attractive women.”

His mouth twists. “Oh, maybe a little, but none that saved his life and helped him out of a sticky situation.” He grins. “You are a very smart doctor, but you also have a little bit of a dark streak to you.”

I’m taken aback. “I most certainly do not.”

His eyes narrow a bit. “I know you bent rules to help him and to help me.” He chuckles softly, “I don’t think you did it just because Bash winked at you. There must be some small part of you that...liked it.”

The expression on my face must have given him pause.

“No, I am not saying that you are like the Petrosky family. No, nothing like that. I just say you like,” he pinches his fingers together. “A little bit of the dark side. Like just dip your big toe in the water.”

Despite myself, I laugh at his analogy, and he sighs in relief. “You are a very good woman, Madison. Bash is lucky to find you.”

I shake my head. “I’ve got to be honest with you, Nick. This betrothal is a real sticking point for me. I won’t be involved with a married man, not even for Bash.”

He closes his eyes and lays his head back. “I know, I know.”

“I’m not heartless, I just believe that if we’re meant to be, it will work itself out to an end that’s satisfactory to us all. If not,” I shake my head again. “I have to go.”



When he opens his pale blue eyes there is a look of apprehension. “You must be patient with him. If he moves too quickly it could be dangerous for everyone involved.”

That sounded an awful lot like a threat. “You care to explain,” I say, folding my arms across my chest.

“If he pulls out of the contract without a good alternate plan, Sergei will come after whoever is forcing him to break it.”

“Jesus.” I could have the Russian mafia gunning for me. “You’re making a very strong case for me to just walk away now.”

He slowly shakes his head. “Too late. Bash is in love with you. He won’t let you go.”

This too sounds dangerously close to a threat. Yet it quickens something deep within me, stirring me in profound ways I’d never experienced before.

“Based upon the situation that you’re describing, he may have very little choice in the matter.”

“What of you? Do you find the prospect of losing Bash so easy a thing?”

My heart crumples at the very thought of it.

“I can see that it is not, Madison. You love him. The two of you will work it out, but you must give him time to end it peacefully.”

I consider his words and smile at him. “You’re awfully wise for you nineteen years, Nick.”

He shrugs. “In Moscow, we grow up a little faster than you do here.”

“I guess it all depends on the person.” I rise from my chair. “All right, I’d better get out of here and let you rest.”

He rolls his eyes and groans. “Rest, rest, rest that’s all I do.”

“Well, that’ll teach your ass not to get shot again.”

His eyes widen as if stunned and then he breaks out into laughter. “I told you.” He wags a finger at me. “You do have a dark side.”

I mock glare at him. “And don’t you ever forget it.”

“Yes, doctor,” he grins.

“I’ll be back to check on you in a couple of hours, but just yell if you need something,” I say and shut the door.

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## Chapter 14 – Evening the Score

I peel my gloves off, turn on the sink, and wash the blood and guts off my hands and face. I'll lose the clothes altogether before I get home. I hear Yuri and his brother run up behind me carrying the bags of cash. About 2.7 million's worth from yesterday's haul on Sergei's racehorse betting operation.

We wore masks but still hit them with such speed and ferocity, they couldn't identify us if their mothers' lives depended on it. Yeah, I could have sent Yuri and his boys, but I didn't for two reasons. One, I didn't want Yuri to fuck it up and leave money on the table. And two, because after Sergei pulled that shit, I personally wanted to pound my fists into somebody while I stole his haul.

Unless Sergei has indisputable proof as to the culprit's identity, he can't move on me directly to enforce repayment. The bosses take that sort of thing very seriously. He'll have no other choice but to face the fact that his little Natasha stunt cost him a tidy sum total of \$5 million. He can choke on it.

Maintaining our silence, I give the signal to leave. The last thing we needed was for some recording device to catch us calling each other by name. We hurry out of the mostly abandoned apartment building. Half the loot goes with Yuri, the other with his brother. We'll sort it out properly once the heat dies down. We split up, all leaving separately in old beater cars that we can easily ditch.

I go to one of the joint captain's apartments located throughout the city. I shower, scrubbing myself clean of any traces of this morning's hit. I then climb back into the clothes that I left the house in that morning. When I'm miles away, I find a fast-food dumpster to toss the bag with my clothes in it. Only then do I ditch the car and pick up my Maserati to head back to Madison.

Last night had been scary, I've been less nervous with the barrel of a gun to my head. I was that terrified that she'd try to leave, and I'd do something...regrettable. I can't let her go. We need each other. She knows that. And if it's buried so deep she can't see it yet, I'll make her see it.

You can't tell me fate didn't bring us together. What were the fucking chances that Dr. Madison Graham would be on ride-along that night I wrapped my car around that tree? Or that she'd agree to help me out of a jam after knowing me for mere minutes? Or that she'd be a brilliant surgeon when we most needed one? The biggest coincidence of them all—is how quickly I became transfixed or spellbound by her. It was as if she bewitched me with that little flashlight she shined in my eyes.

God knows I crave that woman like a parched man in the desert craves a drink of cold water. I can't get enough of Madison and hate every second I'm away from my oasis.

My mind drifts irresistibly to her now. I think about Mads at home in our bed, tangled up in our satin sheets wearing nothing but those bikini panties and t-shirt. I'd like to slip back into that bed with her, slide my mouth down low between her toned thighs so she awakens to my tongue dancing with her succulent little bud. The moment she comes, I'd turn her over and power-fuck all those bad memories clean out of her head.

My dick grows hard and I press my foot to the pedal, desperate to get home to her.

My cell rings. It's Stieg. Shit, has news already got out about the hit? I press answer.

"Yeah."

"Bash, drop what you're doing and get your ass over here."

"What? What's going on?"

"You know the goddamn proof you were looking for?"

I rapidly shift mental gears. This isn't about this morning's hit, it's about retribution against the shitbag who murdered my father. Damn! My morning fantasy with Mads, will have to wait.

"Where are you?"

"I'm heading to the club, I'll meet you there."

“All right,” I say, then. “Wait, whoa, let me meet you at your place or at Chris’s Deli, we’ll grab a breakfast sandwich.”

“What the hell?” he objects. “Meet me at the club, I’ll be there in eight minutes.”

“No, Stieg,” I say firmly. “I can’t explain now, but I need you to meet me at Chris’s, all right?”

There’s a pause on the phone before I hear. “Yeah, see you there.”

Stieg knows that if that information pans out and Sergei is guilty of arranging the hit on my dad, I’ll be the one to avenge him and put that shitbag six feet under. If that happens, Stieg also understands that would make me the new boss of the Petrosky family.

Stieg would become one of my senior captains, my right hand.

I pull into the deli and my heart thunders in my chest. Had this day finally come? When I finally find out who ordered the hit? Or will it be more bogus bullshit? Sergei’s raised me since I was twelve after my father died. I admired and looked up to the man until I was old enough to figure out what he was really all about.

I recall the sharp burst of anger over whether or not to take a slice of a human trafficking ring. I argued strongly against it, refusing to be involved with any business that took advantage of children and underage women. Sergei saw it differently, viewed them as just another product to be sold to the highest

bidder. As boss, he had the final call but it was the turning point for me.

As one of the captains, I should have informed Sergei about the FBI sting operation going down to bust the ring wide open. But I kept silent and gladly watched the whole thing go up in flames. The entire network went down, lots of scumbags went to prison and Sergei lost his taste for the sordid business. And that was the end of that.

Some of the others have also complained about some of Sergei's underhanded dealings, and propensity to break his solemn word when it suited him. Still, I'd been loyal to the organization's hierarchy. It wasn't until my thirtieth birthday when he informed me in front of all the other bosses and captains that I was to marry Natasha Orlov to heal the rift between our families. All of Sergei's captains knew that Natasha had been sucking Sergei's cock for three years. That way he could claim he never fucked her.

Sergei is the greatest proponent of the marriage alliance, says it's the only way to forge a lasting treaty. Together we could take on the Italians, the Irish, and the Albanians combined. He refuses to see reason or consider any other path. I'd be a source of derision, a laughingstock if I married that cock sucking whore. She bragged that she loved giving him head. Made her feel proud to swallow the seed of the most powerful man in the organization.

No sooner had the words come out of his mouth that I vomited up my meal all over the table right in front of



everyone. I left no doubt how sickened I was by the prospect.

Did you kill my father, Sergei? Did you order a hit on your own brother?

If he's out of the way and I'm the new boss, I can dictate how the family proceeds with healing the rift between the two powerful families. In other words, there'd be no need to marry Natasha.

I try not to focus on it, try not to want it so badly that it skews my perspective when I view the cold, hard evidence.

The proof must be iron clad to take out a boss for dishonorable conduct.

I go into the Deli and head to the back offices. One of them is constantly reserved for our use. While I wait for Stieg, I make a quick sweep of the place for wiretaps and listening devices. I find none but still switch on the noisy fan to provide enough background interference. His club would've have been a far more secure spot, but I'd promised Madison.

I stop to think about all the ways Madison is changing me and the ways I'll change her. I refused to meet at Stieg's club because I promised Mads, I'd never step foot in there again. I'll adapt my ways to please her to the extent that I can. But there will be things I can't change and she'll have to learn to live with it.

I don't think it will be as hard as she may think in the beginning. Mads has passed some of the hardest tests with flying colors. The fact that she's still sleeping in my bed after

learning about Natasha – that coupled with all the other things she has done for me, tells me everything that I need to know.

It'll be a fight, but I'll prevail because I'm fighting for our survival, for our future. In the end, that's what she wants too even if she won't admit it to herself.

One of the establishment's owners sticks his head through the door, a balding man, wiry but with a pot belly. "Mr. Petrosky, can I get you anything? We have a great honey roasted turkey sandwich on wheat."

"No, thanks, Sal, I'm good," I reply.

He waves his hands in front of him. "Very good, sir. Oh, and I hear congratulations are in order as you're getting married soon."

I glare at him.

His eyes go round with fear. "I-I I'm sorry, Mr. Petrosky. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Just go, Sal."

"Yes, sir." He slips out the door.

I begin pacing and I'm just about to call Stieg when he walks through the door.

"Jesus, what took you so long?"

"The traffic on West Blvd was a freaking nightmare," Stieg answers.

I gesture toward the chair across from the desk of the small office. "Alright, Stieg this had better be good."

He pulls out a retro tape cassette player. He holds up a tiny cassette. “The feds have the original but we had them make a copy. They’d bugged one of the clubs owned by the Albanians.” He allows me to examine it before he sticks it into the player.

We hear thumping music in the background and then came the voices, two men discussing a job. One of them is unmistakably Sergei. The other voice sounds Albanian. They’re having a heated discussion concerning time, place,, and price.

I sit there and listen as Sergei described their daily route, him and my father’s, that is. They need to make it look like a robbery gone bad. You’ll need to shoot me too, in the thigh, so it won’t appear that you spared me.”

My jaw is clenched so tight I fear my teeth will snap under the pressure. “And the fucking D. A. held onto these tapes all this time? Why wasn’t this evidence used to arrest him for conspiracy to commit murder?”

“Some bullshit about the chain of custody making the evidence inadmissible in a court of law, not to mention the legality of the wiretap.”

“How the hell did you get these tapes?”

He shrugs modestly. “We did a little horse-trading with the Irish who have a guy on the inside. He’s the son of boss Tommy Dalton.”

I scowl. “How the fuck did he pass the feds background check?”

“It’s a bastard son even Tommy didn’t know about. About thirty years ago Anthony knocked up some waitress broad while travelling on business. The mother reached out to Tommy about eight years ago when she needed help putting her kid through law school. This is the first Anthony hears of the kid but sees the opportunity. So, he pays the kid’s tuition, and at the kid’s law school graduation, he surprises him by telling the kid he’s his father and that he’ll be working for him on the side unless he wants to kiss his fancy new law degree goodbye.”

I snort. “And he still went to work for the FBI with that hanging over his head?”

He laughs. “The kid must have brass balls on him, I’ll give ‘em that. The point is the prosecution screwed up and now we have the tapes.”

“Yeah.” I marvel at the irony. “Their incompetence leaves the door wide open.” I point a finger at my chest, I won’t risk being recorded declaring I’ll personally take care of it. “Does anyone else know about this?”

“I came straight to you, Bash.” He slides the cassette over to me. “Your dad was like a big brother to me. Let me know what I can do.”

I study the man for a moment. He’s got to be in his mid-forties, but he keeps damn fit for his age, looking more like a retired quarterback than a mafia captain. His wife Lorna and

three kids live in the west Long Island in a nice upper-middle-class, respectable brownstone. He'll be moving up in the world as my right hand. I'm glad to have him on my side.

"I'll let you know, Stieg." I hold up the cassette. "It's good to know I can count on you in the clutch."

"You bet, k—," he catches himself before calling me kid. "Bash."

"Let's get out of here," I say as I rise from the desk and switch off the fan. Once we're back out in the parking lot, I motion him closer. "I want to do this right. I'm going to play the tape for him before I hack his sorry ass to pieces. Yuri's wedding is in ten days in the Hamptons, we'll all be up there. It'll go down that night."

"Good. I only ask that you allow me to have a go at him. Not a single day goes by that I don't miss Alexi."

I grip his shoulder. "Sergei may have raised me, but you've been the closest thing to filling my dad's shoes."

He pats my shoulder back. "I know Alexi would've done the same for my boys."

"All right, I've got to go take care of some business," I say absently rubbing my sore knuckles. I'd worn brass ones, but I'm afraid my lust for busting skulls must have gotten the better of me.

He glances down at my hands and chuckles. "Put some ice on them." He shakes his head, smiling. "I'd hate to see the other guy."

“Yeah, see ya around.” I hop into the car and head home to Madison.

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## Chapter 15 – Bright Days Ahead

**W**hen Tessa arrived at 10am, I took off for the hospital to catch up on some case notes and talk with Emma about the cardiothoracic residency. The more I look into it the more I realize how highly coveted the position is. I've been working my ass off for it, and Emma thinks I have an edge, but Simon is still a strong contender. The official announcement is two months off, which means this is no time to get complacent.

When I approach the nursing station I see Lisa Melvin the redheaded medical student who switched shifts with me the first night Sebastian and I were together. She's on the phone, smiling and giggling like a schoolgirl. Oh, boy, has Lisa finally met someone special?

I check for messages and review some charts. That's when I hear it, she speaks a few words of Russian. I turn to look at her.

“Yeah, last night when you,” she snickers and looks around, “Did that thing, I'm still walking funny.” More laughter and a



few more words I'm sure she's butchering the Russian language. She sounds as bad as I imagine I do. But what were the chances that she started dating a Russian the same time I did?

"Kristoff," she says demurely. "You're so sweet. I can't wait. You too, *do svidaniya*."

I quickly look away as she ends her call. I'm dying to ask her about her boyfriend but can't without revealing that I was eavesdropping. I recall seeing her at the hospital coffee shop sitting with a dark-haired man who looked to be about her age.

Kristoff...has Sebastian ever mentioned a Kristoff? I check myself. Isn't that absurd for me to assume that all Russians know each other. I mean, it won't hurt for me to ask about him, but I'm just not assuming he does.

"Madison, just the person I was looking for," Lisa says. Her freckled cheeks pull tight into a smile.

"Uh-oh," I say as I plaster on a smile in return. "Lisa, hi. How's it going?"

"Fantastic," she beams and clasps her hands together. "But I need a huge favor. Could you please, please, please switch shifts with me Wednesday. It's my birthday my boyfriend is taking me out somewhere special."

I grimace inside, that would require me to work a double-shift which Sebastian hates. But if it helps me gain some intel, I'll see if I can make it work. I mean, it's her birthday for heaven's sake.

I smile big. “How long have you guys been going out?”

She actually shimmies with delight. “About 2 months now and he is so amazing.”

“Yeah, how did you two love birds meet?”

“Oh, we met here. He was being treated for lacerations on his hand, he works construction. And I don’t know,” she grins, and her brown eyes roll up. “Our eyes just met, and we knew. He asked me out for coffee and the rest is history.”

“That’s so sweet, I’m so happy for you,” I say, patting her shoulder. I look askance at her. “Were my ears playing tricks on me, or did I hear you speaking Russian?”

Her eyes widen in surprise whether it was due to my eavesdropping or the fact that I understood some Russian, I’m not certain.

“Yes, you did. He immigrated to the U.S. about five years ago.” Her eyes narrow at me. “Hey, aren’t you dating that rich guy you brought in from the car crash? Isn’t he Russian too?”

“Yes, well, he’s originally from there but he’s a U.S. citizen. Graduated from Cornell University.” I almost kick myself for mentioning that. I might as well have declared, my Russian boyfriend is way better than yours.

Her smile fades a degree. “That’s nice. So are you going to be able to switch shifts with me?”

I frown. “Let me see if I can make that work. We’ll need to clear it with Emma too, she’s been cracking down on all of that of late.”

“I know, such a dragon lady.”

“I’ll get back with you by the end of the day, alright?”

“Thanks, Madison. I’d owe you big time.”

As she walks off, I can’t help wondering what were the chances that two medical students at the same hospital would start dating Russians within the space of a week. Does Sebastian know Kristoff? Does Kristoff work for him?

It’s no big deal, by kind of is...weird. I shrug. I have more important things to worry about.

When I turn, I nearly bump into Tubbs and Crocket. The two detectives that have been grilling me about Sebastian.

“Good morning, Madison,” says Hart, aka Crocket. “Can we get a moment of your time?”

I stare at them confused. “How did you know I was here? It’s my day off.”

“We’re detectives, ma’am, we figure stuff out,” he replies dryly.

“There have been some new developments we needed to speak to you about,” says Snyder, aka Tubbs. He gestures toward an empty examining room. “Can we step into there?”

I sigh heavily. At what point does this become harassment?

“Five minutes, no more.”

We make our way over to the empty examination room. Hart swings the door closed but when I cut my eyes at him, he opens a bit, leaving it cracked.

I fold my arms across my chest. “What is it?”

“Let’s establish a few things first,” Hart says. “We know that you were the first person to see Sebastian after the accident and that his gun is missing. We know that the two of you are an item, you’re living together.” He raises a brow. “That’s kind of fast considering you just met him two months ago.”

Snyder scratches his nose and looks away from me.

“What are you, the morality police?” I say, hand on hip.

“Did it ever occur to you that he might be taking advantage of your kindness and now keeping you close to make sure you don’t spill on him?” Hart says.

I snort. “Detective Hart, are you implying that there’s no other way a man like Sebastian would be interested in me?”

“Do you know he’s engaged to another woman?” Snyder says.

“Yes, I do, but he’s breaking it off,” I say, hoping my consternation doesn’t register in my face. I only learned of this information last night. This revelation would have floored me otherwise.

They exchange disappointed glances, apparently they thought this would have thrown me for a loop. Maybe rattle some critical information from me as a woman scorned and betrayed. It occurs to me how little they must have on Sebastian if they keep barking up this tree to get the goods.

It’s not that I’m anti-cop. I believe the majority of them are good men trying to do their best in a difficult situation. All

professions have their bad apples who by all accounts deserve to be in prison, not wielding a badge and gun. But these two detectives seem all right. But I know they'd have a field day with Sebastian's gun and never believe that he was acting in self-defense.

But what they don't know, hell, even Sebastian doesn't know is that I still have the gun. Hid it away in a safe place instead of throwing it in the river as I had informed Sebastian. I'm not a complete lovestruck dolt. I had a feeling that one day, that gun might prove to be my life insurance. So, I let the police believe I never saw the gun and allowed Sebastian to believe it's at the murky bottom of the Hudson River.

"Gentlemen, if there's nothing else, I've got to be somewhere." I don't wait for their reply, simply leave them standing there.

My cell phone vibrates with a text message.

It's Sebastian.

*Thought you were off today? Why at hospital? Everything all right?*

By now, I've figured out that, of course, the Porsche he gave me to drive has tracking devices, air tags, etc. Being that it's his car, I can't accuse him of violating my privacy. I can always go back to driving the piece of crap I own.

*Catching up on case notes. On my way back home.*

*Ok. See you soon.*

I find myself doing a little more over the speed limit than I'd normally do. But I'm eager to see Bash. I thought about my conversation with Nick this morning. He said he's never seen Bash this way with anyone before. But that he was between a rock and a hard place with the betrothal. Break it off and risk chaos or keep it and risk losing me.

He's asked for my patience. Assured me that he wants no part of Natasha or any other woman for that matter. I believe him. His insistence that I spend every night with him suggests that he's not even leaving any room for doubt.

Sure, it's possible for him to get in a quicky every now and then, especially with that disgusting strip club his cousin Stieg owns. But I think the allure of the place has worn off and he's had his fill of it. He's ready for a more mature, substantial relationship with a woman whose most valuable skillset doesn't involve dry-humping a metal pole.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm pulling the Porsche into the garage. I make my way up the stairs, into our home.

Sebastian is in the kitchen, putting food from the local Indian takeout onto plates. He looks over his shoulder at me.

"Hi babe, I hope you're hungry."

"Starving, now that you mention it," I say in a jovial tone, nearly forgetting I'm supposed to be angry at him. I stop myself from going to him for a kiss. Instead, I walk over to the sink and wash my hands. "What do you have there?"

I see the hurt look he casts me.

Sorry, dude, but I've got to show a little reserve after last night's fireworks. I'm still not thrilled to know he has a fiancée, regardless of whether it was against his will. In fact, I hate the idea.

On his way to the table, he kisses my cheek and then sets our plates down. I bring over the glasses of iced tea.

"So, were you able to get your case notes caught up?" he asks.

"Yes, and I had a chance to chat with Emma. She's going to see if she can get me in on another cardio transplant this week."

"That's great."

I chuckle. "I guess even on my days off I want her to know that's all I have on the brain."

He makes a pouty face, "I hope that's not all you have on the brain. Try to squeeze me in every now and again."

I start to respond that he's always on my mind, but I'm not quite ready to pretend all is forgiven and forgotten. I offer a half-hearted smile. He's going to have to work a little harder for more.

He takes a bite of his food and chews slowly. He finally sets his fork down. I feel his gaze upon me, willing me to look at him.

"I've found a peaceful way out my betrothal. In two weeks, it will be officially over. I swear, nothing like that will ever happen again."

My heart leaps in my chest. “Really, how? Nick said it would be extremely difficult and not to pressure you about it.”

He looks at Nick's room. “Did he now?” He says nothing more but takes a sip of his iced tea.

“Babe, what happened to your hand?” The knuckles are red and raw.

He looks at them with mild amusement. “I let Sergei know I didn't appreciate him upsetting you.”

“You hit him?”

He shrugs. “He's fine, but he knows never to intrude into my personal life again.”

I'm both elated and disturbed by this news. Is this how he handles all of life's difficulties. “So, how did you manage to extricate yourself from the engagement?”

He waves his hand dismissively. “I won't bore you with the details, but a few of the other captains see the value in pursuing another route for peace. I've persuaded enough of them to override Sergei.”

I leap out of my chair and throw my arms around his neck. “Oh, Bash, that's wonderful. Thank you,” I say, pelting his face with kisses. “I can imagine how difficult it must have been, I can't believe you risked all that for me.”

He gently takes me by the shoulders and stares intently at me with those entrancing eyes. “Mads, you have no idea the lengths I'd go to hold onto you. You're my world now.” The chilling frisson of excitement and fear courses through me. I



want Bash to love me this passionately, but fear what it could mean.

I find myself leaning in to kiss his lips. “And you are mine,” I whisper.

He grins, “Sit down and eat, you’ll need your strength.”

His voice sends a quivering spark right between my thighs. “You know I do have to go to work tonight?” I say as I move back to my chair. “Oh, by the way, Lisa asked me if I could switch shifts with her Wednesday. It will be a double for me, but I’d have Friday and Saturday off.”

His lips curls into a half mocking snarl. “You know I don’t like sleeping without you in my bed.”

Every time he says that a warm, intoxicating feeling swirls in my belly. “And you know how much I love being in your bed. But it’s her birthday and it will give us two days together.”

He sits back in his chair considering the options. “I don’t like this Lisa making a habit of this.”

“I know but she’s this shy little mousy thing and she finally has a boyfriend who makes her light up. He wants to take her somewhere nice for her birthday.”

“Her social life is of no concern to me, I only care that it keeps you from me.”

“I’ll let her know this is the last time, Bash. Let the girl have this. I’m so happy with you, I’d like her to feel at least a smidgeon of what I feel when I’m with you.”

His expression lightens. He liked that. “This is the last time, yes?”

“Yes, no more switching shifts,” I smile and take a sip of my iced tea. “Hey, you know the odd thing is Lisa’s also started seeing a Russian guy. His name is...” I think a moment. “Kristoff. Dark brown hair, medium build. Works on a local construction site. Do you know him?”

He takes his time chewing before he answers. “We have so many workers on the various sites, is quite possible that he works for me. Do you know how they met?”

“I believe he was injured on the site, came in to have his hand stitched up a couple of months ago.” I chuckle. “I just thought the timing was weird.”

“Not so much, I bet if you check your records, several of the guys have come in for various injuries, but you never took note of them before because you weren’t dating me then.”

I consider it a moment. We do get several foreign-speaking patients in the emergency room, it’s quite possible some were of Russian origin. “Yeah, I’m sure you’re right.”

“Either way, if he’s making this Lisa happy, I think it says a lot for my countrymen.”

I nod. “True. I know my Russian keeps me blushin’.”

He shakes his head at my corny joke. “Wait until I take you on a trip to Moscow. You’ll fall in love with the place.”

“Seeing it with you, I’m sure I will.” The wistful tone in his voice gives me pause. “Do you miss your home?”

“You are my home, Mads.”

My heart melts into warm pools at the sentiment. “How is it that in such a short time we’ve become so close? I feel like I’ve known you forever, like this was always meant to happen.”

He shrugs. “When it’s right, you don’t need months or years to figure it out.” He pats his flat belly. “You feel it here.” He then places his hand on his heart, “and here. What more do you need?”

“You’re preaching to the choir, babe. But just try explaining that too the cops.”

His warm expression falls to the floor. “The cops? Have they tried to reach you again?”

“They showed up at the hospital,” I frown as it dawns on me. “They must be tailing me because how would they know to find me there today?”

His brows knit together in consternation. “What did you say to them?”

“Nothing. They tried to rattle me by announcing that you have a fiancée. I think they were hoping I’d be so angry I’d tell them everything.” I shake my head. “Thank God I found out yesterday or it really would’ve thrown me for a loop.”

“Mads, listen to me,” he says sternly. “They’re trying to wear you down. They’ll keep after you saying more and more shocking things but you can’t let it rattle you. Always assume that they are either lying or only telling half-truths.” He levels

an unnerving look at me. “You need to inform me first thing if they question you again. I need to know what they say so I’ll know how best to protect us.” He picks his fork back up. “Don’t wait until we sit down to eat to casually mention it. You inform me the moment it happens. Understand?”

I look away. “Yeah, fine. But I don’t see what the big deal is. I told them nothing, Bash.”

He nods. “You did well today. I just need you to alert me right away next time it happens.”

“I said I would.”

He stares at me hard and long. I feel like it’s some kind of standoff. What more is he expecting me to say?

“My cousin Yuri is getting married next weekend in the Hamptons, I want you there with me.”

I nod. “I’ll check my work schedule.”

“Make it happen, Mads, even if you have to switch shifts with that Lisa person. She owes you.”

“All right.”

We finish our meals in relative silence with a heavy tension hanging over us like a thick cloud. Only I don’t know the cause of it.

Afterwards, we clear the dishes off the table and put the food containers in the fridge. Bash goes to check in on Nick since he’s let Tessa go for the day. I text Lisa to let her know that I can cover for her Wednesday if she’ll switch with me next

week for the wedding. She agrees with multiple smiley faces. That Kristoff must really be doing something right for her.

I step out onto the balcony and stare out over the well-maintained courtyard to lift the mental malaise. The crisp winter air turns my breath to fog. My heavy sweater keeps me warm, though my bare legs feel the chill under my skirt. I'd already kicked my boots off so I'm in my stocking feet.

I feel rather than hear the patio door slide open behind me. I don't turn around, just continue staring out before me. I savor the warmth of his touch as his hands slide up and down my arms.

"I'm sorry if I seemed harsh. I just don't want anything to go wrong now that it's finally going right for us. I wanted to celebrate, not hear about the cops harassing you."

I shiver in the cold. Bash opens his jacket and encloses it around me. His warmth and his scent are like a soothing balm to my troubled mind.

I relax back into him, letting him bear my weight. We remain that way in silence, enjoying the contrast of the winter air against the heat emanating from us.

At long last I hear myself saying, "I'll protect us, Bash. I'll do whatever it takes to keep us together."

He squeezes me tighter. Softly kisses my neck and whispers, "I know, that's why I chose you to be mine."

He turns me around to face him. He cradles my face in his hands, brings his warm lips to mine and kisses me deeply. I'm

so lost in the kiss, lost in him I don't notice where he's moving us. I only feel my back against the wall as he presses his body flush against mine. He tastes so good, and the cool air is perfect against our heat.

He's lifting me now, and I straddle my legs around his waist. He's hiked my skirt up, I feel the cold air on my ass. He grinds his body against mine, biting my neck as he lets me feel his hard cock eager to get inside me.

"Bash," I call his name, my arms wrap tightly around his broad shoulders. His hand slips down to unfasten his belt and undo his pants. I immediately feel the heat from his throbbing penis, feel it pressing against the wet fabric of my panties. He slides them aside and slides the full length of his shaft up inside me.

His hips began rocking forward in a sensual rhythm, back and up, back and up, twisting those powerful hips with each thrust.

I wrap my legs tighter around him and match his movements, our bodies working in harmonious unison to achieve release. His grunts get me hotter, perspiration breaks out on my brow as our bodies work furiously to give and receive pleasure. But there's another element there...anger.

My sweater snarls against the rough brick as his hips pound harder sending his large cock deeper inside me. His grunts grow louder in my ears, sounding more like a feral growl. I fist his hair roughly and he sinks his teeth into my neck. Hard enough for me to whimper but not break skin.

His pounding is merciless, showing no signs of relenting. This feels like tough love, dangerously close to punishment.

I want to hurt him too. Hurt him for compromising me and putting my career at risk. Yet I want to please him, to make him want me as badly as I want him. And oh God, do I want him!

His hips are firing away at me like angry pistons, sending that massive rod into my slick chassis. I want to scream, I want to come. I want to own him like he owns me. I rock my hips against him, smearing my slickness against his pubic hair.

I'm so damn close, but I need him to surrender his orgasm to me first. It's a battle of wills with sublime pleasure at stake as we both climb higher and higher, each trying to get the upper hand to subdue the other, to dominate, to win.

"Ahhh!" I scream my orgasm as my body bucks and convulses against his.

I feel the deep rumble of his laughter an instant before he growls with a body jolting climax that buckles his knees so we both collapse to the cold floor. We lay there breathing hard, holding each other, while still joined in holy coitus.

He strokes my hair out of my face and stares into my eyes.

"Do I have your loyalty, Mads?"

"Yes," I breathe.

"I need to know I can trust you with everything."

I nod.

“Don’t ever betray me, it’s the one thing I won’t forgive.”

I swallow and nod again.

His eyes narrow at me. “You’re shaking...what’s wrong, Mads?”

Tell him about the gun! I scream in my head.

I give him a shaky smile. “I’m c-cold.”

His furrowed brow softens as a light smile graces his lips. “Let’s get you inside, in front of a fire.”

As soon as I get the chance, I’ll throw the gun into the river. But with the cops watching my every move, when can I slip away to do it?



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## Chapter 16 – Sergei First Rights Revenge

Stieg and I are driving back from meeting with the Giusto family head in an effort to smooth over some fallout over a recent turf dispute with the Italians. Lives were lost, and property was destroyed, but we came up with an amicable solution and agreed to let bygones be bygones.

“Since we’re up this way, why don’t we stop at McCormick’s for some steaks,” Stieg says as we speed along I-95. “And the lemon cream cake, man, it’s almost as good as my mom’s. You up for it?”

I check the time. Madison’s shift ends in forty-five minutes, but then she’s going to swing by the clinic to drop off some canned goods for the food drive. I’m certain I can stop for dinner and still make it home not too long after she gets in.

“Sure, why not.”

“That was good work back there, Bash. Smart. You’re going to make a great boss.”

I nod. “Speaking of which, after Yuri’s wedding, at the hotel — It’ll be you, me and Mikhail,” I say.

“Mikhail, you sure?”

“Yeah, remember Sergei had Mikhail’s brother whacked just because Sergei’s wife had it bad for him. He never did anything, never crossed a line with her but Sergei still had him done to save face.”

Stieg nods. “Yeah, that was pretty fucked up. But I don’t think Mikhail’s popped his cherry yet. You don’t want him going soft on us in the middle of the job.”

“He’ll do fine.”

He takes the exit for McCormick’s. When we arrive, there’s a line out the door, but Stieg goes right in slips the Matre’d a fifty and we’re seated within two minutes. The steaks and potatoes are every bit as good as we remembered. While we ate, we discussed a few legitimate business matters and caught up on how his boys were doing on the junior varsity football team.

When we finish our entrées, I check the time. Madison’s shift has ended about thirty minutes ago and I’m ready to head out. The dessert arrives and Stieg asks for five more minutes to scarf it down. We’re waiting on the check when my cell phone buzzes with a text message.

Thinking it might be Madison wondering where I am, I fish it from my pocket and eye the screen.

Sergei.

The text reads: *First rights with the Doc tonight.*

“Yeah, you keep it up asshole,” I mutter. “You’ll get yours.”

“What’s that?” Stieg asks, forking down his last bite of cake.

“Sergei,” I reply and start to put the phone away, but then I notice there’s a video attached. “What the hell is this?” I hit play and wait a few seconds as it buffers.

The screen fills with the image of a woman’s bare legs her ankles are shackled to a bed, her long toned legs are the color of smooth caramel...just like Madison. The camera pans up her body as she squirms, it hovers around her crotch, she’s wearing the red silk panties she dressed in this morning.

My heart is pounding through my chest and there’s a loud ringing in my ears and my vision filters through a red haze.

“Bash, what’s...what the hell are you looking at?”

The camera slowly crawls up her flat taut belly, her breathing is erratic. Her breasts rise and fall rapidly under the matching red bra. Her arms are stretched out to either side of her, her wrists are cuffed to the bedposts.

“No, no, no,” I groan. It finally reaches her terrified face. She’s gagged and her eyes are wide with fear and pleading. The camera pans to the left where two men stand by grinning lasciviously at her. The cameraman finally turns it on himself. Sergei’s large face fills the screen.

My hands shake uncontrollably like I’m a ticking time bomb waiting to explode.

“Give me back the \$5 million and maybe you can have your hot little, half-breed whore back.” They all laugh. “Be here with my money by 7 p.m. sharp, or the fuck fest begins,” he says making a choo-choo train sound as he pumps his arm. One of the fat bastards climbs onto the bed and simulates mouth-fucking Madison as the others howl with laughter.

I shoot up from my chair and dash out of the restaurant. It’s only when I reach the damn car I remember that Stieg has the goddamn keys. I look back to see Stieg burst through the doors searching for me.

“Bash, what the fuck is wrong with you?” he says frantically. “You gone nuts?”

“Give me the fucking keys!” I yell at him. I dial Yuri as we peel out of the parking lot. He answers on the second ring. “Get the money and meet me at my place in fifteen minutes. Bring Vinny. Damn it, you heard me. Pick up Vinny.” I check the time it’s 6:20pm. A hard knot forms in my gut. They must have grabbed her in the parking deck and taken her to a backroom at Stieg’s club.

If they’ve started in on her...I pound the dashboard of Stieg’s Mercedes.

“For God’s sake, Bash, tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“He has her,” I exclaim. “The miserable fat fuck has Mads —” my voice breaks.

“Mad...Madison, your doctor friend?”

“Wants the money for her,” I manage to say as we fly like a bat out of hell down the road.

“Jesus, ok, ok,” Stieg says. “What exactly are his terms?”

“I have to be there by 7pm with the cash or they’ll...” I yell my frustration. “I’m going to kill every last one of them!”

“Will you calm down, Bash. You’re doing over 100, you can’t save her if we can’t get there in one piece.”

“I shouldn’t have waited for Yuri’s wedding, I should have killed the motherfucker the moment you told me he killed my father.”

“Where’s he holding her?”

“It looks like Last Call.”

“The son of a bitch took her to my place?” he checks his watch. “Ok, we’ll be there in fifteen minutes. More like ten the way you’re driving. We’ll give him the money and get the girl, but you’ve got to keep your head.”

“I know, I’m just...I should’ve had someone watching her, keeping her safe.”

He stares at me. “Wait, what’s she to you exactly?”

I grit my teeth.

“Jesus, Bash. You love this girl?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Holy fuck,” he says. “And Sergei knows. Jesus Christ.”

Now Stieg understands. Even if I give Sergei the money, he's going to damage her in every possible way, maybe even kill her when he's done. My vision turns to red again and my heart's beating out of my chest.

If there's any chance of getting her out of there alive, I'm going to need a diversion. We make one other quick stop before arriving at the Last Call club.

It's 6:43pm when we pull up, but we have to wait on Yuri. Barging in there without the money will only result in bloodshed. The first bullet would be right to Madison's head.

"I had to get Vinny. I'll be there in two minutes," he pleads when I threaten to rip his head off if he's not here in seconds.

Stieg's gone to his trunk and loaded up on weaponry. I take an extra gun as well. Everyone of my bullets have Sergei's name written all over them.

Madison. She looked so terrified. If I get her out of this alive, she'll be traumatized. This could destroy her.

"Fuck!" I mutter to myself. I've got to hold my shit together. She needs me to go in there and take charge and get her the hell out of there. That's how this is going down. That's the only outcome I'll accept.

"He's here," Stieg says and nods his head in Yuri's direction as he pulls up in his black BMW. He jumps out of the car, runs around to the trunk and hauls out the two bags. "What the hell, Bash? You said we'd split it once the heat cooled down."

Stieg turns to Yuri. "Shut the fuck up!"

It's 6:47pm. I check the contents of the bag.

"It's all here, isn't it?" I ask. "The diamonds too?"

He nods but looks angry. "I'm getting married in five days, I need that money to buy Becky the house."

"She'll get her damn house as long as you play your part." I haul the bag onto my shoulder. We head for the back entrance of the club, Vinny follows behind. We dodge the surveillance camera's so Sergei won't know the size of our crew.

Stieg uses his keys and lets us in. "I'd like to bust a cap in him just for bringing this down in my place."

I say nothing, I need to be laser focused. I can't allow myself to think about what may have already happened up to this point. We walk down a dark corridor and draw our weapons. We ascend the stairs and head to the far room Stieg uses as a spare bedroom when he works late.

I motion for Yuri to open the door while Stieg and I keep our guns trained on whoever opens it. When we enter, the five men are still there, guns drawn and trained on us. Madison is still strapped half naked to the bed. Her frantic eyes meet mine and fly wide. Her cry is muffled by the gag as she thrashes futilely.

Sergei sits at the head of the bed with the barrel of the gun pressed to her temple.

His mouth stretches into an ugly grin. "Drop them or the girl gets it, and we still take the money."



I look at Stieg and Yuri, and motion for them to drop their weapons. We all slowly ease them to the floor.

“Search them,” Sergei orders his henchmen.

Mikhail and the others pat us down. Removing the additional weapons we brought in.

His eyes settle on Yuri he grunts a laugh. “So, you’re part of this?”

“No, Sergei, I had no idea what this was about,” he says with his hands up as he backs to the door. “I’m getting married in five days, please I want no part of this.”

“You fucking pussy!” Stieg barks at him.

“Mik, get the bag,” Sergei orders, keeping his gun pressed to Madison’s head.

“Please, just let me go,” Yuri whimpers.

Mikhail smacks Yuri across the head to shut him up and he grabs the money bag from him. He tosses it to fat Boba, the one who’d simulated fucking Madison. Boba catches it. Opens the bag and starts counting it.

“We spent some, Sergei, but I made up for the difference with diamonds,” I explain, keeping the focus on the bag. “That’s five million, plus interest. Just let the girl go.”

“What’s the hurry?” He slides a big sausage paw over Madison’s right breast, he squeezes it roughly. Mads thrashes violently as she stares daggers at Sergei. “I was going to let the

matter go, but now, I'll have first rights and you boys can watch." There is a rumble of laughter through the room.

"I'm warning you, Sergei, let her go!" I snap.

Sergei's evil grin widens. He slides his big hand down Madison's body and slips into the crotch of her panties.

Boba suddenly hollers in agony and thrusts the bag away. Sergei whips his head around at the commotion, at the same moment, Mikhail opens the door and whistles. In charges Vinny, his huge rottweiler with savage jaws. It goes right for Sergei. As it flies at him, Sergei turns his gun on Vinny.

All hell breaks loose as the rottweiler goes full beasts on Sergei, I grab a gun and begin freeing Madison's bonds. Stieg has wrestled Sergei's gun away while Yuri and Mikhail make short work of the others. Boba is writhing on the floor in agony from poison delivered by the scorpion's sting, the one I'd placed in the diamonds bag.

Madison is clinging to me as I release her ankles and pull her off the bed. I throw my coat around her, hand her the car keys and order her to run! She takes off down the hall.

Mikhail gives a sharp whistle and Vinny obediently comes to heel at his side. Sergei is bloody but still breathing, he climbs to a kneeling position and glares at us. "You dare come up against your boss!" he roars.

I retrieve the cassette player from the side pocket of the money bag. I take the pictures of him attempting to assault my mother and throw them at him.

He croaks a laugh. “That stupid whore, she went for the wrong brother.” He pulls himself up onto the bed. He turns his baleful gaze onto Mikhail, “Miserable piece of shit traitor. You’ll pay for this.”

I press the button on the cassette player. Sergei’s voice comes through the speakers, “This is a photo of Alexi Petrosky. You must make it appear to be a robbery. Kill him, but you must shoot me too in the leg, here.” Now the Albanian’s voice. “Count the money.” A few seconds of silence. The color has drained from Sergei’s face as I glare at him. “It’s all here, seventy-five thousand,” the Albanian voice says. “Then you do it, Thursday after we finish collections. You’ll get the other seventy-five thousand then.”

I go cold as ice as I walk over to the closet and search for the machete I know Stieg keeps there.

“Your father was weak, didn’t know how to run the business. I was the true boss who raised the family to this level. I made us great!” His pale blue eyes go wide with panic when he sees what’s in my hand. He lunges for something beneath the pillow Madison had been laying on. A gun?

Mikhail jumps him and begins reigning down blows on his head until he drops the gun. Stieg tosses it out of the way and backs away from him.

As I approach, Sergei locks eyes with mine, his face twists into a hideous scowl. “Don’t you want to know why your bitch of a mother left you behind to be raised by me? Why I made you my heir,” he wipes the blood from his nose with a thick

hand. “Your mother wasn’t some saint fleeing a monster, she was mine,” he thumps his chest with a heavy fist, “before she started spreading her legs for Alexi.” He then hisses, “But not before I put *you* in her belly. And now, son...will you kill your own father?” he asks with a villain’s smile.

This revelation comes as no shock. Deep down, did I know? Had I suspected all along? Hearing the truth finally spoken aloud has the exact opposite effect of what he’d hoped.

When the blade sinks down into Sergei’s shoulder, he realizes how grossly he misjudged me. He throws his hands up defensively, but I strike him again and again. He falls off the bed onto the floor but fueled by years of rage and grief, I keep hacking away at him never intending to stop.

“...enough. He’s dead, Bash. Stop.” I hear Stieg’s voice in my rage. But I keep going even though I can barely recognize Sergei as a person anymore.

“Sebastian, stop!” comes Madison’s voice. I turn to find her standing there in the doorway with my coat clutched around her. Her face is a mask of horror as she stares at me in shock. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and understand why. I’m covered head to toe in Sergei’s blood and guts.

Her face softens when I let my arms fall to my side. Only then do I recall that as a seasoned surgeon, Madison is no longer horrified at the sight of gore.

Boba is on the floor, his eyes are mere slits in his bloated face. His writhing has slowed, but he’s still breathing. As Madison glares at him, her face morphs into a vicious scowl.

She walks over to Boba, apparently recalling how he'd pressed his groin to her face and threatened to do all manner of vial things to her. Swiftly, she snatched the machete from my hand and drops down next to Boba. Unlatching his belt, she yanks his pants down exposing his genitals. Wielding the machete with a surgeon's precision, she swings it down between his legs and severs his dick and ball sack clean off.

She slings the bloody organs in his face. "Suck on that, motherfucker!" she bellows and spits on him. Tossing the machete to the floor, she storms out of the room and down the corridor.

"I'll take care of this mess," Stieg says. "You'd better go after her...boss."

I nod at him. Knowing the danger is over, I take a quick moment to wash off my face and hands of Sergei's blood. I'll dispose of my clothes later. I need to get to Madison.

When I get down to the bottom of the stairs, Madison is waiting for me with a haunted expression on her face. I throw my arms around her, and though she doesn't pull away, she's stiff as a board. I've got to get her out of here.

"Come on," I say and take her by the arm to lead her out into the parking lot. I take one of the beater cars with the keys already under the seat. I'll dispose of it afterward to destroy any blood traces connecting me to Sergei's death.

We drive home in shocked silence.

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## Chapter 17 – What in the Hell Did I Expect?

**S**o, this is what it feels like to be in shock. To be abducted from one's automobile, stripped of your clothing, and strapped to a bed while vile men ogle you. This is what it feels like to have a fat pig of a man rub his disgusting groin against your face, and to have the barrel of a gun pressed to your brow because your boyfriend robbed him of his bookie haul. This is what it feels like to live in fear that you're about to be brutally gang raped and murdered.

This is what it feels like to watch your boyfriend come through the door to rescue you and to butcher the man who had the audacity to touch what was his alone.

I'm numb, in a mindless daze, wondering how did I get here. And what do I do now to bring my life back into a semblance of order? At the same time, I know full well that I've crossed a line and can never go back to normal.

When we pull up to our home. I notice that there's a car outside with two men sitting in it. They're definitely not cops from the look of them.

“They’re part of my security team,” Sebastian says just above a whisper so as not to jar the silence.

I nod, other than that I feel incapable of moving. Sebastian gets out of the car and comes around to my side. He opens the door and gently takes me by the arm.

“Come on, babe,” he says softly. “Let’s get you inside where it’s warm.”

I obey, putting one barefoot out and then the other. He lifts me effortlessly into his arms and carries me up the stairs, into the house. I revel in the safety and strength of his arms. I rest my head against his chest, feel the beating of his heart, and am comforted. I don’t dwell on the fact that I’d never have been in this harrowing situation in the first place had I not been involved with him.

He carries me up the stairs to our bedroom where he wraps me in the comforter. After kissing my brow, he goes to the bathroom and begins running water to fill the garden tub. As I lay there, I watch as he pours in various soothing oils designed to help me destress from the trying ordeal.

I must have drifted to sleep because I hear him call my name and feel the gentle nudge. He takes me by the hand and leads me to the full tub, overrunning with sudsy bubbles. The lights are dimmed, and meditative music plays over the sound system. A glass of red wine awaits me.

Bash kisses the top of my head and then withdraws from the bathroom. He’s apparently concerned that I may not want to be



naked around any man after the nightmare I just endured. He may be right, but I feel strangely bereft without him.

But my primary need is to feel clean again. Thank God, Sebastian arrived before any irrevocable damage had occurred. Other than Sergei's grubby hands on me and being ogled, no unendurable violation had taken place in the form of penile penetration into any orifice.

I step out of my bra and panties, in slide into the warm fragrant bath. I slip all the way down, below the water, allowing every inch of me to be washed clean.

I break through the surface when I can hold my breath no longer. Only then does the horror of what happened really hit me. The tears are now flowing unabashed, and the sobs rack my body.

It's not long before Sebastian enters and kneels by the bathtub.

"I'm so sorry, Mads. I'm so damned sorry for what happened. It's all my fault."

When I look up at him, his eyes are glistening with tears.

"I should've protected you, should've know what that animal would try."

I let him wrap his arms around me and gather me into his arms as I continue to cry.

"I swear to you, nothing like that will ever happen again. You'll be safe with me. I stake my life on that."

He continues to stroke my wet hair and tenderly kiss my brow to console me.

“And this place,” he says looking around admirably, “is a virtual fortress, Mads. And from this point on, you’ll have an armed escort to see you safely to and from work. Nothing like that will ever happen again. I promise you that.”

I don’t know how long we remain that way with him comforting me, but the water now feels lukewarm going to cold.

I finally find my voice. “Towel.”

He rises from my side and returns with a big plush one. He spreads it wide for me as I rise from the bath. He wraps it around me and holds me close.

“Precious angel, I love you so much.” He whispers in my ear.

I cling to him as if this were the only safe space in the world when probably the very opposite is true.

“I should get some sleep,” I say into his chest. “I have an early shift in the morning.”

“No, I reached out to your friend Lisa, she’ll take your shift tomorrow.”

I look up at him. “What?”

“You’re in no shape to be working tomorrow. Please give yourself a little time to recover from this. I wouldn’t want you coming apart in the middle of the O.R.”

While I can't fault his reasoning, I take offense at him stepping into my workspace, making arrangements without my knowledge. I know he only did it out of concern for my well-being, but still.

“What did she say? We usually don't do this on such short notice unless we're sick.”

“She's glad to do it. She thinks very highly of you.”

“Not if I start calling out at the last minute.” I squeeze my eyes shut. “The chief resident will think I lack commitment.”

He cradles my face in his hands. “Baby, you're getting that cardiothoracic residency. I guarantee you that.”

Suddenly, visions of him cornering the review board members and threatening them about my residency pop into my head. I'm not thinking straight, that's not even possible.

“I've worked so hard for it. I'll be crushed if I don't get it.”

The corner of his mouth hitches up. “You have to learn to trust me, Mads. You're worked up over nothing.”

I lean my head against his chest. “You're probably right. Surely, Emma can overlook one sick day out of an entire year.”

“Come on, put on your pajamas. I've lit the fireplace, let's sit there and talk.”

I agree and pull on one of his Cornell t-shirts and some comfy sweatpants. Still feeling a bit chilled, I slip my feet into some thick socks and throw on my bathrobe.

We go down to the living room. There's a roaring fire casting a warm glow across the room. We curl up on the sofa, he wraps his arms around me.

“What you did to Sergei,” I shake my head. “I'm not going to lie, after what he did to me, I wanted that animal dead.” I study his response, is he surprised to hear me say that? His expression is unchanged. “But watching you butcher him like that.” I hold my hands out in a helpless gesture. “It was like you zoned out, went to a different place. What were you thinking, Bash?”

He draws in a deep breath, stares at the ceiling a moment. “When I saw you lying there.” He squeezes his eyes shut. “When I saw him touch you like that. I saw red and lost my shit. I'm sorry it happened, I'm sorry you had to see that side of me.”

I touch his hand. “I was just thankful, you got there, Bash. I thought I was dead or was about to be praying for death.”

“Don't say that, baby.”

“But somehow, I knew this horrible thing wasn't going to happen because you'd save me.”

He gives me a sad smile. “I'd move heaven and earth for you.”

“I mean, don't get me wrong, I was pissed as hell at you for robbing Sergei, but...”

“I know, I'm sorry about all of it.” But then a smirk crept across his face. “And you, hacking Boba's junk off like that.”

“He put that nasty shit near me, the asshole.”

He’s laughing. “That was epic. Nobody’ll dare fuck with you again.”

“What happened to him? Was he bitten or stung?”

“Scorpion sting. It was in the diamond bag.”

“What? You just keep pet scorpions handy for such occasions.”

“You never know.”

“Did he die? There is an antidote.”

He shakes his head no. “He’s dead.”

I feel myself drifting even further across the line. “Have you...killed many people?”

His eyebrows hike up in mild surprise, “It depends on how you define many,” he hesitates, then adds, “I do what’s necessary to protect my own, nothing more.”

I nod thoughtfully, contemplating what this means. Visions of him laying waste to Sergei fill my mind. He was protecting me, I’m now part of what he calls his own.

“Are you ok?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

“I just thought you’d be a little more...I don’t know, upset or traumatized by the ordeal.”

“They attacked me, but you took care of it. You did what was necessary to get me out of there.”

“Let me guess, you’ve seen worse in the O.R.”

“Not the violence, mind you. But the O.R. does tend to desensitize you to the sight of blood and guts.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “Is that the medical term for it?”

“Wise guy.” I shift so I can look at him better. “Bash, in the course of three months, I’ve hidden a gun, treated a GSW without reporting it...and chopped a guy’s dick off.”

He brushes some strands of hair from my eyes. “You want a medal?”

“Bash.”

“Sorry, too soon.”

“I’m...it’s like I don’t recognize myself anymore. At the same time, it’s like a whole new side of me has been awakened, a side I never knew existed before.”

His sapphire eyes study me. “That doesn’t sound like such a bad thing.”

My heart sinks to my belly. “Babe, I have to tell you something. I’ve been meaning to, I just didn’t know how.”

He continues to study me, his eyes narrow. “You can tell me anything, Mads.”

I let the silence linger. My gaze drifts to the windows. I notice the snow has begun to fall in big pillowy flakes. I feel his fingers on my chin as he gently turns my face back to him.

“After what we just went through together, we shouldn’t have any more secrets.”

“I know but...I think you'll be angry.”

He looks askance at me, his eyes search mine. As if reading my mind, he finally says, “What did you really do with the gun, Mads?”

Detective Hart's words echo in my head. “Did you think he might be taking advantage of your feelings for him, to make sure the gun is safe?”

I take a deep breath and blurt it out. “I didn't throw it in the Hudson River, it's in the attic of the house I rent.”

He simply stares at me for a moment. Uncertain, I return my gaze to the falling snow as I await his response. He cradles my face in his hands and kisses my brow. “Thank you for telling me the truth. Tomorrow, we'll go take care of it. I never should've put that on you in the first place.”

“You're not angry with me?”

He shrugs. “It was a rookie mistake, I'll forgive you this once.”

“Okay, and I'll forgive you for not telling me you were engaged.”

“Oh...right.”

I hold out my hand. “Shall we call it even? No more secrets from here on out?”

He gives my hand a firm shake. “No more secrets.” The rigid set of his shoulders softens, and he relaxes into the cushions. “I don't know how much you heard in that room, but...” he

closes his eyes and lays his head back. “Sergei ordered the hit on the former head of our family. The man I believed to be my father.”

“Oh my gosh, really?” I sit up. “Wait, what do you mean, the man you *believed* to be your father?”

His eyes are still shut. “I don’t know whether he was just trying to save his skin, but he claims he and my mother were together before she married my father. And that...he was my dad, not Alexi.”

I peer at him. “Do you believe him?”

He opens his eyes, his gaze rests upon the glowing flames dancing in the evening light. “I don’t know. Whether he was or not, I wanted him gone. For killing the man I called father, but mostly for what he tried to do to you.” He looks at me. “Either way, I’m glad he’s dead.”



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## Chapter 18 – Cleaning up Loose Ends

**T**he next morning, I let Madison sleep in while I checked in on all the fallout from last night's chaotic events. Stieg text me to say that the kitchen's clean, letting me know that Sergei's body has been properly disposed of and the room has been sanitized. Good man, that Stieg.

The next text isn't so amenable.

We need to talk.

It's from Natasha's father, head of the Orlov family. Is this about the broken betrothal or about Sergei's recent demise? There's no telling what his spies may have already told him. If he's still sore over me breaking off with his daughter, he may have a thing or two to say about me stepping into Sergei's shoes.

*Where?* I text back.

*Collins 1pm.*

I consider it a moment. That's his seat of operation so this is a clear powerplay. Yet the alternative would naturally be Last

Call, the place I swore to Madison I'd never step foot in again. His place may have had some action going on in the back rooms, but at least it wasn't a full-blown strip club.

It's a hard pill to swallow, but I'll do it to keep Madison happy.

*2pm and you get 5 minutes of my time.* I say exerting some authority, I won't give another inch.

He hesitates, then types.

*2pm sharp*

The dick. I close out of the conversation. Is he going to make a move for the throne, basically declaring war? We'll see. It'll be the last thing he does. I cut my teeth on Sergei, I'll devour Orlov.

Now, to the matter of the gun Madison hid away. Hid away...not tossed in the river like she'd told me while I'd been in the hospital. She lied to me. I mean, I get it. She didn't really know me then, was trying to protect herself, keep an insurance policy. I can't really fault her from lying to me. I fucked up over Natasha and she did over the gun.

We're going to forgive and forget on both counts. But I need her to understand that she must never to lie to me again. At some point, she'll come to understand that her future is as much at stake as mine. Our fates are inextricably intertwined.

I hear her stirring upstairs. I'm surprised as how resilient she is. How the whole ugly incident has left her unshaken, like she

believes it was all play acting and she was a hundred percent certain I'd save her before any lasting harm was done.

I'm smiling at the thought. I like being Mads' knight in shining armor. I liked the way she looked at me, clung to me for shelter and warmth, despite being the little badass she is herself. Jesus, what she did to Boba...it'll be talked about for years. With some training and guidance, she could become quite the lethal...

Stop!

Madison's services as a surgeon are all that will be required of her. I need her to be happy which means ensuring that her plans fully come to fruition by whatever means necessary. Dabbling in my word on occasion needn't jeopardize that. I need to keep her hands clean enough to be respectable but dirty enough to keep her in.

She's coming down the stairs now, sexy bed-hair and one of my t-shirts. God, I love her like this. My brilliant, and sexy as hell girlfriend. Girlfriend. I plan to upgrade that status this weekend at Yuri's wedding.

"Morning, sweetheart," I call to her as she reaches the bottom stair. "How about a nice omelet, some toast and coffee this morning."

She closes her eyes and smiles. "Sounds perfect." She saddles up to one of the bar stools in the kitchen.

"You sleep alright?" I ask as I retrieve the ingredients from the fridge. "I hope I didn't wake you."

“No, no, you’re fine,” she says batting a hand at me. “I slept for as long as I needed to. I’m ready to start my day.”

I turn to look at her. “You remember you don’t have to go to the hospital today, right?”

She gives me a wry look. “Yes, silly. I didn’t get bumped on the head, you know?”

“So, what are your plans today?” I ask as I pull the skillet from the lower cabinet.

She drops her head back, thinking for a moment before her eyes lock with mine. “We need to get your gun out of the attic of my apartment. But here’s the problem, I’m pretty sure the police are watching my every move.”

I toss out the cracked eggs shells and turn to her. “Don’t you think that if they were tailing you, they would’ve seen Sergei’s men take you?”

“Yeah, I been trying to figure that one out,” she replied, leaning forward on elbows. “My guess is that they just wait outside the parking deck and then follow me from there. I mean they know we’re living together and always seem to know when I’m at work. So, they’ve got to be tailing me, right?”

“That’s a fair assumption,” I say as I whisk the eggs. “So, we go to your place,” I look at her, “which I think you should give up, and get some more of your things to bring over here. They shouldn’t find anything suspicious about that. One of those items will happen to be my gun.”

“I know, but if they pulled us over for any reason and found it on us, we’re both majorly screwed.”

I grin at her. Happy to see she’s viewing this as our predicament, not just mine. “This isn’t my first rodeo, babe. We’ll get it and I’ll take care of the rest.” She’s still frowning. “Look, why don’t I go. Just let your roommates know that I’m on my way and that I’ll be picking up a few of your things.”

Her face lights up. “That would be so great, Bash. My whole medical career could go up in flames if I were found with it. You know?”

“Yep, which is precisely why I’m going to take care of it.” I stop to look at her. “I’m not going to let any of this blow back on you. You know that, right?”

She holds my gaze. “You’d never do anything intentionally to put me at risk, but with the cops riding my ass, we can’t be too careful.”

“Agreed.” I turn back to the stove to tend to the omelet. “You stay here with Nick today, or do I need to have Tessa come over?”

“Nah, give Tessa the day off. I’ll look in on Nick and catch up on patient files.” She chuckles. “It’s hard to believe that in 2 months, I graduate medical school and,” she crosses her fingers on both hands, “will begin my cardiothoracic surgery rotation.”

“In June, right?” I say over my shoulder. “You get a break in there between March and June. We should go somewhere on

holiday. Give yourself time to rest up and recharge before your grueling residency schedule starts.”

She’s nodding at the prospect. “That’s actually a great idea. It’s funny, we really haven’t had much time to just hang out with each other. So, spending a few weeks doing nothing but that, we’ll either fall more madly in love or kill each other.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I say dead pan. “It’s probably best that we leave all weapons at home...just in case.” I grin as I slide the omelet onto her plate.

She takes up her utensils. “I could never hate a gorgeous man who makes me breakfast every morning,” she says slicing into her omelet.

“Depends on what’s in it,” I say.

The burst of laughter escapes her before she takes a bite. I love the sound of Mads’ laughter, the deep throaty sound of it as if she’s laughing from her soul. “So, where did you have in mind?”

I shrug. “We could split our time. Spend a couple of weeks on some luxurious Caribbean Island and then,” I wait until she lifts her eyes to mine, “you could let me show you Moscow.”

Her eyes widen in surprise. She carefully chews her food and then replies. “I’d love to see Moscow with you.”

Not the exuberant response I desired but it will do. “Wonderful, I’ll make the arrangements.” I need to present her to the family. I’m walking her down the aisle regardless of

their approval, but it's important that I give them the chance to weigh in on my future bride.

Her phone beeps with a text message. Her eyes fly over the screen. "Ha, Doctor Neely is asking me to assist with a quadruple by-pass this Friday. Awesome!"

"That's my girl!"

"That's doctor to you, mister."

I chuckle. "I'm so incredibly proud of you, Mads. I don't know what the hell you're doing with a guy like me, but I'm damn glad you are."

A pensive expression falls over her face. "Last night I'd never been so frightened in my life. But when you burst into the room, I'd never felt so alive or so happy to be with you. Sometimes it feels like I'm living some crazy novel where you have no idea what's going to happen from one chapter to the next." She crinkles her nose adorably. "But a part of me kind of loves it." She fixes her eyes on me. "Or maybe I just love you, any way I can have you."

I stop what I'm doing and come around the bar to her. I cradle her face in my hands. "You're the most important thing to me in the world. Everything that I do from here on out, I'm doing it for us, for our future." I kiss her tenderly, letting her know that as much as I desire her, the tender bond we share is what I prize above all else.

Just then the toasts popped up. "Either the toast is ready or it's just really happy to see us."



I chuckle and wonder what I ever did before this woman entered my life. I go for the toast, but she hops off her stool.

“No, you’ve already waited on me,” she says, grabbing the toast. “Go get ready, I’m assisting on an angioplasty tomorrow morning, I think I can handle buttering toast.”

I back away laughing. “It’s all yours, doc. I’m out of here. Oh, hey,” I say, halting at the first step. “Don’t forget we have Yuri’s wedding on Saturday. It’s really important that you be there with me. So, don’t go changing up your shifts on me, all right?”

“Yuri’s wedding, that’s right,” she says, snapping her fingers. “I need a dress for it. I’ll borrow one of Donna’s. When you go pick up my stuff, I’ll have her toss it in.”

I frown. “Why’re you borrowing a dress?”

She smiles demurely. “I want to look nice for you, and I’ve got nothing but the couple of dresses you’ve already seen me in.”

I lean against the stair rail. “Ok, first of all you could show up in a paper bag and you’d be the best-looking thing in the room. Second of all, if you want a nice dress, go buy one.” When she starts to object over the expense, I quickly add, “It’s a gift from me.”

Her face sours mockingly. “First you have me move in, insist I drive one of your cars and now you want to dress me? I’m beginning to feel like a kept woman.”

I walk back across the room to her. “Well, you’re my woman and I plan to keep it that way for a very, very long time.” I kiss her cheek. “So, that means, you’re going to go find yourself the prettiest, most expensive dress you can find and let me buy it for you. Get the matching shoes and purse, the whole works,” I wave my hand at her. “Whatever you ladies like to do to get all dolled up.”

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## Chapter 19 – The DEA, really?

It's such a huge relief that Sebastian removed his gun from my attic. No longer will I have to suffer nightmares where the cops come busting in with a warrant to search the premises and find the smoking gun. The very gun that I claimed I had no knowledge of. It was a dangerous game, but now it's over.

Thank God.

And yes, I know, I never should have gotten myself into this predicament in the first place. I had risked so much when I barely even knew him. I know it's silly to say I went on a gut feeling about Bash...but the truth is, I was right. And now the gun was gone forever freeing me of any guilt.

I look in on Nick. He's sitting up in his reclining chair, looking better each day. Again, another bullet I've dodged with his swift recovery.

“Hey, how's my favorite patient?”

“Feeling good,” he says and smiles. “Thanks to my favorite doctor.”

“Aren’t you the charmer,” I say as I approach him. “Let’s have a look, shall we?”

He unbuttons his pajama top to reveal the clean bandages. “See?”

“Yep, looking good,” but I begin peeling back the tape. “I just want to take a closer look.”

He sighs and holds his hands up to let me do my work. Fortunately, all is looking good. “I should be able to remove the sutures in a few more days.”

He nods and his expression turns somber. “I don’t know if I ever properly thanked you.”

“Sure, you did.”

“No, not just for this,” he says, gesturing at his wounds. “But for protecting me...not turning me in.”

I finish flattening the tape down across his torso. I meet his eyes. “You know, the best way to thank me would be to stay away from the crime world. Go back to college, finish your degree and then help Bash run the legitimate operations.”

He holds my gaze, giving me a curious look. “You know that Bash is going to be the head of the family now, so...”

“Bash and I talked about that,” I answer. “He’s spinning some of the less savory parts of the business off, let some of the other bosses take over that stuff. He’ll focus on the financial advisory aspect of the business which is what you’d expect of someone with an Ivy League MBA. Right?”

He gives me a reluctant, though sympathetic smile. “I’ve never seen Bash this happy. I hope it all works out for you.”

With that in mind I head to the hospital with spirits soaring high. With the gun burden lifted, my medical career is secure, Bash and I are closer than ever, and I found an amazing, super cute cocktail dress that’s just hot enough to get me noticed but not enough to take the attention off the bride.

Natasha Orlov is the woman they thought they’d see on Sebastian’s arm. The one thing I can say about the bitch is, she’s a looker. I need to be at my absolute best to answer the question of *who’s the woman Sebastian dumped Natasha for and risked a turf war over?*

I’d love for them to see me and say, “*Wow, and she’s a surgeon too? I get it Bash, totally get it.*”

When I pull into the parking deck, I tense up with the memory of being abducted from here, of being thrown in that room and strapped to the bed while those disgusting men leered at me. But then I glance in my rearview mirror and see my two new bodyguards pulling up in the black SUV. Bash assigned Dmitri and Peyter as my guard detail, to escort me to and from my workplace. Bash insisted upon it, and after what happened to me the other night, I don’t fight him on it.

The angioplasty went fairly well, it’s a routine procedure by now and there was only so much a medical student could actually do as they learn from the surgical team...but they let me get my hands in there.

The strange thing is, now that I've actually had a solo surgical performance on Sebastian's brother Nick, I feel so much more confident in my abilities. In my ability to be the primary surgeon and take all the rewards and punishments that go with the title.

Several times I looked up at Doctor Ellison, dying to say, let me in there, I can do this!

But I held my tongue and humbly helped out where I could. I'll have my day in the limelight, for now I must watch and learn...and pretend that I've never been to the big show.

Afterward, I follow the surgical team out of the O.R. and begin removing any soiled gloves, masks and scrubs. For the second time in two weeks, Emma bursts through the door searching for someone, her eyes come to rest upon me.

The chief resident waves me over emphatically. Geeze, not the cops again, I fear.

"In my office now," she says in a clipped tone. When we're clear of the door she adds, "It's the DEA, they want to talk to you."

I halt in my tracks. "The DEA?"

She pulls me aside to an empty waiting area. "Look, Madison, you've got a really bright future ahead of you. That's why I stuck my neck out to give you such a strong recommendation for the cardiothoracic surgery residency at Presbyterian over Simon. Don't make me regret it. I don't know exactly what's going on with you, but you need to make

this go away. It's not good for the hospital and it sure as hell isn't good for your career. Understand?"

"Yes, completely, I'm so sorry, Dr. Weiss."

Her face screws up. "I don't want your apologies, just make it stop." She closes her eyes and sighs heavily. "With the field you've chosen, you have to make a tough decision about what comes first, your career or your personal life. No man's worth it, believe me."

Emma's been divorced two years now, it's clear to see what choice she made, even if that means only seeing her kids on the weekends and holidays. She's made her sacrifices and appears pretty annoyed with me for jeopardizing mine over Bash. I completely see her point, but now that the gun's been dealt with, the authorities can't pin anything on me.

So, why are the freaking DEA here?

I nod eagerly. "I know, I'll do what needs to be done."

"Alright, I've got to go check on a patient," Emma says as she makes for the door. "The DEA are waiting for you in my office."

"On my way," I reply as I head in the opposite direction. I quickly text Bash. "DEA are here." As I ride up the elevator, my phone buzzes with Bash's call.

"Have you spoken to them?" is his curt greeting.

"No, I'm on my way now. Bash, this could end really badly for me."



“Listen carefully, Mads. You tell them *nothing*. Everything is going to be fine, trust me. Just keep your head and call me the second you’re out of there. All right?”

“Yeah, yeah, bye,” I say as the elevator doors part. My heart is pounding like a jackhammer as I head down the corridor to Emma’s office. Officer Tubbs is standing outside the door chatting with two other men in dark suits. Just great.

He looks up at me and gives a sad smile. “Here she is.”

The two men turn rather grim looks on me. “Ms. Graham,” the closest one says extending a hand. “I’m agent Roberts and this is agent Hall.”

Hall shakes my hand. “Ma’am.”

“We just need a few minutes of your time,” Roberts gestures toward the open door.

“Sure, no problem,” I say as I step through the door and move around the desk to sit in Emma’s chair.

Roberts is middle aged, brown hair graying on the sides. He lowers his medium sized frame into the chair across from the desk. His gray eyes are watchful and filled with concern. Hall is younger, I’m guessing early thirties, his face is a blank slate, like he’s already bored.

“Can you tell us about your relationship with Sebastian Petrosky?”

“Sure, if you can tell me why you’re interested in my private life.” I don’t want to antagonize them, but neither do I want to

give out information needlessly. Obviously, they already know about me and Sebastian, so why the banal question?

“We’re just trying to verify some details, that’s all,” Roberts replies.

And loosen my tongue no doubt. “It’s such a general question, please be more specific.”

“When did you meet Mr. Petrosky?”

“September 24<sup>th</sup>,” is my curt reply. I allow the ensuing silence to linger refusing to fill it with additional details.

Roberts clears his throat. “How did you meet?”

“He was a patient of mine.”

“And that’s the first time you met Mr. Petrosky?”

“Yes.” Do they really have to keep calling Bash Mr. Petrosky? Is as if they’re trying to make him seem less personable, like we’re discussing a stranger.

“And then you moved in with him about four weeks after his discharge from the hospital?”

“Yes.”

He raises a judgmental brow. He allows the silence to stretch out before saying. “So, things obviously developed rather quickly between you and Mr. Petrosky.” He gestures. “You went from never laying eyes on him, to moving in with him in a matter of six weeks.”

Well, when you put it like that...I make no response as technically it wasn’t a question.

“Why are you here, agent Roberts?” I ask with a smile to soften my words. “I’ve got patients to tend to, so if you could just cut to the chase, that would be amazing.”

He smiles back but his gray eyes are cold as ice. “Did you know that Sergei Petrosky, Sebastian’s uncle has gone missing for 2 days now?”

His words land like a sucker punch right to the gut. I blink twice before responding. “No, I didn’t.” What had they done with the corpse mangled as it was.

“Well, he has, and we strongly believe that Sebastian Petrosky had something to do with that.”

I nod slowly but say nothing else.

“Look, Ms. Graham, soon to be doctor Graham unless this all goes the way I think it will...” Roberts says cryptically. “I’ve been building a strong RICO case against Sergei Petrosky for over a year now. We were this close to collaring him but now he’s vanished into thin air. Personally, I think he’s dead.”

I hope my gasp and hand to the throat don’t come off as over the top. “Oh, no. That’s awful.” But isn’t this the proper response for hearing that your boyfriend’s uncle may be dead?

“Do you know where Sebastian was the night of November 28<sup>th</sup>?”

I lift my eyes to the ceiling. “Hmm...that would’ve been a Tuesday, right?”

Roberts, “Yes, Tuesday.”

“I’m pretty sure we spent a quiet evening in.”

“You worked that day, didn’t you?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“How did you get home after your shift?”

“Bash, sorry, Sebastian picked me up,” I readily reply just as Bash and I had rehearsed it.

I see Tubb’s brow furrow.

“Don’t you drive to work in a...,” Roberts glances down at his notes. “A blue F-type convertible Jag?”

“Yes, but on the way in that morning, the engine was making a funny noise so Bash told me not to drive it anymore till he could have his mechanic come check it out. So, he picked me up, met me around the back to avoid the heavy traffic at the front entrance.” I peer at Roberts who’s clearly disappointed. “Why do you ask?”

His head lalts to the side. “Do you realize what the penalty is for lying to the authorities during a federal investigation? Forget about losing your medical license and think about doing serious prison time, Ms. Graham.”

I shift in my seat, but otherwise remain calm. I know my rights. “Do you realize how offensive it is to be called a liar?” Even if the shoe fits...

He smiles disarmingly, “I’m merely letting you know what the ramifications are if in the event you should lie to us.” He sits back. “And now that you know this, do you want to tell me

again about how you got home Tuesday night? Anything you...forgot to mention?"

I chuckle and nod. "Well, yes, I did forget a detail." All three men perk up. "After the mechanic ran a diagnostic, turns out it had some bad gas, so he ran some fuel cleaner and now it's running like a champ." I nod off to the side toward the parking deck. "That's why I'm back in it again."

Roberts levels his ardent gaze at me. "Glad to see you're feeling all better," he says through tight lips. "I guess yesterday's call out must have been one of those 24-hour bugs."

I pat my stomach. "Yeah, I think I must've eaten something bad. I'm still not a hundred percent, but I'll manage."

"Why would a seemingly intelligent woman like you, who has everything to live for, get involved with some low-life thug?"

I go a little rigid at the insult. "Low-life thug? Sebastian graduated magna cum laude from Cornell University, earned an MBA from there as well. He's on the board of 3 reputable financial services organizations as well as heading the East Coast operations of his perfectly legitimate businesses. So, I suggest you look up the definition of the words low-life and thug before you go around using it so inappropriately."

He smirks knowing he's hit a sore spot with me. "You could become the greatest surgeon ever, but you'll go down in history as the Russian mobster's bed bunny. That's really gotta suck for a woman as accomplished as you."

“You’re barking up the wrong tree, Roberts,” I say, placing my hands on the armrest. “I’ve got patients to see.”

He cranes forward in his chair, “If I can’t get Sergei, I’m coming after your boyfriend. I’ll take him down and anyone near him, including you.”

“That doesn’t sound like justice, agent Roberts, it sounds like a vendetta,” I say as I rise and move out from behind the desk. “Like it’s gone from professional to personal.”

Roberts stands but doesn’t block my path.

Tubbs is standing at the door, his eyes fixed upon me. “We heard Petrosky broke it off with his fiancée...so you two are really that serious, huh?”

Was that a look of jealousy or pity in his intense brown eyes?

“I’m late for rounds,” I say as I exit the door.

“She definitely knows something,” I hear Halls grumble.



## Chapter 20 – Fishing Expedition

The minute that I get off the phone with Madison, I place a call to Jim Donaldson, a cop with a horrible gambling addiction that keeps him on our payroll.

“Why did I have to find out second hand that the DEA has a hard on for me?”

“I told you they were looking at Sergei, I didn’t know just how close until he went missing,” Donaldson spills. “They’re going apeshit down here at the precinct trying to figure out what happened to Sergei.” He chuckles nervously. “Roberts was hoping this was going to be his big catch to make his career. He’s pissing tears over this, so—”

“So, they’ve got nothing, this is just a fishing expedition?”

“Yeah, but they’re hoping to squeeze your girl for some information, so, you know,” he chuckles again. “You may need to handle that.”

“They’re wasting their time, there’s nothing there,” I say tersely for any who might be listening. “All they’re managing



to do is piss me off.”

“Right,” he quickly adds. “I’m just letting you know is all.”

“That’s just it, you *didn’t* let me know.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll do better.”

“I want to know what you know before you know it, understand?”

“You got it, I’m on top of it, all over it,” he sputters.

I let the silence speak the unspoken threats. This guy owes us nearly a hundred g’s, we overlook it in exchange for good intel which hasn’t been forthcoming of late.

“Uh...are we good?” he asks.

“You got one more chance, then we call in your debt...even if we have to take it out of your hide.” I end the call and check the time. It’s only been five minutes since Madison called but it feels like an eternity.

I promised her my business wouldn’t affect her job, but now those bastards are camping out at the hospital.

I pace outside in front of the jeweler, hoping my trip here isn’t in vain. The timing couldn’t be worse with our upcoming trip to Yuri’s wedding. I have a lot riding on it.

But what if this proves to be too much for Mads? What if she keeps silent about the gun and Sergei but decides it’s too risky to be with me and tries to leave.

I search for a bench as I suddenly feel the need to sit down. It’s as if someone’s just knocked the breath out of me. Three

months ago, I didn't even know Madison Graham existed and now I feel like I can't fucking breathe without her. Something deep within me smiles every time I think of her, of the way we are together. When I think of all she's done for me and the way she feels when we're tangled in the sheets, the words I love you roll off my tongue so easily because I'm simply speaking from my heart. But if I truly love her, shouldn't I leave her be and watch her burgeoning career from afar?

I will...if it comes to that, but for now, I'm going to fight like hell to hold onto the best thing that's ever happened to me.

I'm jarred back to the present when I feel my phone vibrate in my hands. It's Madison.

"Where are you?" I quickly ask. "Are you sure you can talk?"

"Yes, I'm in an empty patient room."

"Ok, good."

"They were after Sergei, agent Roberts had been building a big case against him and now he's turned his sights on you."

"Yeah, but if they're desperate enough to go after you it means they've got nothing. I told you, Mads, everything's going to be fine."

She groans her skepticism. "Bash, Emma's really beginning to question my commitment to the job and even in her decision to back me. This has got to stop."

"I won't lie to you, Mads," I say earnestly, but then pause to choose my words carefully. "Both of our careers are extremely

high pressured and time consuming. So yeah, things are going to get a little intense, but I've got you, baby. We're going to get through this and you're going to be the best heart surgeon that hospital's ever produced. That's my promise to you."

I hear her sigh heavily.

"I love you so much, Mads. You're everything to me, fucking everything." I close my eyes letting my feelings radiate from me, hoping to find their way to her. "I won't let you down, that's something I'll never do. Just have faith in us, all right?"

"Bash, I..."

"I don't know what I'd do without you," I say as my throat tightens with the onslaught of emotion. "I just don't know... I've never felt this way about anyone."

There's beeping on her end.

"Bash, I'm sorry, we'll talk when I get home tonight, all right?"

Her tone is clinical, detached. I'm both hurt and angered by it. I allow my silence to convey my emotions.

"Babe, you know I love you too, but I've really got to go." She ends the call without waiting for me to reply. She's a doctor, I remind myself, she'll always be in demand, her time is precious. When I chose her, I knew the deal. I'll always play second fiddle to her career. As much as it galls me to know this, it's part of what I admire about Mads.

That knowledge didn't prevent something ripping open inside of me at her coolness.

I have a feeling it's Emma's diminishing faith in her that's really got Madison rattled, more so than the idiot DEA agents. If Madison truly feels her career is being threatened, she'll try to cut me loose.

I must prevent that at all costs, which means, I must deal with Chief Resident Emma Weiss.

This is for Madison. She's worth every effort I plan to go through to keep her.

As I leave the jewelers and head for the car, my cell rings again. It's Stieg.

"Yeah," I answer as I hop into the car.

"Orlov's a fucking joke," Stieg starts in. "He thinks you're going to just step down or let him run half the business. We ought to cinch off some more of his business just for the insult."

"The rat bastard's so offended that I broke off with Natasha when he knew all along what his daughter was doing with Sergei. He was just too much of a chicken shit to call Sergei on it."

"He's going to make trouble for us," Stieg says. "He's trying to raise support for his rise seeing as how you've decided to go outside the fold for a bride." He snorts, "I'm joking about the bride part, but how serious are you two?"

“She makes me happy, Stieg. Plus, she’ll be a valuable asset, far more so than a hundred of those dumb, fake tit pool girls.”

There’s nothing but silence for a few seconds. I let it play out.

“You know what you’re doing, Bash?” he finally says. “It’s one thing to knock around with your doc, but if you get serious...being in your position, you’ll need the head’s blessings. Considering she’s not Russian...among other things.”

“The Wolf didn’t achieve his position by being a backwards fool,” I blurt out. “I’ll take her to meet him in Moscow, he’ll recognize it for the brilliant strategic move it is. To hell with the rest of them.”

“Jesus, Bash,” he exclaims in alarm. “What if they side with Orlov and offer the seat to him? You willing to lose everything over this girl?”

“I won’t lose a damn thing,” I reply. “For months now, I’ve been working out a new direction for the business. It involves high finance, far more cash and a lot less blood work.

He scoffs. “Tryin’ to go all respectable. Damn that doc’s done a number on you.”

“I’m telling you, there’s more money in it. I didn’t spend all those years earning a MBA and working on Wall Street for nothing. I think it’s about time we started thinking more with our heads and less with our fists.”

“Ah, but where’s the fun in that?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll keep your club and run all the action you want.”

“What about you? You might be making a fuck load of money, but with no heads to crack, how will you get through the day?”

“Ha, now you’re a fucking comedian.”

“Seriously, I just hope you know what you’re doing, Bash,” he laments. “You’re making a lot of changes all of a sudden. Not everyone’s going to like it.”

“We’ve got to grow and adapt, be smarter. Let the rest of these assholes squabble over the petty stuff. We go big, where the real money is.”

“I hear ya, Bash. Just let me know what you need me to do.”

“For now, just keep your ear to the ground,” I say. “I have a strong feeling Orlov’s going to strike out at me to make some powerplay.”

“You got eyes on the doc?”

“Yeah, Dmitri and his brother.” I reply, dying a little inside thinking about what almost happened to Madison. “I won’t ever make that mistake again.”

He laughs. “After what she did to Boba, I don’t think they’ll try that again. Imagine what she could do if she had all her medical tools on her. Talk about being a valuable asset.”

I smirk. “She’s a surgeon not an interrogator, Stieg.”

“Hey, you never know. Surgeon by day, master interrogator by night. She looked pretty capable when she sliced Boba’s junk off.”

I laugh at the memory. “The fat fuck deserved it.” But then my spirits sink. “The DEA and her boss are really leaning on her.”

“The DEA? What the fuck, Bash?”

“It’s fine, they know nothing. They’re just pissed that Sergei’s off the menu, so they’re looking for new meat. Namely me.”

“Shit, this isn’t good. They’ll be up our asses trying to find something.”

“I’m not worried about that. Half the shit Sergei was into, I wouldn’t touch. I’m more concerned about what this is doing to Madison. Her boss is leaning on her hard to cut me loose.”

“Damn, Bash. That’s rough but with you guys getting pressure from both sides...do you think maybe...I don’t know.”

“No, I don’t think about any of that. I know just how to deal with Madison’s boss.”

“Jesus, Bash. What about all the new direction, less bloodwork talk?”

“Use your brain, Stieg. No one’s going to rough her up, I’ve got something far better in mind.”

“You’ve got my attention.”

“Let’s just say the chief resident’s background isn’t so pristine as she’d have Mads believe, in fact, I could have her medical license revoked.”

Stieg chuckles. “Damn, what’s this one done? It makes you think twice about ever going to the hospital again.”

“Never mind that. The point is, she’s about to back off of Madison.” I note the time. “Look, man, I have to cut over to a conference call. Catch you later.”

“Later, Bash.”

After handling the days business, I make a call to Che Pierre’s to have one of Madison’s favorite meals prepared and delivered to our home. Once it arrives at 6:30pm, I set an elegant table for two and open a bottle of pinot noir. I play some soft ethereal music she loves and dim the lights.

Madison’s shift ended at 6:30pm, which means she ought to be pulling into the garage at about 6:50pm. A quick check of the tracking device tells me she’s on route as scheduled. I grab a quick shower and make myself as irresistible as possible. She’s just been grilled by the DEA and leaned on by her boss. I’ve really got to bring my A-game to turn this around.

Right on time, the security camera shows Madison pulling into the garage. Dmitri and his brother are close behind in the black SUV and will remain outside until I give them the go ahead to leave.

I greet her at the door. “Hey babe,” I say with a peck on the lips. I help her with her things. She looks exhausted and



weary. “Why don’t you come sit on the sofa and I’ll bring you a glass of wine. I hope you’re hungry.”

She kicks off her shoes at the door and lifts those lovely hazel eyes at me. She knows I’m really trying here, nonetheless, a difficult conversation lies ahead of us.

“Something smells divine,” she says as she makes her way over to the sofa and collapses on to it.

“Grilled Chilean bass with fresh lemons, a buttery garlic sauce and steamed broccoli in a light cheese sauce.”

Her tired eyes light up and I can already see the weight of the day’s ordeals lifting from her shoulders.

“Mmm, sounds delicious,” she says as she accepts the glass of wine I hand her.

I sit next to her on the sofa. “And if you have room for it, there’s a generous slice of lemon cream cake with your name on it.”

“From Che Pierre?”

I grin and nod.

“Ohhhh, you’re a saint.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” I reply as I lean down and gently pull her feet into my lap.

She reclines against the cushions as I slip her socks off her feet. I love her feet, so elegant and sleek. She’s no longer self-conscious about letting me massage them right after she’s been on them all day. She’s so funny about that sort of thing as if

natural human scents are something to be appalled. I love all her sweet earthy scents, I love her period.

Mmm. She groans softly as I massage her stress away. I grow more confident with each passing moment as the world's burdens begin to roll off her. I've got her, I need her to know that she'll be safe with me.

I look at her as she sips her wine and smiles at me. "How was your day?"

"Busy as usual, but productive," I say and decide to elaborate on the extensive legitimate endeavors I'm involved with. "I had to take a few conference calls with Davidson Associates to approve a new acquisition. I've completed the review of the Qantas IPO and have submitted it to legal and then wrapped up with meeting with the president of Horizon Inc. All in all, a good day's work."

Her gaze falls upon me, studying me as if I'm some great enigma. I want to know what she's thinking, what's going on inside that head. But I wait patiently for her to find her words. Much to my disappointment, she pulls her feet away and sits up to face me squarely.

"How are the plans coming along to distance yourself from the seedy side of the business?" the fatigue has left her eyes and now they fix hard on me. "It's stressful enough having all eyes on me in the operating room without having to worry about an DEA investigation or my boss deciding I'm not worth all the negative attention?"

My heart sinks at the pained expression and the angst in her voice.

“I’m scared, Bash. This couldn’t be happening at a worse time with them finalizing the surgical residency selections.”

I place my hands consolingly on hers. “I hear you, I totally get it. Now will you hear me out?”

She closes her eyes in exasperation. “I don’t want to hear any more about how everything’s going to work out fine. You’re not the one in there about to have a nervous breakdown. You have no idea what it’s like for me to—”

I sit silently, waiting for her to exhaust her need to vent her frustrations. I owe her that much.

She finally winds down and stares at me waiting for me to reply.

“First of all, I want to say that I’m truly sorry for the difficulty that I have caused you. My goal is to be a source of comfort and encouragement to you, so it kills me to know that I’m causing you grief.” My words soften the rigid set of her shoulders, but only by a fraction. She tilts her head at me as if to say, surely, you’ve got more than that. I suppress a smile knowing it would only infuriate her.

“Secondly, the DEA are only talking to you because they have nothing else to go on. That shows you how weak their case is against me. Sergei was the big fish, now they’re just grasping at straws. They’ll quickly lose interest and move on.”

She rolls her eyes. “Meanwhile, I’m—”

“Thirdly,” I press on ignoring her interruption. “Chief Resident Weiss has no moral ground to stand on.”

Madison’s brow furrows. “What?”

“I mean, *you* could have *her* medical license revoked like that,” I say, snapping my fingers for emphasis.

“Say what now?”

I chuckle. “You know those medical school exams you had to study for, all those hours you spent grueling over all those books and papers, all the practice exams and preparations.”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Not everyone had to work that hard at it. Or to be more precise, some tried and failed, but instead of taking a hint and moving on, they simply found someone else to take the exams for them so they could pass with flying colors and eventually become a chief resident in the ER of a certain prominent NY hospital.”

Her mouth drops open. “No!”

“Yes.”

“There’s no way.”

“I’m telling you, Emma’s about to be knocked clean off that high horse of hers.”

“Bash, this is nuts,” she says as her eyes dart side to side trying to process the implications. “How do you know? Is this real?”

“I make it a point to acquire knowledge about the key people in my life and dealings. I hoped it would never come to this, but I needed to know any weaknesses that the chief resident might have,” I give her an apologetic smile when she looks askance at me. “During my investigation of Emma, I discovered that after the birth of her second child she went through some difficult times. The pressure of medical school and being a mother of two must have gotten to her. She really struggled when it came to passing her USMLE exams, particularly during her first year of residency. She knew she couldn’t successfully pass USMLE step 3 on her own, so instead of taking some much-needed time off to regroup, Emma paid someone to take the exam for her.”

Madison’s eyes go wide. “Get out! Are you serious? Where’s the proof?”

“It came out during her very ugly divorce hearing about two years ago. Her ex-husband claimed he’d discovered unauthorized test prep materials, some which already had the test answers provided. But the smoking gun came when he uncovered the payment to a hacker who likely altered her test scores or had someone take the test for her.”

“Holy shit,” Madison says, running her hands through her hair. “But how is it that she’s still practicing? They should have yanked her license the second this was made public.”

“Because it was deemed inadmissible evidence, possibly fabricated by the husband as a revenge tactic.”

Her shoulders sag. “Let me guess, her ex is some kind of computer wizard, software engineer type?”

“Yes, but where they left off, I took up the investigation. Mads, he didn’t fabricate a thing. She’s guilty and I have the proof.”

Her eyes narrow at me. “How did you...”

“I know a guy who does a little forensic accounting specializing in this sort of thing. He traced the payment to the hacker in question, they move about in the same internet forums on the dark web. For a price, the guy was willing to turn over his records of his transactions with Emma.” I sit back and smile. “We’ve got her, babe. If she so much as looks at you funny, just mention this name – Constantine.”

Her eyes search about as she rolls the name around on her tongue, “Constantine.”

“Yeah, it’s your ace in the whole if she starts to lean on you again.”

A slow smile starts to spread across her face as she nods. “I’ll have to test your theory. I mean, I’ll only do it if she tries to pull her support from my surgical residency assignment.” Her brow furrows. “Though technically, I should blow the whistle on her regardless. That’s some seriously unethical shit. She’s a good doctor and I can imagine how difficult it must have been juggling a high-pressured career and motherhood, but jeez.”

I shrug. “For now, just keep it in your back pocket to get you through this prickly period. It’ll ease some of the pressure knowing she won’t withdraw her support at the risk of exposing her own skeletons.”

She sits back against the cushions and folds her hands behind her head, looking pretty cute in her green scrubs. “Meanwhile, you’re working to shift your business dealings to focus primarily on the financial sector?”

“Yes, diligently. I don’t want you worrying about any of this, okay?” I poke her flat belly. “You just focus on saving all those lives.”

She squirms and giggles. “You know in the angioplasty, they let me make the initial incision and retract the balloon stent. And I got to perform a transesophageal echo today on a patient with a mitral valve disorder.”

“Oh, my God,” I gasp, raising my brows dramatically. “Not a freaking transesophageal echocardiogram! Well, look at my brilliant little surgeon girlfriend,” I say, teasing her all the while demonstrating my knowledge of her field.

“Bash!” She smacks my arm playfully. “It’s a major procedure I can add to my list. Simon hasn’t performed one yet.”

“I know, babe. You’re going to leave that Simon guy in the dust. No one’s better than my Mads.”

When she smiles warmly at me, I know the crisis has been averted and we’re better than good. I rise from the sofa and

hold out my hand to her.

“Come on, sweetheart, let’s eat.”



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## Chapter 21 – Down on Bended Knee

I sit alone at one of the breakroom tables eagerly updating my procedures journal for the latest surgery that I participated in.

“Cardiac ablation,” comes the male voice from over my shoulder. “Impressive.”

I turn to find Andrew smiling holding two cups of coffee. He holds one out to me.

“One sugar, two creams, right?” he asks disarmingly.

“Yeah, thanks, Andrew,” I say, accepting it. I’d been trying to steer clear of him since the little spat Bash and I had over me giving him a ride home a month ago. But earlier this week, Andrew pulled me in on an emergency cardiac procedure which added greatly to my list. I can’t repay him with the cold shoulder. Bash can’t begrudge my speaking with a colleague.

“Mind if I sit?”

“Be my guest.”

He lowers himself into the chair next to me. “How’d the ablation go this morning?”

“Not bad, I think they’ll have me back.”

“Was it a maze procedure or convergent?”

“Mini maze actually,” I reply. “They let me make the incisions in the ribs,” I say motioning at mine, “and I partially guided the camera into the chest cavity. It was great.”

Andrew’s smile matches mine, but he sort of just sits there staring at me for a moment.

Oh boy.

He shakes his head as if snapping out of his daze. “Surgery, you’re such a natural in there. The surgical team can’t seem to get enough of you.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. I hope Presbyterian’s surgical team will like me too,” I say, hoping it didn’t sound too cocky. I shift my gaze away. “I can’t help noticing that Simon’s in the O.R. just as often as I am, so I shouldn’t be getting my hopes up too high.”

His mouth pulls to the side disapprovingly. “I don’t know about that. I think you’ll edge him out.”

“I’ll believe it when I open that envelope on match day.”

His smile widens. “Ah, good old match day, I remember it well.” He has a nice smile, and his brown eyes are kind. Andrew’s extremely knowledgeable and a talented physician in his own right. ER medicine suits his disposition quite well.

“You must have been so thrilled to see you’d received your top choice.”

He nods and rakes his fingers through his slightly thinning, dirty blond hair. “I was over the freaking moon.”

“And what’s next for Dr. Andrew Cooper? I mean when you complete your residency?”

He considers it a moment, his mouth quirks to the side again. “I’m not sure just yet. For now, I’m content to stay right here at Bellevue.”

“It’s been a great teaching hospital,” I quickly fill the silence, sensing an uncomfortable segway approaching. “The residents and faculty have been so supportive and encouraging. Well...for the most part that is.”

He grimaces, “Let me guess, Clegmire?”

“You too?”

He glances around furtively and then leans in. “That guy’s a first-class asshole.”

I blurt out laughing and cover my mouth just as Lisa walks in.

Andrew and I both clam up and try to look like we weren’t just criticizing the ER chief. But Lisa’s eyes linger upon us, she glances at our two cups of coffee...her eyes fix upon me as if she’s caught us at something far more nefarious than two colleagues having coffee.

“Hey Lisa, how’s it going?” I ask.

“Fine,” she says glancing from me to Andrew.

Andrew gives me a quizzical look. I shrug. Who put sour milk in her cornflakes? Had something gone wrong with a patient? Or perhaps things have taken a bad turn with her boyfriend? I saw her earlier today and she seemed in good cheer.

She finds a table not too far from ours and sits down rather noisily.

“You want to join us?” I offer.

“I’m good,” she says in an uncharacteristically clipped tone, glaring openly at us.

Okay. I think. “Just as well,” I say, rising from the table and taking my coffee with me. “I need to be heading back anyway. Thanks for the coffee.”

“Sure,” Andrew says, looking a little bewildered.

It’s Friday and my shift ended at 4 p.m. so I’m pulling into our garage at 4:28. I wave at Dmitri and his brother before the garage door glides shut. Sebastian is coming through the door carrying our overnight bags to load into the Jag.

“Hey, babe,” I say, as I climb out of the car and greet him with a kiss. “You’ve already got us packed up and ready to go.”

“Yep, I’d like us to be on the road by five, if possible,” he says, placing our bags in the trunk. He glances up at me. “Think you can be ready by then?”

“I just need a quick shower, I promise I won’t be long.”

He glances anxiously at his watch. “Ok, but please hurry.”  
He shuts the trunk and follows me inside.

The wedding is tomorrow evening, but Bash wants us to spend some time alone in the East Hamptons where he bought the oceanfront home we stayed in during our last trip. It’s an English country house with French provincial style. All the modern amenities are present, including an infinity pool and jacuzzi, tennis courts, a state-of-the-art outdoor kitchen, and a private boardwalk. It’s truly quite spectacular. Even on a doctor’s salary, it would’ve been out of my price range. As a medical resident, it was inconceivable.

So, I’m excited about going to see the place again, not as a holiday renter, but as the guest of the owner. Bash calls it “our” place, but he’s just being sweet. I slip out of my scrubs and into the shower.

As I lather up, I wonder if I can truly see a future with Sebastian. I mean, I’m crazy about the guy and can’t get enough of him. But can I really reconcile his chosen life with the one I’d planned to lead?

And what of my actions thus far? Particularly on the night of my abduction. I’d lost my temper and severed a man’s genitals. Granted the bastard in question was planning to rape me and had committed vile acts in my face. Besides, I didn’t kill the guy, the scorpion sting took care of that for me. But still.

I'm shocked to feel my mouth curving into a small smile. Did I enjoy that? Not enjoy as in I find pleasure in mutilating people but getting revenge against a sick pervert trying to do me harm...hell yeah!

There are a thousand different cuts that I could've made to really make the bastard suffer. There's the—

“Babe, can you get a move on?” Sebastian calls to me. “I'd like to get on the road soon.”

“Yeah, just rinsing off.”

“All right, everything's packed and your outfit's laying out on the bed.”

“Thanks, babe.” Jeez, he's certainly eager to get on with this trip. Traffic's going to be a bear at this hour, but it'll be good to get out of the city. And I'm truly looking forward to spending some leisurely time with Bash before the wedding. My stomach clenches at the prospect. This will be my formal introduction as Sebastian Petrosky's girlfriend.

Maybe that's what has him a little anxious and just ready to get the whole thing over with. Second to meeting the family, this is as big as it gets.

I turn off the water and reach for my towel. I quickly dry off and begin blow-drying my hair. I check the time, it's 4:55 p.m. I slip into my bra and underwear and then hurry into the bedroom to get dressed.

I hear Bash downstairs talking to Tessa about Nick's care while we're gone. Thankfully, Nick's up and around

recovering beautifully. In another week or so, he'll be able to return home in time for the start of the spring semester at Cornell University.

I pull on a pair of black fitted slacks and a cream-colored cashmere sweater that Bash bought for me. I apply a bit of mascara and lipstick before slipping into some socks and pulling on my ankle boots.

At 7:01 pm Bash enters the room giving me a slightly impatient look.

“Okay, okay, I’m ready,” I say, brushing my hair as I head for the door. “Let’s go.”

He leans against the doorframe and smiles at me. “You look gorgeous.”

I melt at that devilish grin. “Right back at you, handsome.”

He pushes off the door. “But we’ve really got to get going.”

“I’m right behind you,” I say following. “I don’t know what the fire drill is about. Is Tessa all set to manage Nick?”

“Yeah, all good there.”

“I know he’s on the mend, but I still feel a little funny about leaving him,” I say as we descend the stairs.

“He’s doing great, and Tessa will be here the whole time,” he glances over his shoulder at me. “For the next two days, turn off the doctor’s brain and try to relax for a change.”

“Easier said than done.” When we reach the bottom of the stairs, I turn toward Nick’s room, but Bash grabs my hand,



stopping me.

“Nick, we’re leaving,” he calls out.

“Have a good time,” Nick replies.

Bash hikes a brow at me. “Satisfied?”

I roll my eyes at him. “Let’s go.” We grab our coats and head out the door.

The drive to the East Hamptons was pleasant enough. Bash and I talked about our childhoods, comparing our upbringing. My father is a retired Naval officer living in Alaska where we’d been stationed for five years. This tickled Sebastian because Alaska was merely a stone’s throw away from Russia. We were practically neighbors as children and didn’t even know it.

At thirty-one years old, Bash is still five years older than me. He’d finished his MBA by age twenty-two and had spent six years working for Goldman Sachs in New York before he left to run his family’s business. Whereas I’d earned my undergraduate degree at NYU and went on to attend medical school there as well.

But as Bash is fond of saying, the stars aligned, and our paths crossed on that fateful night. We’ve been inseparable ever since. And for the most part, happy ever since.

Upon stating that, he slipped his hand into mine, resting it upon my knee. I give him a warm smile and glance up at the rearview mirror. Dmitri and his brother follow at a

comfortable distance. All the while reminding us that all is not well in Camelot.

We discussed our favorite movies and TV shows. Bash watched very little television, but he'd mentioned that the one show that fascinated him was E.R. His favorites were Doctors Green and Benton. While he thought Dr. Green was a brilliant and compassionate physician, he thought Dr. Benton, the surgeon, was the rock star.

"Ah," I say, "thus your fascination with doctors, surgeons in particular."

He grins. "You know, I toyed with the idea of becoming a doctor."

"Really?" I say, turning to look at him. I try to imagine Bash in scrubs as a surgeon. He's highly intelligent and could probably accomplish anything he set his mind to. The drive and determination are there. How different our lives would be if he'd only chosen that path.

"But the family was pressuring me to run the business, so it was an MBA for me instead."

"Do you regret it?"

He considers it a moment, his head tilting to the side. "I think this was the best course for all parties concerned." He glances at me. "Besides, my superhot girlfriend's a surgeon. It's the next best thing."

We arrive at the house around 8 pm. The floodlights in the front yard illuminate the stately home in soft hues. Through

the windows, I see that the inside of the house is lit up as well, as if welcoming us in.

Bash carries our things up to the master bedroom. I head for the living room and go stand before the large plate glass window overlooking the vast silvery ocean. Watching the full moon shine its rays down upon the surface of the glistening water was like watching heaven pour down pure radiance and love to wash away all this world's woes. The panoramic vista is breathtaking.

“Magnificent, isn't it?”

My gaze shifts to Sebastian's reflection in the glass as he strolls up behind me, looking fine as hell.

“I'll say, and the ocean's not too bad either.”

He chuckles softly as his blue eyes crinkle adorably. “You've got to see these stars, Mads. It's insane out here,” he says, taking me by the hand. “Come on, you've got to come see it.”

“Ah, babe, it's kind of cold out there,” I say, resisting as he pulls me toward the French doors that open out onto the deck.

“Stop whining and come on,” he says and throws his arm around my shoulder. He reaches over and flips on a light switch. Out on the deck, beautiful blue flames dance up and lick the air within the stone firepit. “We'll be warm enough.”

“All right, Romeo,” I tease as I let him pull me back out into the cold night air. “Happy now?”

“Relax, just let yourself enjoy it for a few minutes.” He wraps his arms around me, determined to keep me warm and

quiet.

So, I give him that, letting the tension in my neck and shoulders melt away as I lean into him, slipping an arm around his waist.

He's staring up into the night sky. Extending his hand, he points at one particularly bright star. "You see that? The glittering one, just there."

"Yeah, neat, it shines bright like a diamond, if I may quote Rihanna."

"That's our star," he says, his voice filled with awe.

"Our star?" I glance at him. "Wait...you didn't do one of those things where you get to name a star or something?"

He laughs. "No, silly. I just meant, it feels like it's shining for us. In fact, they all do."

Just then the stars surrounding the larger one begin to swirl in the night sky as they're all marshalled forward.

"What the?" I squeeze my eyes shut trying to banish the hallucination.

"Mads, you're missing it," Sebastian says, drawing my hands away.

The stars keep dancing about, bright little diamonds against a velvety black sky. They migrate together to form the shape of a heart...with an arrow through it.

I clap my hands over my mouth and laugh. "Bash, you did this...how? Oh, my gosh, this is so cool."

“Shhh,” he shushes me. “Just keep watching.”

The heart appears to disintegrate and fall away but then coalesce to form the word Sebastian, beneath it, the red heart appears, and then finally the diamond lights for my name.

I squeeze his arms. “Sebastian loves Madison,” I look up at him. “And Madison loves Sebastian, very much.”

He turns my chin so that I’m staring at the dark sky again. Under my name the diamond letters form the word, will you, under that, MARRY ME?

I gasp and turn to see Bash going down on one knee. My heart is thumping wildly in my chest as he produces a blue velvet jewelry box. Jesus, is this really happening? We’ve only known each other for three months!

“I chose that proposal theme because I know with every ounce of my being that we are meant to be together as if were written in the stars,” he says in a heartfelt tone as he gazes up at me. “The road ahead of us is going to be rough and challenging with you beginning your surgical residency and my transitioning the business, but this,” he says, opening the jewelry box. My eyes nearly pop out of my head at the dazzling pear-shaped diamond. “Represents our commitment to each other and to the path we’re on. It’s the promise that when we get through this period, we’ll seal our pact with an exchange of wedding vows.”

And just like that, Bash spoke to and addressed all my hopes and fears. There would be no rush toward setting a date, adding tremendous pressure to an already tumultuous time.

The ring symbolized a promise, an understanding that we love each other and reasonably expect a future with one another. I think that I can live with that.

When I'm slow to reply he adds, "I just need to know that when we come out on the other side of this, you're hoping to be with me as much as I'm counting on being with you. That's what this ring represents to me and to all who see it on your finger."

Ah, I thought. Thus the timing...so that at tomorrow's big social event, Bash will be able to introduce me to his inner circle as his fiancée, not some piece of ass he's killing time with. I mean, I get it, but...

"Bash, you know how I feel about you, and yes," I say placing my hand upon his. "I very much want a future with you...I just hope you're not doing this now, tonight, to make me feel better. It's sweet, but not necessary."

He smirks. "Trust me, my motives are hardly selfless. You're a young, gorgeous, intelligent, and funny woman. I want to officially take you off the market to keep Dr. Cooper and all the others off of you," he says jokingly. "If they don't get the message from the ring, I'll personally come to pay them a visit to explain it real nicely."

Oh, my gosh, is he still on about that? "So, basically, this is your version of clubbing me over the head and throwing me over your shoulder to take back to the cave?"

He shrugs. "Would you prefer the club? It would've been a hell of a lot cheaper."

I snatch the jewelry box from his hands. “Nope, too late.”

He takes the box back and retrieves the ring. He smiles softly as he holds my gaze. He takes my left hand in his and holds the ring poised at the tip of my finger.

“Madison Lynn Graham, will you marry me?”

I stare into his eyes and feel our souls intertwine, mine with his and his with mine. The answer slides effortlessly off my tongue. “Yes, I will.” Someday, I add in my heart.

He rises swiftly and cradles my face in his hands. “Madison,” he breathes my name like a prayer and tenderly kisses my lips. “You’ve made me happier than you can imagine. And I’ll work hard every day to make sure you feel the same.” He kisses me again, with less tenderness and more burgeoning need.

My own hunger makes known its presence. I run my hand up the back of his neck, up the base of his skull. I grip him tight, pressing his mouth harder to mine, I nip his lip. In response, he grinds the length of his body against mine. Slides his hands down my waist to the curve of my ass, and he grabs handfuls.

I arch my back exposing my neck and breast, but under heavy coats and sweaters, it’s hard to get to each other.

“Is the light show over?” I ask in a breathless voice.

“The grand finale takes place in the bedroom,” he gives me a devilish smirk, “or whichever room you’d like, in every room you’d like.”

“Hmm, let me think, which room to christen first...”

“Too late,” he declares, and then in one fell swoop, he sweeps me off my feet like I’m weightless and throws me over his shoulder. “To the cave with you.”

I scream with laughter. “Bash, put me down.”

“I will, when I’m ready,” he says as he reenters the house and strides across the floor with me in tow.

“Bash!” I blurt out as he ascends the stairs taking them by twos with me hanging over his shoulder.

He grunts like a caveman, “What, woman?” Eliciting more laughter from me. “Mate now, make talk later,” he says before kicking open our bedroom door and tossing me onto the soft bed. He beats his chest like Tarzan and leaps onto the bed with me.



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## Chapter 22 – Yuri’s Wedding

**W**hen Madison finally comes down the stairs with her hair done up and wearing an exquisite cocktail dress and matching heels, I stop and stare in awe. I can’t believe this incredible woman has agreed to become my wife.

“Boy is the bride going to hate you,” I say, extending my hand to her as I wait at the bottom of the staircase. “Nobody will be able to keep their eyes off you.”

“Oh, stop it,” she says, taking my hand. “The only eyes I care about are yours, lover.”

“That’s fiancé to you, thank you very much.”

She holds up her left hand, the ring catches the light dazzling the eye. “Oh, is that what this little bobble means?”

I grab her by the waist and pull her toward me. “Don’t make me carry you back upstairs and stake my claim again.” I nuzzle her neck and she squirms against me.

“Bash, stop,” she giggles as she bats at my chest. “You’ll get me all messed up, we’ll never make it on time.”

“All right,” I say, releasing her. I help her into the full-length cashmere coat I bought her. She refused the mink on principle.

The wedding venue is a fifteen-minute drive from our residence. We arrive just in time to take our seats before the bride walks down the aisle. The guests nearly broke their necks getting a look at Madison as we took our seats on the second row near the front. I can feel the burning glare of Gregor Orlov. Fortunately, Natasha is nowhere to be seen.

I exchange looks with Stieg. He nods his understanding. We need to be wary of Orlov tonight, bringing Madison may just be the thing to set him off. I don't regret the decision, it's the perfect venue to make her introduction into my world.

After the wedding ceremony, we all head over to the reception hall in the adjacent building. With Madison on my arm, we're arguably the most striking couple in the place. Out of respect for my position in the hierarchy, the various guests make their way over to pay their respects.

“And who is this lovely young creature?” says Boris, one of the older captains who'd worked for Sergei. It's not clear whether his allegiance is to me or Orlov.

“Boris, this is my fiancée, Dr. Madison Graham,” I reply. Madison keeps reminding me that she won't officially be a doctor for a few weeks when she graduates from medical school, but tonight she hasn't given me any flack about the title. She's starting to enjoy the prestige the title carries.

Boris' thick brows hitch up. “Ah, a doctor. What field of medicine are you in?”

“Cardiothoracic surgery,” she replies.

When he looks confused, I add, “She’s a heart surgeon.”

The corners of his mouth tug down as if to say “Impressive”.  
“Well, I hope if I’m ever in need, I’ll find myself in your capable hands.”

Madison smiles magnanimously. “Thank you, but let’s hope it never comes to that.”

After a few more pleasantries, Boris moves along to be replaced by others. Madison handles herself with great aplomb as I knew she would. I think she’s winning them over with her charm, wit, and beauty. At least no one’s overtly hostile toward her, or rudely asking about Natasha.

When the request is given, we sit at our assigned table near the bridal party and enjoy our meal. When the opportunity arises, I escort Madison onto the dance floor and take her into my arms. We move well together even though it’s our first time dancing with each other in a public setting. Our compatibility is tested when the slow song is replaced by an upbeat fast one. I try to draw Madison off the floor, but she pulls me back forcing me to join the myriad of others for the popular Cha-Cha slide dance. Despite myself, I seem to be wearing a ridiculous grin the whole time and manage to keep in step with the music alongside Madison. She’s a huge hit with the crowd, so we stick around for the equally popular Macarena line dance.

“Enough,” I laugh when the song ends and another upbeat one begins to play. “I’m sitting this one out.”

Some of the younger girls plead with Madison to keep dancing with their group for the Electric slide, and she glances at me. I shrug. So she waves at me and allows the girls to pull her back onto the dance floor.

Needing a bit of air to cool off, I head toward the patio where a few guests gather to smoke or just have a bit of solitude. I look back inside and note that Dmitri and his brother are never very far from Madison. I'm satisfied she's in good hands.

The night air is crisp and refreshing. The stars sparkle against the brilliant black sky. A warm feeling spreads through me as I think about how well the proposal display went off. Sure, it cost a small fortune to hire the firm to orchestrate the drones to spell out the proposal, but it was worth every penny to hear her say yes.

“How dare you?” I hear the caustic words spoken in a heavy Russian accent.

I turn to see Natasha staggering toward me. She's drunk. Very drunk.

“It wasn't enough you humiliate me by calling off our wedding,” she's now speaking in Russian as she closes the distance between us.

“Hello, Natasha—”

“You have to bring your brown whore here to rub in my face.”

“The only whore I see around here is you,” I can’t resist saying. “I’ll bring my fiancée wherever I please. Get used to it.”

She growls and takes a swing at me. I easily step out of her reach. “You’re drunk, Natasha. Why don’t you go back inside before you freeze to death.”

She spits at me. “Don’t tell me what to do, you pig!”

“Natasha!”

We both turn at the sound of her father’s voice. He’s standing in the doorway, but now makes his way over to her.

Her blue eyes are wide as he approaches.

“I told you to go home?” he barks at her. “Why are you here making a fool of yourself?”

“When are you going to do it?” she shouts at him. “When are you going to—”

The brisk slap across her face cuts her words short. “Go inside now!” Gregor roars at her with hand still raised.

“I hate you!” she screams at him and then staggers toward the door. “Where is my Sergei? He would cut your balls off and feed them to you!”

Whether that was directed at me or Gregor, I couldn’t be certain. I was just glad to see her go. The chill in the air is starting to cut through to the bone.

“Please accept my apology for my daughter,” Gregor says. “It’s been a difficult time for her,” he glances back to the

banquet hall where Madison is, “given the circumstances.”

I’m about fed up with this pretense over his daughter’s alleged heartbreak. “Natasha was with Sergei during our entire six-month engagement, so spare me your outrage, Gregor. If she’s drunk off her ass, it’s not over me.”

His brow furrows, but he doesn’t deny the accusation. “It’s been over a week, and no one has seen Sergei,” his gray eyes darken. “Word has it you took him out at Last Call, then made it all disappear.”

I shrug. “For all I know, Sergei’s off on a bender in Vegas with a bunch of hookers. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

He gestures emphatically at the reception hall. “Regardless, did you have to bring her here?”

“Yes, I did,” I snap. “She’ll be my wife soon and you’ll—” His derisive laugh cuts me short.

“Not if you plan to be head of the family,” he snorts. “Try getting her past the heads in Moscow.”

“I plan to do precisely that,” I say so ardently Gregor’s grin falls and his eyes narrow at me.

“You’re serious,” he states, then the devious smile spreads across his thin lips. “If Sergei’s really gone, it looks like I’ll be head of the family after all.”

“Not when they find out you’ve been skimming 15% off their cut for the last eight months,” I fire back, cursing myself for tipping my hand.

His mischievous eyes go wide at the revelation. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but you’d better keep your lies to yourself if you know what’s good for you.”

I take a step closer to him. “You threatening me, Gregor?”

He attempts to stand his ground, but he averts his eyes unable to maintain my gaze. “I’m just saying watch what you say.”

“Likewise,” I warn him, staring him down as our breath fogs the bone-chilling air.

He backs down with shoulders slouched. “It’s cold out here,” he mutters, then turns to head back inside. Before he enters the banquet hall, he turns and gives me a sinister look that drops the temperature a few more degrees. And now I know that when it came to Gregor Orlov, it was kill or be killed.

With hands buried in my pockets, I remain outside a few minutes longer contemplating my next move. When I return to the reception hall, I’m pleased to see Madison chatting with a young woman I recognize as my cousin, Kylie. She’s also lived in the U.S. for most of her life having recently graduated from NYU with a computer science degree. I was hoping they’d have the opportunity to meet here.

I walk over to them and greet her, “Glad to see you could make it, Kylie,” I say and peck her cheek.

“Bash, where have you been hiding this one,” she says, gesturing at Madison. “Since when did you start dating gorgeous doctors?”



Mads rolls her eyes. “I still have to graduate medical school in—”

“Please, you’ve cut people open in the OR, you’re a doctor,” Kylie laughs it off. “You could do way better than this lug.”

Madison chuckles but slips her arm through mine. “Yeah, but I saved his life and now I can’t get rid of him.”

A bark of laughter escapes Kylie. “That’ll teach you.”

“Hey, I’m standing right here, you know,” I say, giving Kylie a playful scowl. Her blond hair is pulled back into an austere bun. She’s wearing stylish glasses giving her a bookish look. All of this contrasts with her natural beauty and figure, which she’s showing off in a tight black cocktail dress.

“Kylie and I both attended NYU,” Madison says. “But she entered the year I graduated.”

“Thank God,” I joke.

“What?” Kylie laments. “Madison and I would’ve been fabulous friends.” She leans in conspiratorially toward Madison. “I could’ve filled you in on all the dirt on my cousin.”

“When?” I retort. “In between all your partying? Remind me, how long did it take you to graduate.”

She laughs again. “Screw you, Bash. I had a hell of a good time and still earned a top-notch degree. We can’t all be uptight, model students like you.”

Madison turns a mock incredulous look on me. “What? Not my Bash.”

“Hey, I was focused so I could finish early,” I grin and shoot a look at Kylie. “Some of us actually wanted to get on with our lives instead of becoming career students.”

Just then, a tall, good-looking man of partial Asian descent walks up placing a hand on Kylie’s back. “Babe, it’s getting late, you ready to go?”

“Sure, hold on,” she looks at us, a slight flush in her peaches and cream complexion. “Cousin Bash, this is my boyfriend Zhi Davis, of Davis Industries on Wall Street.”

Zhi extends his hand, I clasp it firmly and say, “Nice to meet you. And this is my fiancée, Dr. Madison Graham.”

He shakes her hand too. “Nice to meet you both,” he says. “We’ll all have to get together soon for dinner. Kylie has told me so much about you.”

I cut my eyes at Kylie. “Really?”

“Don’t worry,” she winks at me. “I left out all the hair-raising stuff, but it’ll make for great dinner conversation.”

“As will your exploits, dear cousin,” I reply and return my gaze to Zhi, “I look forward to dinner. Meanwhile, good luck with this one.”

Zhi chuckles nervously. “Thanks...I think.”

“He’s teasing you,” Madison says in the awkward silence. “Kylie, give us a call this week. My schedule is crazy, but I’d

love to get together soon.”

“Oh, you can count on it,” she says with a smirk. “Later you two.”

As they walk off, Mads leans in. “Why didn’t you tell me about Kylie? She’s a hoot.”

I chuckle. “She’s trouble, but she’s family.”

“Meh, so, it took her an extra year to graduate, how bad can she be? I’m looking forward to getting to know her.”

Before I can reply, Stieg approaches us. “Hey, Madison, you mind if I pull him away a moment?” he asks.

Mads glances at me and then at the crowd forming around the wedding cake table. “Sure, but after they cut the cake, I’m going to be ready to go. These shoes may look amazing, but they’re killing me.”

“Sounds good, I’m about beat too,” I reply. “We’ll meet back in ten minutes, all right?”

“Tootles,” she says with a flutter of fingers.

When we’re out of earshot, I ask Stieg, “What’s up? Is it Gregor?”

“Yeah, the word is he’s itching to put one in your skull. We need to deal with that slimy turd, fast.”

“I figured as much,” I reply. “I’m doubling security at my place tonight.” I glance at him. “You should take care as well. If he can’t get to me, he’ll go for my right-hand man.”

He snorts. “Let him, I’ve been waiting to put a slug in that scrawny little bastard for some time. Just give me a reason.”

“Don’t get too anxious, this has got to be by the book,” I say as we step outside. No one’s around but I still lower my voice. “We already have to answer for Sergei.”

“When are you going to Moscow to sort that out?”

“Early March.”

Stieg stops walking and looks at me. “You’re waiting that long?”

“Mads can’t leave work until then.”

His eyes widen with incredulity. “You’re taking her to meet them,” he states rather than ask. “But you haven’t brought her in, nothing less than that will even make them consider her.” He shakes his head. “What are you thinking, Bash?”

I resume walking. “I know what I’m doing, Stieg. They’ll see firsthand what a valuable asset she’ll be, it’ll all work out.”

He laughs. “Have you told her this?”

I go silent as we continue walking.

“I’ll take that as a no. Jeeze, Bash. I don’t know.”

“Where are we going?” I ask growing wary of the conversation.

“I forgot to bring in the wedding gift, Lorna’s busting my balls about it, saying since she was one of the bride’s maids, the least I could’ve done was to remember the gift.”

I frown at him. “How’d you forget that little detail? I might have to rethink the whole, right-hand man job.”

“Hey, there were two boxes, I just brought the larger one assuming that was it. When she saw me walk in with the one gift box, she nearly had an aneurysm. I’m guessing the smaller box must have slid under something in the trunk.”

“All right, let’s hurry,” I say, digging my hands into my pockets. “It’s freezing out here.”

“Ah, too many years in the US has made you soft,” he laughs as we head to the parking lot. “This is nothing compared to winters back home.”

We reach his gray Porsche. He uses the remote to open the trunk. “Just like Lorna to have to outdo all the other ladies. One gift wouldn’t do for her.” He leans in and fishes around under a blanket and toolbox. “Ah, here we go.”

I see the small ornate box and understand how the misunderstanding could’ve happened.

“Crap, I got some grease on the damn thing,” he reaches for the equally soiled towel. “Shit.”

I laugh. “You’re a freaking mess, hurry it up, will you.”

“Yeah, you could help, you know. Hand me the wipes from the front seat.” He pulls his keys out of his pocket, but his fingers are slick, so they fall to the ground.

“Jesus, Stieg,” I say as I drop down to pick it up. That’s when I hear the two gunshots ring out and see Stieg collapse to the pavement clutching his right shoulder. “Stieg!” I grab him

and quickly drag him behind the car out of the aim of the shooter.

My heart pounds wildly as I draw my gun and ease around the side of the car trying to get a glimpse of the shooter.

“The fucker shot me!” Stieg groans. His hands are covered in blood.

“Shit! I can’t see anyone,” I reply as my eyes scan the wooded area across from the parking lot. It’s dark but judging from the trajectory, I have a general sense of where he might be. “I heard two shots. Were you hit anywhere else?”

“I...I don’t think so. Son of a bitch!” he yells.

“Just hold on, I’m going to get you some help.” I risk another look and note that the sounds of the shots don’t seem to have penetrated the music and chatter at the banquet hall. I know Dmitri and his brother are protecting Madison. My primary concern now is Stieg...and the shooter if he’s still out there.

My rage is mounting. Who the fuck sent a shooter to a wedding?

“Damn it!” I can’t call Madison down here with the shooter still out there, plus her cell phone is in her purse at our table. “Shit.” I remove my jacket, ball it up, and press it against his shoulder. “Hold on to this. You need to apply pressure to the wound. I’m going for help.”

I jump when I hear a car door slam and an engine roar to life. I peer back around the corner in time to see a black Escalade

pull out into the open in an attempt to speed away. I leap out and start firing at it. The passenger side window shatters under a hail of bullets. I aim lower to take out the tires. The car flies out of control and crashes into a storage building.

I take off after him, the bitter cold no longer a factor while in hot pursuit of the shooter. Only twenty feet away, the driver's door opens. The culprit takes one look in my direction and then takes off running. I fire again, aiming low at his legs. I want him alive to get the truth out of him. I need confirmation that Orlov sent him.

I'm certain a bullet caught him in the leg because he nearly stumbles, but pure adrenaline keeps him moving. Now he heads out onto the main street. If I have to put a bullet in his back to keep him from escaping, I will.

He reaches the street and turns to look back. He pulls his gun. Right when I duck for cover a truck comes barreling down the road and mows him down. The truck driver never even slowed down, much less stop.

I ran up the slope and onto the roadway where the shooter lay motionless. As expected, he's unconscious, and the awkward position of his limbs tell me they were broken and shattered. I check for a pulse. It's faint, we'll have to work fast to extract any information from him. I drag him back onto the safety of the grass and then place a call to have one of my guys come collect him.

Now that the immediate danger seems to be over, I dash back to Stieg.

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## Chapter 23 – Sinking Deeper in the Mire

“**M**adison, we have to go,” comes the urgent words from Sebastian as he holds my coat open urging me to put it on.

I look apologetically at the young couple I’d been speaking to as I stick my arms through the sleeves. “It was a pleasure meeting you.”

“Oh...you too,” the woman says a little wrong footed by Sebastian’s abruptness. “Congratulations on your engagement.”

“Thanks,” I manage to say as Sebastian pulls me away in a vice-like grip. He pushes through the crowd ignoring any who might attempt to speak to him. At first, I thought he was merely rescuing me from a boring conversation, but I quickly realize something’s terribly wrong.

As we head for the doors, I ask, “Bash, what’s going on?”

The rush of cold air hits us like a brick wall and suddenly all I care about is getting out of it. We’re practically running to

the car. Once we're inside, Bash wastes no time firing up the engine. The tires squeal as we pull out of the parking lot and onto the road.

“Bash,” I say hesitantly. “You want to tell me what’s going on?”

His face is a tense mask of concern. “We have to get back to the house, I’ll explain once we get there.”

“Explain what?” I say anxiously as I watch the speedometer climb past 70mph. “Please, you’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

His eyes remain straight ahead as his jaw clenches tight. “Natasha’s dad decided to let me know what he thought of ending the engagement.”

I jolt to attention and now I’m angry. “What did he do?” My mind is all over the place. Sebastian is unharmed, but there’s no telling what kind of damage Victor may have done. But the way we’re speeding back to the house...is that where he struck while we were at the wedding?

“He fired a shot at me.”

“What?” I exclaim. He’s clearly unharmed, but I’m riddled with guilt for forcing Bash to break off the engagement so abruptly.

“I’m fine, Mads. But he got Stieg.”

“Oh my God, is he alright? Where is he? What’s his condition?”

“He needs your help, babe,” he says, glancing at me before his eyes return to the road.

“Of course, where is he? Where are we going?”

“He refuses to go to the hospital, he’s at the house bleeding badly.”

My gut wrenches with more guilt. “Where was he hit? How bad is it?”

“He was shot in the upper chest. I didn’t see an exit wound, but at least it missed his heart.”

“That’s good, but we need to get him to the hospital, Bash, I don’t have the tools I need to help him.”

“It’s ok,” Bash replies. “I have some basic first aid tools at the house and I’ve sent Hector and Ray to gather some more supplies.”

“This is crazy,” I object. “If Stieg is shot, he’s in no condition to decide whether or not he goes to the hospital. Just take him!”

“He’s not going to the hospital and that’s final!” Bash snaps as he turns onto the road toward the house. “He’s at the house, you’re going to help him. It’s the least we can do for him!”

I just stare at him in disbelief. His tone and manner suggest he’s not asking, he’s giving me an order. I start to push back but I remember that we’re in this predicament because I forced his hand regarding Natasha. If I’d been patient and allowed him adequate time to delicately extricate himself from the engagement, maybe none of this would’ve happened.

Natasha's father might not have been so vindictive. Me showing up at the wedding as the new fiancée certainly didn't help matters.

So much of this is wrong I hardly know where to begin. So, I sit silently as we drive down the road. Mentally, I prepare myself for what I'm about to face and run the procedures I'll need to stabilize Stieg until I can convince them to take him to the hospital.

We pull into the garage and hurry into the guest suite where they've put poor Stieg. He's laying there in bed and Ben stands guard.

"How's he doing?" Sebastian asks him.

"No change," Ben answers. "He's breathing ok, and the Percocet must have kicked in since he's not groaning.

"Excuse me, please." I push past Ben to get to Stieg lying on the bed. The ghastly pallor of his face unsettles me. They've removed his shirt and have a green towel pressed to his upper chest on the right.

His eyes are shut but the lines between his brow tell me he's still experiencing discomfort despite the Percocet.

I shrug out of my coat and toss it to Sebastian. I need to work quickly to stabilize Stieg. "I'll need to sterilize the wound before I can assess the damage and remove the bullet. I'll need more towels, can someone boil some water?"

Dmitri and Ben go on full alert and hurry about their business. I go to the ensuite bathroom to thoroughly wash my

hands, Bash follows suit using the faucet from the bathtub. When I give him a curious look, he replies. “I’m going to assist you.”

“Do you have some tweezers, alcohol, and peroxide?”

“Yes, I had the guys pick up some at a medical supplies’ outlet. Along with plenty of gauze and bandages,” he says as he scrubs his hands and lower arms as if he scrubbed in for surgery a hundred times before. “I don’t think the Percocet is going to do the job.”

“I’ve got something stronger.”

I glance at him. “Like what?”

“Morphine.”

My brow furrows. “Morphine? You just happen to have morphine sitting around.”

“No, I don’t use it for myself,” he explains as we dry our hands on the bathroom towels. “It was confiscated off an acquaintance in lieu of payment.”

I can’t even form the words to dive deeper. Right now, Stieg is all that matters. I walk over to him and remove the soiled towel from his wound.

“He’s still bleeding,” I say sternly, still angry Bash won’t let me take him to the hospital. “Without the proper equipment —”

Just then two of Bash’s men come running in with bags and boxes of medical supplies. Damn, that was fast! I have a

strong suspicion they didn't exactly purchase the materials. I put a pin in that to discuss later with Bash.

“What do you have?” I ask searching through the bags.

“What do you need?” Bash asks, as he hands me some surgical gloves.

“I need to sterilize the area and stop the bleeding. I'm not sure how much he's lost, so I may need to start a blood transfusion and IV fluids. I'm going to need—”

“Iodine, alcohol and saline drip,” he says fishing the items out of one of the boxes.

I cut him a look. “Yeah.” I take the Iodine from him. “Can you jury rig the saline bag to the bedpost? Where's the morphine and syringe? I need butterfly needles so I can begin administering the fluids. I'm also going to need to clamp blood vessels and seal them.”

“So, hemostat, sutures, surgical ligature, what else?” Sebastian asks, as he withdraws those items from the curiously available supplies.

Within seconds, everything I asked for is placed in my hands. I administer the morphine and proceed to sterilize the wound with the iodine. My pounding heart finally levels off and glides into calm, familiar waters. I'm in my element now. This is where I thrive and come alive.

I begin clamping the blood vessels, stemming the bleeding, achieving hemostasis. I have Bash monitoring Stieg's blood pressure and heart rate. I go in search of the bullet lodged deep

in below the clavicle but thankfully above the heart and lungs. I cautiously enter the wound and extract the projectile.

“Suction,” I say, and Bash inserts the tube device to remove the excess blood. “Sponge,” I say, and it’s immediately in my hand.

About an hour after we arrived, I’m closing Stieg up, neatly suturing the wound. Bash and one of his men are cleaning up all the bloody gauze and towels. The color in Stieg’s face is finally returning to normal. A quick glance at the portable monitor tells me his vital signs are all within acceptable parameters considering the circumstances. Only then do I breathe a sigh of relief.

I glance up at the guards, and they avert their eyes but not before I see the look of awe and admiration in them. I’ve saved their friend and colleague, and they’re grateful, finally coming to appreciate that I’m far more than just a pretty bobble on Sebastian’s arm.

As I pull off my gloves and toss them into the trash bag along with all the other detritus from the makeshift operating room. I look up to catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My hair is disheveled, and my lovely powder-blue dress is covered in blood. It’s ruined...

And now comes time for the inevitable conversation with my mysterious fiancé. The unsanctioned emergency surgeries on Nick and now Stieg? What the hell is going on and what’s the ongoing part he’s expecting me to play in his world?

More importantly, when I hear it, will I be willing to play it?

Sebastian gives instructions to Ben, informing him to remain in the room with Stieg and to keep an eye on the monitor. If any alarms go off, he's to alert us immediately.

With that, we withdraw from the room and retire to the master suite. Silently, we remove our soiled clothing and wash away the remnants of the impromptu surgery. Despite everything, I believe Bash easily could have gone into the medical field and have become a great surgeon. Obviously, he's smart enough and learns very quickly.

Nonetheless, I seriously begin to wonder about his motives and the sincerity of his feelings for me. He proposed marriage...but was he proposing to the woman or to the doctor? And is it only if the doctor will agree to play private surgeon to his comrades?

I could lose my goddamned license even before I earn it!

When I enter our bedroom, Sebastian has an inviting fire going in the fireplace and holds out a glass of what I assume to be a shot of some strong liquor.

"I thought we could both use it," he says as I approach. He stares at me with those mesmerizing blue eyes which emanate a new level of admiration, if not idolization. "You were incredible."

But I refuse to be taken in by the flattery or the way he's looking at me. "What the hell's going on, Bash?" I say curtly. "I'm assuming you don't want me to report that gunshot wound either."



He sighs heavily. “Babe, please,” he gestures at the comfy divan before the roaring fireplace. “Have a seat, let’s talk.”

Reluctantly, I follow him over and sit next to him. I refuse to drink just yet as I sense that my head needs to be very clear for this conversation. My stomach churns with the fear that this engagement may prove to be more short-lived than the one with Natasha.

He places his large, strong hands on mine when he sees them trembling. Thank God they’re steady as a rock during surgery.

“I love you so much, Mads,” he says imploringly, his eyes warm with emotion. “More than anything in this world. I’m so proud to soon be your husband. It will be the crowning achievement of my life.”

I look away, giving a roll of my eyes to offset the smile tugging at the corner of my lips. “If you love me so much, why do you keep jeopardizing my career? You know how much trouble I could get into for this.”

His lips curve into a smile. “You’ve nothing to worry about, we protect each other against any threats. That’s why it was so important to bring you to the wedding tonight as my bride to be, so everyone would know what you are to me. My better half.” He inclines his head, staring intently at me. “And that you’re one of us now, to honor and to protect at all costs.”

I take a deep shuddering breath at Sebastian’s words. Somehow, I feel as if I’ve unwittingly undergone some strange initiation or hazing process and now, I’m formally being invited to join. I’m so deeply entangled in this now, both

emotionally with Sebastian and by the things I've done. Is there any going back now? Is it even an option?

I lift my eyes to his. The genuine adulation beaming from them is intoxicating. Nonetheless, I have to ask, "If I weren't a surgeon...would you still have asked me to marry you? What if I'd only been the EMS attendant, would I still be wearing this ring on my finger?"

His expression becomes introspective as he honestly considers the question before replying. I appreciate that because a perfunctory, "Oh, yes, of course I would" answer would have rung flat and disingenuous.

He takes a deep breath and says, "I obviously find you very attractive, our chemistry is phenomenal, and I long to be in your company. But dating someone outside the fold is so prohibitive and difficult that I don't know if either of us..." He's holding my gaze but now his hand trembles a bit as if he's worried that his honesty may be too much for me to swallow. He repositions himself on the cushions and seems to rethink his next words. "Madison, if I'd been in a... different line of work when I met you," he smiles and nods, "yes, we'd definitely be in a committed relationship with the distinct prospect of making it permanent."

I interpret that as, I'm crazy about you as a person, but I don't know if the relationship would've been worth all this trouble if you hadn't also been a gifted surgeon.

That I'm a surgeon can't be distinguished from who I am. It's like him asking me if I'd still be in love with him if he

weren't drop dead gorgeous and rich...

Still, my spirits feel deflated. "What if I lost my license, would you still want me?"

He laughs and lifts his hands to cradle my face. "First of all, it's too late, I'm madly in love with you. Secondly, no one's taking your license. Thirdly, no one can take away your skills or the knowledge contained in that brilliant head of yours." He pecks my lips. "You'll always be a skilled surgeon no matter what, and I'm dying to be the most loving and supportive husband to you."

I allow his tender kiss and the promise of the future together. But before I completely lose myself in it, I remember that Stieg lays there recovering from a gunshot wound that I treated. It's a dangerous, scary road with Sebastian. He won't come out and admit it, but with the elimination of Sergei, he's the new head of this faction of the Russian mafia.

The only thing scarier than that prospect, is a life without Sebastian in it. But where do I draw the line?

He must sense that my heart isn't in a very romantic place at the moment. He pulls back and says, "It's fine, babe...why don't we just get some sleep. Things will look much better in the morning."

I nod, that much I can consent to. In the dark of the night, I'll have to ask myself, how much am I willing to risk for Bash? Just how far will I go?

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## Chapter 24 – No Going Back Now

**L**orna Korbet, Stieg's wife, is pissed as hell when she learns of what happened to him. She suspects the shot was meant for me and that I provoked it by bringing Madison to the wedding so soon after ending things with Natasha.

But I have no regrets. My bold move served its purpose well. Stieg is on the mend and Madison...she's finally understanding what it means to be my wife. Does she fully comprehend what I'm asking of her? It's there, she knows but we haven't discussed it explicitly. But the fact that she hasn't attempted to bolt after the incident with Stieg is very promising.

She's a smart woman, she must sense that she's in too deep to turn back now. She knows how much I love her and would do anything to protect her from danger, whether it be from my enemies or from the medical board. In turn, she'll provide her services when we need them. It's the only way I can sell this to the powers that be back in Moscow.

She'll be made to understand that this won't come down to me choosing her over this life. There is no way out for me. Either I stay or I'm dead. Those are my only two choices.

I could tell she'd been troubled through the night with all of her tossing and turning. I can imagine how difficult this must be for her.

Allowing her to sleep in, I go to check in on Stieg in the morning. His pallor had improved, and a quick look at the monitor tells me that his vital signs are good. Losing Stieg would've been a tremendous blow. There's no one I trust more than him. He'd been one of my father's crew, but a bit too young to have been one of his captains at that time. At fifteen years my senior, Stieg's been more like a big brother than a father figure. Second to Nick, he's the closest thing to family I have.

Thank God Madison patched him up better than new and he'll not miss a beat. As I sat there in the chair, his eyes flutter open and his gaze drifts over to me. An understanding passes between us, he knew I'd get him through this and that he'd be alright.

“Hey man, how're you feeling?”

He manages a weak smile. “Like...I was hit...by a bazooka.”

“Nine milliliter slug.”

He turns to look down at the bandages. “Madison?”

“Yeah.”

“Bullet’s out?”

“Yep, she removed it and patched you up good.”

He nods. “Water?”

I hop up out of my chair. “Yeah, sure.” I grab a bottle of water, pour some into a plastic cup and place a straw in it.

He attempts to sit up but grimaces.

“Stay put,” I order and lift the bendy straw to his lips. “There ya go,” I say when he takes a few sips. “Lorna is on her way. Originally, I told her you had a few too many and crashed at my place. This morning, I told her the truth.”

He chuckles and winces. “How pissed is she?”

“On a scale of 1 to 10, I’d say 15.”

“Great.”

“She’s mad at me, not you,” I say, sitting back. “She’ll probably be here in fifteen minutes. Will probably try to convince you to stick to Last Call business.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“With a slug in your chest...I couldn’t blame you if you listened to her.”

His gaze shifts to me, his eyes narrow. “You trying to offload me?”

“You crazy, lose my right hand?”

“Then stop with the bullshit,” he says. “I make my own decisions. Lorna knows that.”

“I’ll never speak of it again.”

“Good, cause I ain’t going anywhere, kid.”

I smirk, even though I’m the boss now, I allow my friend the pejorative term in private.

“The meds alright? You in any pain?”

He gingerly lifts his hand to the bandage. “Had a dose earlier this morning, I don’t want to get hooked on the stuff.” His eyes fix on me. “You find the fucker who shot me?”

“Yeah, took him over to Sully’s to pound some answers out of him. Then we sent him back to Gregor. Well, his head anyway.”

“Ah, figured it was that weasel ass prick behind it,” he says, scratching his chin. “Can’t say we didn’t see it coming. But what’s our next move? We’d be fully in our rights to take him out.”

“You just focus on getting better for the next couple of days. I’ve got something in mind for old Gregor. Trust me, you’re going to like it.”

A grin spreads across his face. “Come on, you can’t leave me hanging like that.”

The doorbell rings. “Ah, that must be Lorna,” I say rising before he can object. “I’d better let her in, I’m already in hot water with her.”

“Yeah, yeah, go on.”

When I reach the door, he calls out, “Hey, Bash.”



I turn around in the doorway.

“Thank Madison for me, will ya?” he says, pointing to the bandage. “I really hope things work out for you two.”

I nod. “Thanks, I’ll let her know.”

I head for the front door. Dmitri is already there talking to a particularly animated Lorna. The feisty little brunette is a handful at the best of times.

“Lorna, hello,” I say as I approach. “Come on back, Stieg is waiting to see you. He’s doing well.”

Her green eyes narrow dangerously. “He’s a father, Bash. We have two boys at home who need their father alive and well, not taking bullets for you!” She gestures wildly. “It’s not right. You could have any of these goons work for you. Why can’t you leave Stieg be, huh? Just let him run Last Call for heaven’s sake.”

“He’s this way,” I say, leading her down the hall. “Look, Lorna, Stieg is free to do as he pleases. I’m not forcing him to work for me.”

She stops in her tracks and turns to me. “You know he won’t leave your side unless you order him to. You guys and your stupid codes and brotherhood. I hate it,” she says tearing up.

I know it’s her fear over nearly losing Stieg that has her all wound up like this. I get it, I let it pass. “Come sit with him, Lorna. It’ll do him good to see your smiling face.”

She stares daggers at me. I feel for her, I really do, but this was the life Stieg chose and she knew that when she married

him seven years ago. Lorna knows he's like a brother to me and I'll always do my best to keep him out of harm's way. She's hurting now, but Stieg is the only one who'll be able to calm her down.

I proceed toward his room and hold the door open for Lorna to enter.

"Oh, my baby," she says as she runs to him and hugs his good side. "Are you alright? Darling, I was so worried."

I close the door to give Stieg the space to respond the way a caring husband should without worrying about losing face in front of me.

It's 7:38 a.m. when I return to our bedroom. Madison is laying awake staring at the ceiling. Her gaze cuts to me when she hears me enter.

"Good morning, sweetheart," I say, kissing her cheek. "You get enough rest?"

"How's Stieg doing?"

"Just great, thanks to you," I say, sitting next to her. "He told me to tell you that. His wife Lorna is in there talking to him now."

She props up on her elbows, her brows pinch together. "Does she know I treated Stieg?"

"No, that information won't leave this house."

Her head lulls to the side. "I get the whole protect our own thing, but the fewer people that know about it the better."

“Of course, babe. That goes without saying.”

“I mean, I feel sick about this whole thing,” she grasps my arm. “Please tell me that was the last time. I can’t keep rolling the dice on my career like this.”

My heart sinks into my stomach, apparently, we’re not on the same page about this. “I wouldn’t have asked unless it was really important to me. I promise to only involve you when it’s absolutely critical and even then,” I continue speaking over her when she starts to object, “you’ll always be protected. Please Madison, I swear on my life, this won’t compromise your career in any way.”

Her expression hardens, her gaze is unwavering. “And if I refuse?”

I meet her gaze unflinching. My voice is calm and even when I reply, “You won’t refuse. I’m making major changes in my life for you. In return, this is what I’m requiring of you.”

Her face twists with indignation. “I’ve never asked you to make changes for me. You can’t—”

“Never step foot in Last Call even though it’s a major hub of business,” I say, ticking her demands off on my fingers, “immediately break off my engagement even though it could start a fucking *war*, change the very nature of my work so that I can be respectable enough for your colleagues. Any of this sound familiar?”

Her mouth drops open as she looks at it from my perspective. For a moment, she appears crestfallen like she

truly hadn't considered the ramifications of her demands. But then her eyes narrow. "Wait, did you do all of that for me or was it born out of desperation to recruit a surgeon?"

Her accusation feels like a hard slap across the face. "We can buy a surgeon to perform these services, Mads. What do you think we did before I met you?" I look away from her for a moment because I'm so angry at her right now. "I jumped through all those fucking hoops because I found the woman of my dreams and was willing to do anything to keep you!"

Her eyes widen in surprise as the truthfulness of my words registers with her.

"I'm not," I close my eyes and breathe deeply. "When it comes to choosing a bride, I'm not free to choose as I please. If I hope to marry you, I have to convince my heads to make an exception for you, because you come from outside the organization." I'm annoyed when my vision blurs with angry tears. "I love you, Mads. We're so good together. I know you love me enough to do this for me."

"Jesus, Bash, this is..." her gaze falls away and she shakes her head. "I just wanted to be with you, not join some...some criminal organization."

"I know, but it's the price we have to pay to be together," I say, gripping her hands. "We don't have any other choice, Mads. This is the only way."

Her eyes are wide with fear. "Why do you need their approval? Why can't we just leave?"

“That’s not an option for us, once you’re in, you’re in for life.”

Her face contorts with anger. “I’m not in,” she says, shaking her head. “I never signed up for this!”

“Yes, you did, babe. I’m sorry but you’re in up to your eyeballs.”

“What are you talking about?” she shouts. “I wanted to be with you, but I never chose to be a part of a crime syndicate.”

I can’t keep the derision from my voice. “What in the hell did you think you were doing the day you chose to hide the gun of a known mafia prince?”

Her eyes fly wide as if I’d struck her. “I...I was just trying to help you. I didn’t...”

“What about your decision to keep seeing me at the hospital even though I wasn’t even your patient?” I fire off the questions like bullets. “What about your decision to go on a date with me? What about your decision to come back to my house and sleep with me? To live with me, to drive my car and wear this ring as a promise of our future together!”

Her eyes are tearing up and she’s moving away from me toward the edge of the bed. But I keep coming, having this all pent up inside.

“You’re in gross violation of the medical standards for your profession as a result of failing to report the gunshot wounds you treated!”

Her face is twisted with bitter anger and fear. “I did it all for you and now you throw it back in my face!” She climbs off the bed and makes toward the bathroom. “You unbelievable asshole!”

I fly after her and shoulder the bathroom door open when she tries to shut it on me. “You did it for me? Why, Mads? Why’d you do it?” I shout.

“I thought you needed my help!” she screams back. “I thought you were in trouble, so I—”

“I needed your help?” A contemptuous laugh escapes me. “What were you thinking with? Your bleeding heart or your quivering cunt?”

I see the slap coming but let it land to fuel my rage. “Admit it,” I growl at her. “You wanted to fuck me. Maybe have a little fun with the bad boy until you got bored. Only you didn’t count on me falling for you!” I grab her by the shoulders. “Well, you’d better get used to playing your part, Mads, because you’re not going anywhere!”

“Let go of me!” She tries futilely to free herself of my grip, even pounds her fist against my chest. “I’m not one of your fucking goons, you don’t control me!” She’s working herself into a fit. “I swear, you force me to stay and you’d better sleep with one eye open for the rest of your life!”

That’s when I snapped.

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## Chapter 25 – No Way Out

I've never seen Bash like this. His sapphire eyes are ablaze, his beautiful features are contorted with rage and the need to control and dominate me as he does all who surround him. My own fire burns, both at him and myself for allowing myself to be trapped this way. He might as well have spelled it out. All along, the greatest threat to my career wasn't the authorities or the hospital administration...it's Bash. He's the one holding all the cards.

I struggle madly against him, wanting to strike him again and again, but his iron grip renders me powerless in his arms. The silk nightie I'm wearing is twisted up, barely doing a thing to cover me.

He kicks the bathroom door shut and forces me back roughly against the vanity. "You'll do as I say. Cross me and I'll fucking end your career!"

"You won't do shit if you're bleeding out your carotid artery!"



The look on his face is both terrifying and priceless as he realizes he's not the only one who can make threats.

“You crazy bitch!” he snarls, tearing my nightie off with one yank.

“Psychotic asshole, you don't own me!” I fire back, though I'm stripped down to my panties as he towers over me, so close I've no room to maneuver.

He grabs me by the hair, forcing my head back exposing my neck and bare breasts. I'm breathing hard, my hands scramble to find anything that I can use as a weapon. Seeing this, he grabs my wrists, clamping them in one large hand behind my back. With his free hand he rips my panties off leaving me naked before him.

His face is a mask of cold derision as he kicks my legs apart and presses himself against me. I feel the hardness of his erection and damn it if I'm not more aroused than I've ever been with him. I curse myself for wanting him, for wanting this so badly I gasp with my desire for it.

I turn away, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing the desire in my eyes. But he gets his proof when he slides his fingers down between my thighs and feels how wet I am.

A low rumble of desire courses through him in an ugly laugh. “I own you, admit it!” he says, grinding his hard cock against me.

“Fuck off!” I say, but my body has a mind of its own as my hips press forward in time with his.

“I will, but first you’re going to beg me to fuck you.”

It’s my turn to laugh derisively. “Go back to your trashy Last Call girls if that’s what you want.”

“Why when I have a trashy doctor who gets wet just looking at me?” he says, maintaining a slow, steady grind against my clitoris while keeping my hands in a tight grip behind my back.

Damn he feels so fucking good. But I can’t let him have this. Not when he’s threatening my career. But he ups the ante, gripping a breast and taking the hard nipple into his hot mouth. He teases it with his tongue knowing how it drives me wild.

But my defiance remains. “You’re nothing special, Bash,” I gasp as he sucks harder. “Just a low life criminal with a big dick.”

He ceases movement and then looms up before me. The look in his eyes chills me to the bone. Have I gone too far? He wanted my surrender and all I’ve given him is my contempt.

In a flash, he whips me around and bends me over the vanity. Gripping the back of my neck, he holds me down, my face is pressed against the coolness of the granite vanity as he unfastens his pants. I feel his hot flesh against my backside. He kicks my legs wide apart forcing me into a position of complete submission before him. I’m simultaneously enraged and wildly aroused by it.

Exerting his dominance, he drives his shaft deep inside me, hard and fast, each of his powerful thrust punctuated with a

grunt of rage and gratification. As angry as I am, involuntary moans of pleasure escape me and I greedily arch my back, tilting up to give him better access to go deeper. My blatant desire shames me, my slickness is a bold testament to how badly I want this, and he knows it.

“You’re mine, say it!” he growls, as he pumps madly inside me.

I moan with pleasure even as I grit my teeth.

“Say it!” as his hips flex and pulse in perfect control.

“Never!” I blurt out in my defiance.

He slips his fingers down between my thighs and begins working that clit like he owns it and I come undone.

“Say it, Mads. You’re mine!”

As I crest higher and higher toward sublime orgasm, I cry out, “I’m yours!”

“Again!”

“I’m yours!” I roar.

“Say my name!”

“Sebastian,” I cry. “Damn it, I’m yours.” I climax so hard, it feels like I’m peeing myself as my own ejaculate squirts out.

“Fuck yeah!” Bash shouts in the tight grips of the orgasm that nearly buckles his knees. His cum shoots into me in steady pulses, filling me with his seed. “Fuck me,” he gasps trying to catch his breath. He collapses down over me, his

chest against my back. “Holy shit, Mads,” he breathes in my ear. “I’m yours. Oh, God, I’m yours.”

For the next few hours, we barely say a word to each other as I tend to Stieg. His prognosis looks good and he should be well enough for Lorna to take him home tomorrow. My new reality begins to settle in and I have no one else to blame but myself.

During the hour-long drive back home, we’re mostly silent as we both contemplate the magnitude of all that transpired this weekend. We got engaged and we made our official appearance as a couple. Bash was almost shot, and I failed to report Stieg’s gunshot wound after performing surgery on him. And finally, I’ve been informed that I’m to be their official on-call surgeon or I can kiss my medical career goodbye.

But would Bash really do that to me? The hard look in his eyes told me he’d do it in a heartbeat if I ever tried to leave him and this life.

I hate that I put myself in this position. I hate that I’m in love with Bash and crave him like an illicit drug. I recall seeing patients strung out on heroine and worse, while I treated them, I remember despising what they had become and wondering how they could’ve let it happen. Well, now I know because I’ve met my opiate of choice and it goes by the name of Sebastian Petrosky.

Bash is right, I had multiple opportunities to put a stop to all this. Yet I blindly chose to follow him down this dark path,

blinded by his beauty and charm, and the panty-soaking things he did to me in the bedroom.

I own it and only pray that he protects me as he promised and will never let my moonlighting ever come to see the light of day.

We're about twenty minutes out from home when I feel his hand upon mine. Surprised, I glance at him, but he keeps his eyes straight ahead as he caresses my hand.

"I'm sorry about the way things went down back there. You have to know that while I may need the surgeon, I love the woman. My heart is yours no matter what."

I remain silent, angrier at myself than anything else.

"We'll both make incredible sacrifices for each other – because we love each other more than anything. But my God, we can have such a good life together, Mads. That's all I want."

He squeezes my hand. I nod reluctantly.

"Of course, I'm removing all the kitchen knives and sharp items, so I don't have to worry about waking up bleeding out a carotid artery."

His deadpan delivery caught me off guard and despite all that's happened, I find myself chuckling. "That's the price you pay for dating a surgeon. Live in fear my friend. Live in fear."

He's smiling too. "I'll take my chances. We all have to die someday, if I have to go at your hands, so be it." He looks at

me. “But I will come back and haunt you. You’ll never have a day’s rest, lady.”

We adjust our hands so that our fingers are entwined representing our tentative truce.

“I love you, Dr. Graham. God help me, but I do.”

I smirk. “Then we should both have our heads examined because...I love you too, Bash.”

Content with that knowledge, we drive the rest of the way home in silence, but our hands remain joined.

I welcome the return of the routine life back at the hospital. When I check in with Dr. Weiss, I recall the information that Bash gave me. Emma cheated on her medical school exams while she struggled with motherhood. Had she not been dealing with the stresses of a newborn, I’ve no doubt she’d have been capable of passing them on her own merit. But this information certainly cast her in a whole different light. She’s fallible and doesn’t deserve to be on any pedestal we students have placed her on.

“Good morning, Dr. Weiss,” I say with a knowing smile when I run into her at the nurses’ station.

“Madison.” She smiles back apprehensively as if she suspects something is up but has no idea what. Knowledge is power, Dr. Weiss, I want to say as I continue on my way.

Things are pretty slow today. No interesting procedures taking place in the OR, at least nothing I’m interested in

adding to my procedures list. So, I stick to the ER, lending a hand wherever I can.

While I'm stitching up a minor head wound, I reflect on my situation and begin to consider that things might not be as bleak as I had imagined. My medical career here is secured given the information I have on the chief resident and the DEA haven't returned or attempted to contact me. Sebastian has assured me that I'll only be called in to work on high profile associates and that a nurse will be used for more routine procedures. In two weeks, they'll be announcing the residency selections and I'll get a few months off before I begin my residency.

A few relaxing weeks on a Caribbean Island in an overwater bungalow is just what this doctor needs after all the chaos of the last few weeks. I'm still not so sure about going to Moscow with Sebastian for some archaic bride "approval" process.

Just as I'm wrapping up with my patient, Emma comes around the curtain and stands there with arms folded across her chest.

"Oh, hey, I'm almost done here," I say, assuming she needs me to see another patient.

She walks over and whispers, "Your DEA friends are back."

My shoulders immediately tense up.

"Afterward, you and I need to have a very serious talk," she said stiffly.

I turn to look her in the eyes. “Yes, indeed we do, Dr. Weiss,” I say, matching her tone.

Her brows hike up as I hold her gaze. Bewildered by my bold attitude, she leaves without another word.

I finish with my patient and immediately phone Sebastian to apprise him of the situation.

“You know the drill, babe,” he calmly says, “Call me as soon as you’re done.”

Agents Roberts and Hall are waiting for me in the office, both are standing looking expectantly at me. Robert’s smirk sends a jolt of anxiety through me. He thinks he has something this time.

“Ms. Graham,” he says, motioning for me to take a seat. “Thank you for meeting with us again, we hope to make this quick and painless.”

“I’d appreciate that,” I say as I sit behind Emma’s desk.

“Would you mind going back over the events of the night of November 28<sup>th</sup>?”

When I stare blankly at him, he adds, “That’s the night Sergei Petrosky was last seen at the strip club Last Call. I believe,” he glances at his notes, “your shift ended at 6:30pm. Tell me about how you got home that night.”

I sit back with arms folded across my chest. “Haven’t we been over this?”



“I’m going to remind you that you’ll do serious time for lying to a federal investigator. I’m giving you a chance to come clean, Ms. Graham.”

And just like that, I’m nervous again. What in the blazes do they know? If it were truly solid, they’d be arresting me, not asking more annoying questions. Are they bluffing. Either way, I have to be extremely careful about what I say.

“It’s been several weeks so my memory of that day may be a bit fuzzy,” I begin with that to give me a little cover.

“That’s understandable,” Roberts says flatly. “Just do your best starting from when your shift ended at 6:30pm.”

I’m careful to maintain eye contact as I reply, “But I couldn’t drive my car home due to some engine trouble. Sebastian picked me up and took me home.” I offer not one word more. I’m a hundred percent certain that there are no security cameras in the parking garage, so there’s no chance they witnessed me being abducted by Sergei’s men.

“And Sebastian took you straight home?”

I stare at the ceiling as if trying to recall. “Hmm, I think, we might have stopped off on the way home to pick up a bite to eat first.”

I sense him hone in on this as his eyes narrow. “Where did you go for this bite?”

I shrug. “I don’t really remember.”

“Try,” he says firmly.

“Do you remember what you did three months ago on an uneventful night?”

“Look, Ms. Graham, we can either do this here or take you down to headquarters. I suggest you check your memory.”

I peer at him. “I think I’d like to call my lawyer.”

“Why?” Hall interjects, finally coming alive. “What’ve you got to hide?”

“Nothing, I just don’t like being harassed, Agent Hall. I told you I don’t remember the specifics of that night other than what I’ve already told you.”

“Really?” Hall says, rising from his chair with a folder in hand. “Maybe these photos will jog your memory.” He opens the folder and fans the photos out on the desk.

Immediately, I recognize them as me and Sebastian leaving Last Call after he’d rescued me from Sergei. How in the hell did they get these? If they saw us leave, wouldn’t they have seen Bash arrive...without me? I suspect they must only have the departure photos or else they’d totally have busted me for lying about Sebastian picking me up from work being as he would’ve arrived at Last Call without me.

In the photo, I’m looking shellshocked and wearing a coat that’s obviously too big for me and clunky shoes. Thank God Bash had the good sense to clean up and change clothes before we got in his car to go home. His license plate is showing so it’s no use lying about our identity.

I gamble everything on the notion that his is all they have.

A smile springs to my face and I tap the photo. “Ah, that’s right, we stopped off at Last Call for food. It’s his best friend’s establishment. I’m not crazy about it, being a strip club and all, but the food is decent.”

“Where are the bags of food?” Hall asks as Roberts watches me closely.

“We decided to eat there so Bash could catch up with his buddy.”

“Oh, so it’s all coming back to you now?” Hall says failing to hide his annoyance.

I shrug. “Your memory would come back too if someone showed you photos from the evening that took place months ago.”

“Why are you dressed like that?” Hall presses.

I examine the photos and chuckle self-deprecatingly. “Yeah, I’m such a klutz at times. While there, I bumped into a waiter carrying a tray of drinks and it went all over me, down my scrubs and into my shoes. So, I had to borrow Bash’s coat and someone’s shoes.” Was this their smoking gun?

“Ms. Graham,” Roberts raises his voice. “Sergei Petrosky was last spotted at Last Call on the night of November 28th at around 6:20pm but was never seen leaving. Sebastian was observed leaving Last Call at 7:30pm that same night that Sergei managed to vanish into thin air. Our sources tell us that Sebastian Petrosky is the new head of that crime family, the

only reason they'd name a new head is because the current one is dead, not simply missing."

I sit patiently letting the silence stretch out for a bit before I say, "I'm sorry, was there a question in there somewhere?"

"Let us paint the timeline, lady," Hall says planting his hands on the desk and leaning in at me. "You finished work at 6:30pm but you're never seen leaving the garage, you just seem to vanish into thin air. You see, we reviewed the camera footage of the back of the hospital that night, at no time are you seen departing the hospital nor is any car of Sebastian's description seen pulling up to give you a lift. The next time you are spotted is here," he jabs a finger at the photos, "looking pretty rough wearing nothing but a man's coat and someone else's shoes, leaving out the back of Last Call with Sebastian. It appears to us that this is where he found you after work, but unless you've taken up stripping for extra money, what would you have been doing there?"

My heart races but my mouth remains clamped shut.

"I'd suggest you were stripping, but with a rich boyfriend like Sebastian that would hardly be necessary and besides he doesn't look too thrilled to see you there. If anything, he looked pretty pissed. Which leads me to believe, you weren't there of your own volition and Sebastian arrived to take you home."

I clasp my hands in my lap to hold them steady.

"What we can't figure out is how the hell did you get there since your car, and yes, the cops checked, was still in the

parking deck where you left it that morning. Which means you didn't drive yourself to Last Call, somebody took you there and it sure as hell wasn't Sebastian." Hall leans in so far I fear he'll topple over the desk. "How did you get to Last Call the night of November 28<sup>th</sup>?"

I swallow in a dry throat. "I've already told you."

Hall slams his hand down on the desk top. "Alright, get up, we're taking you down to headquarters. Call your attorney and tell him to meet you down there."

Oh, my God, they're serious.

Hall is removing cuffs from his hip and moving toward me. I get up and back away. "You can't do this, on what grounds are you arresting me?"

"Obstruction of justice," Hall says cornering me.

"The cuffs won't be necessary if you agree to come quietly, Ms. Graham," Roberts says holding up his hand. "Back off, Jim. Leave her be. I think she knows we mean business."

Begrudgingly, Hall backs down and I have to wonder if this had all been rehearsed ahead of time as a scare tactic. I must say, it's working.

"Look, Ms. Graham," Roberts says, "We all know you're lying, but I suspect that you're afraid of what will happen to you if you rat out your mobster boyfriend." He gives me a sympathetic smile. "We don't want you, and I'd honestly hate to ruin your career. You give us what we want, and we'll make this all go away. Alright?"

I look away from him, but nod.

“You’re an aspiring doctor, you know you don’t have a future with that low-life, scumbag. You had your fun with the pretty bad boy, but now it’s time to hand him over and we’ll see that no harm comes to you. We handled plenty of cases like this, we know what we’re doing.”

“H-how will telling you how I got there help you get Sebastian if he had nothing to do with it?”

Their eyes brighten as they sense victory. Roberts scoots forward in his chair making it squeak against the floor. “We need to find out what happened to Sergei. I’m positive that he knows. We need you to get him to talk about it.”

I frown at them. “What? Then report back to you?”

“No, we want you to wear a wire.”

“Are you insane?” I exclaim. “You know what he’d do if he found it? He is my lover, I think he’d find it.”

“We’ve got that covered, Ms. Graham,” Roberts says practically salivating now. “You’ll arrange to meet him in a public setting, you know, a restaurant or here to meet you for lunch. You get him to talk about it and then you simply remove it before you return home with him.”

I stare incredulously at them. “Oh, yeah, over dinner I casually ask, hey babe, how’s your steak, by the way, do you know anything about Uncle Sergei disappearing because for some inexplicable reason, shortly after meeting with the DEA, I’m extremely curious.” I shake my head. “Trust me, he’d

sense the trap and there'll be nothing you can do to protect me.”

Roberts gives me a clever smirk. “Not if we do this our way. I want you to meet agent Mitchell. She’s very experienced with this sort of thing and she’ll explain exactly how this is going to go down. Cooperate or plan to spend the night in a jail cell. The choice is yours, Ms. Graham.”

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## Chapter 26 – Two Birds with One Stone

**F**or our four-month anniversary, I wanted to do something really special for Madison to make up for all the turmoil of the last few weeks. Especially after she came home completely freaked out about the latest DEA visit. I told her that she'd handled the whole thing marvelously. Yes, the photos of us leaving Last Call were problematic, but nothing truly incriminating.

So tonight, I want to give her a glimpse of how good life can be for us now that she knows the full extent of the role I need her to play in my world. I want to dazzle her and remind her of why she fell in love with me. She needs to know that despite everything, we're worth it.

I contacted Lisa and arranged to have her switch shifts with Madison on the day of our anniversary. That morning, we'd had breakfast together and really hadn't mentioned a word about it being the anniversary of our first date. Not surprising as we really haven't been making a huge deal out of it with so much going on in our lives. While I was at work that morning,

I called her and asked her to check in the guest bedroom to see if Nick had left his running shoes there from when he'd stayed with us in December.

As expected, Madison called me back within a few minutes to rave over the beautiful gown elegantly draped across the bed, along with the matching pair of heels, but the piece de la resistance was the diamond broach necklace she found in the jewelry box placed there. I told her to be dressed and ready by 6pm because I had a big night out planned for us in Manhattan.

She was so excited and animated that I switched on our security camera just so I could see her bouncing around with joy as she held the dress up to her and spun around. A little later she called to say she had to run out to pick up a few items for tonight and that she'd be gone for a couple of hours. I thought nothing of it until she left the house carrying the dress in a garment bag. I hoped it was simply that she wanted to find a matching shawl and not that I'd bought the wrong size or something like that. I started to call her and ask, but I was afraid she'd be offput by the idea that I'd been watching her at home.

I switched off the camera and decided to let the matter go.

When I arrived home at 5:50pm, Madison was still upstairs getting ready.

"It's not 6pm yet," she calls down a little anxiously, "I'll be ready, just wait down there, alright?"

I freeze on the second step. It's not like Madison to be so caught up in her appearance. She's not one to primp in the mirror for an hour before going out. It's one of the things that I love about her.

“Okaaay,” I say as I turn around. “Let me know if you need any help zipping up or anything.”

“I'm fine,” she calls out. “I'll be down in five minutes.”

The limo doesn't actually pick us up until 6:15pm, but I don't tell Mads this. Her punctuality is getting much better, but for tonight, I'll allow a little cushion.

But the jokes on me because at 5:58pm, Madison is an exquisite vision standing at the top of the stairs. The form fitting burgundy evening gown, hugs her in all the right places. The slit up her thigh shows off her long-toned legs, the thin spaghetti straps showcase the delicate slope of her shoulders. Her hair is neatly pinned up in an elegant Audrey Hepburn-ish kind of do accentuating her graceful, swanlike neck.

Mads is absolutely breathtaking as she descends the stairs. It's so hard to believe that she can be the quintessential epitome of feminine beauty yet turn around and slice open a human chest and hold the heart in her hands without blinking an eye. Indeed, my dear bride-to-be is as lethal as she is stunning.

“Hello gorgeous,” I say as I take her into my arms and gracefully dip her.

“Bash,” she laughs as I pull her upright. “I take it, you like?” she spins around slowly for my viewing pleasure.

I pull her back into my arms, “I’m beginning to wish I didn’t pick out something so damn sexy.” I check my watch. “The driver won’t be here for another fifteen minutes…” I say pumping my brows suggestively.

Her naughty laugh is such a turn on, but she pushes me away. “You have any idea how long it took me to pull this look together? Uh-ah, hands off, buddy.”

“Fine, I’ll collect my reward before the night’s over.”

“We’ll see,” she says cavalierly and then she finally visually takes me in. “Look at you, stud. You could’ve stepped right off the cover of GQ magazine.”

I look down. “What? This old thing?” I laugh. “I had it delivered to the office so I could wow you upon site.”

She grins as she saunters forward and kisses me. “Consider me duly wowed. Where exactly are you taking me? I’ve been going nuts trying to guess?”

“You’re so impatient, Dr. Graham,” I tease her. “Just a few more minutes and all will be made known.”

She groans her protest but doesn’t press any further. We grab our coats and wait for the driver. It gives me such great pleasure to spoil Mads this way. I love the way her face lights up when the limo rolls forward.

As a successful physician, I know someday she may be able to afford all these luxuries on her own, but for now, I’m

thrilled to be the one to offer it to her instead of one of those stuffy old doctors at the hospital. I haven't forgotten about Andrew and the other hotshot doctors.

We sip bubbly glasses of champagne and chat about our day as we're driven into the heart of Manhattan. Right on time, we arrive at the Downtown Manhattan Heliport where I've chartered a helicopter to fly us over New York City.

"Oh, my gosh, Bash," Madison says, gripping my arm. "I've always wanted to do this!"

Soon after we're safely strapped in, we're flying high over the city's most celebrated landmarks. I've done this a couple of times before but experiencing this with Madison transforms it from an interesting experience to a magical one.

The aerial views are magnificent, seeing the city all lit up at night. We point out the Statue of Liberty, Central Park and the Hudson River along with the iconic skyline.

"Oh, Bash, this was so amazing," Madison says, kissing my cheek. "Thank you."

"You're welcome and I hope you're hungry."

"Starving."

It's 7:27pm when we slip back into the limo. We're taken a short distance to 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the Ink 48 Hotel on top of it is the famous restaurant The Press Lounge. It's known for its stylish ambiance and sophisticated décor, not to mention its world class cuisine. We receive a very warm welcome by the friendly staff and are escorted to the rooftop lounge.

Immediately, Madison is awed by the panoramic view of the city we just flew over.

We're ushered over a reserved area with our private table. Our server introduces himself and proceeds to present a selection of their signature cocktails and fine wines. It's not long before he returns with our drinks as we look over the customized menus.

We place our orders and sit back soaking in the ambiance as we sip a vintage bottle of Chateau Margaux. As enchanting as it all is, I can't take my eyes off of Madison, in her elegance, she's the most stunning sight here.

"I don't know, I can't decide between the Maldives or Turks and Caicos. I've heard so many incredible things about both places," Madison says.

"You have nearly 3 months off before your residency starts so why don't we do both?" I reply taking a sip of wine. "That will still give us time to visit Moscow." It was just the briefest of moments, but Mads' smile dropped at the mention of visiting Moscow. Definitely not a good sign.

"Sure," she says and brings the glass to her lips. She then tugs absently at the strap of her dress, it's the second time I've seen her do it tonight.

"Is anything wrong with your dress? I did get the right size, didn't I?" She's a fairly consistent size six, but some designers do vary.

“Oh, no, it’s perfect,” she says almost too forcefully, like she’s overcompensating for something. “I just...tried a new body lotion today and it’s irritating me a little in this area.”

“Ah, are you ok?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” she says, pulling her hand away from her chest. “Hey, so you know I told you the chief resident is really giving me so much grief over the last DEA visit.”

The change of subject is rather abrupt, but obviously this is still troubling her. “Darling, I told you how we’ll handle Doctor Weiss. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“I know, trust me, I’m still holding that trump card.” Madison shifts uncomfortably in her chair. “It’s the DEA visit that still has me rattled. Bash, they were this close,” she pinches her fingers together, “to placing me in handcuffs. You have any idea how humiliating that would’ve been?”

“We’d have had their badges if they tried pulling that shit,” I say incensed at the mere thought of them putting their hands on Madison. “Besides, we’ll see how they like it when we turn the tables on them.”

Her brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been conducting my own investigation on agents Roberts and Hall. At least I know why Hall always acts like someone pissed in his cornflakes.”

Madison sits forward in her chair. “What did you find out about him?”

“He was planning to divorce his wife because he’s been banging a fellow agent for months now. Only his wife just told him that she’s pregnant with their third child. She confronted his lover and told her that if she didn’t leave Hall alone, she’d report them both to the agency which would’ve gotten them both canned. So poor Hall’s lover gave him the boot. So now he’s back full-time with an angry pregnant wife.”

Madison is shaking her head. “That would explain that sour puss face of his.”

“And Roberts,” I continue, “About ten years ago he asked the agency for a leave of absence because his wife had terminal cancer. The department was compassionate even though it meant leaving in the middle of a big case he was leading. His wife went into remission, but when he returned the case was completely in the hands of other agents. They nabbed their big fish but guess who it was.”

Her eyes round with anticipation. “Who?”

“Giovanni Castellano – of the Gambino family. He’s the one that got away.”

“No freaking way,” Madison exclaims. “So that’s why he’s got such a huge stick up his ass over losing Sergei.”

“Yep, another big one got away from him. You almost gotta feel sorry for the guy. It would be really bad for his career if the media got wind of another case he fumbled.”

“But that’s why he’s redoubling his efforts with you, babe,” Madison says. “He’s going to take you down or die trying.”



“Let him, he’s got nothing on me, and he knows it,” I gesture at her. “Even after you told them about Sergei nabbing you after work, they know I pulled you out of there and that Sergei was alive when I left.”

Madison looks away and tugs at her dress again. “But they don’t know that he was still alive or where he is now.”

I look curiously at her. She takes a sip of wine.

“We’ve all been trying to figure that out,” I reply.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” she asks with a fearful look in her eyes.

She’s playing it perfectly, just as we rehearsed when she informed me that the D.E.A. wanted her to wear a wire. She’d been terrified, but I told her this was exactly how we’d handle it, killing two birds with one stone.

I glance around, no doubt there are a few agents here disguised as waiters or patrons.

“I’m pretty sure he is.”

“Bash,” she says plaintively. “You didn’t...I mean, I know you were angry about him taking me.”

“Meh, Sergei just wanted the money back. He knew the best way to get my attention was to grab my girl. I knew he wasn’t going to hurt you. He’s far too smart for that.”

Her face twists with derision. “You were going to let him get away with snatching me?”

“Fuck no, Mads. The best way to strike at guys like Sergei is to hurt them in the pocket. That’s how you deliver your most powerful blow.”

She leans in lowering her voice, “So, you really don’t know what’s happened to him?”

“I have a strong suspicion, but I’m just waiting for confirmation from a lab.”

She sits back with the right degree of shock. “Confirm what at a lab?”

I scan the room then lean in. “When some of the boys were over in Gregor Orlov’s warehouses trying to even the score. They knocked a few containers over and one had, what I’m guessing, are his remains.”

She clasps her hand over her mouth. “What did they find?”

“Part of a hand...a thumb and two fingers.”

Her shoulders sag and her hand drops away on cue. “But that could be anybody’s, what makes you think it belongs to Sergei.”

“The crown tattoo, in the same spot Sergei wore his,” I reply, my tone heavy with a sense of mystique. “I don’t believe in coincidences, Mads. The lab will either confirm or deny my suspicion.”

“But I thought Sergei and Orlov were sympatico,” she says, voice tinged with skepticism. “It doesn’t make sense that he would go after Sergei like that.”

“They were playing nice under the arrangement carved out by my betrothal contract. But once Orlov got wind that I was backing out, the deal was off, and it was going to be all out war. I believe Gregor made a strategic move to mitigate the bloodbath. He figured Sergei was the strong man and if he fell, the rest of us would fall in line behind him without putting up too much of a fight.”

Madison sits back letting the realization fall across her face. “Gregor Orlov ordered a hit on your uncle...damn,” she says contemplatively.

“It’s the best explanation for the timing of his disappearance and the evidence found in Orlov’s warehouse.”

“Unless of course...,” suddenly, she won’t meet my eyes, “someone’s framing Orlov a-and maybe planted his body there.”

I place my glass down on the table. Madison’s going off script, this wasn’t part of what we rehearsed. “I suppose that wouldn’t be unheard of, especially if they wanted to throw the heat off themselves,” I say, playing along.

“I guess it’ll come down to which one of you had a greater motive to kill Sergei. Orlov, with his desire to seize control or you seeking revenge over my abduction.”

“True,” I say, wondering where she’s going with this. “But we left there together, and you know that I spent the whole night with you.”

She glances at me before looking away. “You could’ve done it there, before we left Last Call.”

The tension in my shoulders returns. “But sweetheart, you were present the whole time I was with Sergei,” I chuckle, belying my heightened concern. “I think you would’ve remembered me killing someone.”

She locks eyes with me, and I’m totally exposed here, feeling like I’m out on a limb that’s about to be cut off.

“Yeah, I know. Which is why I’m trying to understand why they’re trying so hard to pin it on you. Sergei was never seen leaving Last Call after you came for me. But then again, they never saw me leave the hospital that night. I was removed right from beneath their noses, Gregor could’ve had his men remove Sergei the same way.”

Check and mate.

I shrug, downplaying my admiration for what she’s done. “Some of Orlov’s boys were there that night, so, I suppose it’s possible...but highly unlikely, unless they had inside help.”

Her brows rise in surprise as we’re completely winging it. “Did he have many enemies inside his camp?”

I snort. “I could name a few. Since Sergei’s disappearance, a couple of his captains have jumped ship in favor of Orlov’s leadership.” I shake my head. “Seriously, the DEA are complete idiots for wasting their time on me. But I just hate what this is doing to you, harassing you at your job like

they're the fucking gestapo. The next time they show up, you need to call your attorney and file charges against them."

"Maybe you could tip them off to the warehouse location where you found his hand."

I jerk back as if she'd slapped me. "I'm not a rat, Mads. Let the feds do their fucking job and figure it out themselves."

"So, Gregor gets off Scott-free for killing your uncle?" she asks incredulously.

"Orlov will get his, trust me. We have our own forms of justice."

"Bash," she wines. "Please, stay out of it. No more of that life, right?"

I sigh. "I'm sorry, babe, it's our anniversary, I don't want to spend any more time talking shop." I look up to see our waiter making his way over with our appetizers. "Ah, you're going to love these."

She smiles politely at the waiter who nods at her, his gaze inadvertently slips down to where the wire is hidden...either that or he's seriously checking out her cleavage. When he bends toward her to refill her wine glass, I see the slight bulge at the back of his waistband indicating he's carrying a weapon. An agent loaded for bear.

I take a bite of stuffed peppers. "Mmm, delicious, my compliments to the chef," I tell him with a generous smile.

"Yes, very good, sir," he replies as he swings the bottle of wine toward me to top off my glass. But in the process, he

knocks my glass over spilling wine all over my crisp white shirt.

“Damn it!” I say, shooting up from the table.

“Oh, my goodness, so sorry, sir,” he exclaims and snaps his finger for another server to come over to help him. “It’s only my second night here, please forgive me,” he says while aggressively blotting my shirt with a napkin. “The meal will be comped.”

“I should think so,” I snap, shoving his hands away. “This is absolutely unacceptable!” As he fusses over me, I keep my eye on what’s happening with Madison. The other waiter, a woman is leaning toward her saying something. “I’ll be sending you the dry-cleaning bill as well,” I say in my surliest tone.

“Of course, sir, everything is on the house tonight,” he sputters. “If you’d like, we can provide you with another shirt.”

I lock eyes with him. “Go...away...*now*.” There was a second of defiance in his eyes before he remembered he was playing the part of a dutiful server at a posh restaurant.

“It’s not so bad,” Madison says, “Just scootch your tie over that way.”

“Can you believe this?” I laugh. “And they call themselves a five-star establishment.”

“I know, it’s shocking really,” she says over enthusiastically like someone very nervous about a task they have to perform.

What in the blazes did they say to her?

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## Chapter 27 – The Wire

“**H**e knows! Get the warehouse address, then go to the lady’s room!” was the fevered whisper in my ear. They suspect that Bash is aware I’m wearing a wire and is feeding me a line of bullshit. They don’t realize I’m the one who told him.

Now I have to ratchet up the frightened little bunny act. In truth, I’m getting a little nervous about how this is going to go down now that they think they need to rescue me from Bash. It could get downright ugly.

I take a big swig from my wine glass.

“Mads, are you alright?” Bash asks.

I nod and glance away from him. “I know we don’t want to talk about shop anymore, but I’m a little nervous about the big match reveal for the residency selection.”

He chuckles. “Seriously, it’s in the bag. Madison, you know you’re getting the surgical residency. You can’t really be concerned about that.”

“Are you kidding me? With the DEA buzzing around and the chief resident giving me the stink eye all the time.” I sigh heavily as if the weight of the world is on my shoulders. “I just wish we could give them something substantial enough to make them go away for good.”

He squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head as if he’s exasperated with the topic. “My God, I’ll be glad when they announce the selections so you can see you’ve worried yourself over nothing.”

“I don’t want to gamble with my career, Bash. I’ve worked too damn hard to get where I am.”

He leans forward narrowing his eyes at me. “What do you want me to do, Mads? Huh? How do I make this stop?” he snaps.

“Throw them off your trail by giving them the warehouse location where you found Sergei’s remains,” I reply and take another sip of the wine. My eyes dart toward our waiter before returning to the tabletop.

He rubs his face with his hands as if exhausted. “Those keystone cops couldn’t find it if I drew them a map with a big fat X on it.”

“Babe, do it for me, please,” I say anxiously. I tug at my dress strap again, the wire is so irritating.

Bash sits back in his chair and stares at the ceiling. “Fine,” he exhales. “I’ll leave an anonymous tip for them tomorrow

morning.” His gaze falls back to me. “Are you happy now? Can we please enjoy the rest of the evening?”

He knows they need the name right now, but he’s going to make this difficult.

“I think it would extend a lot of goodwill if it would come from me, you know,” I offer. “So, they’d feel like I was cooperating with them.”

“Jesus, Mads,” he says raising his voice.

I cower, lowering my head, playing the part of a terrified woman as the agents look on.

“It’s the Rockwell warehouse on East 29<sup>th</sup> street near the docks, bay 18. They can take in some dogs to sniff him out. If they’re too stupid to find it, that’s on them,” he says and fixes a hard glare on me. “Now, for the love of God, can you drop it?”

“I’m sorry,” I say demurely. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Bash.”

He looks askance at me. “Why are you acting so weird? This isn’t like you, Mads. What’s going on?”

I shift in my chair but won’t meet his eyes. “Nothing, I’m just tired I suppose. All the stress of the last two weeks is really getting to me.” I look directly at him and force a smile. “I promise, I’ll let it go and we’ll enjoy the evening.”

His frown melts away and he reaches across the table and takes my hand, “That’s all I wanted, babe. To show you a good

time tonight and remind ourselves why we fell in love with each other.”

I smirk. “Did you really think I needed a reminder? All I have to do is look into those eyes and I’m done.”

A slow grin spreads across his face. “As good of a time as we’re having, I can’t wait to get you home and out of that dress.” His grin broadens, “In fact, I can’t promise I’ll wait till we get home.”

I genuinely laugh almost forgetting I’m supposed to be terrified. “Play your cards right and I’ll make the limousine ride home very worth your while.”

His eyes widen appreciatively as he raises his hand, “Waiter, check please,” he jokes.

I laugh again. “Please, the least you could do is feed me first.”

“Whatever the lady wants.”

Over Bash’s shoulder, I see the female waitress, agent Mitchell waving me to the lady’s room. “The lady needs to use the restroom,” I say, rising. “I’ll be right back.”

As I walk by him, Bash takes hold of my wrist. The two waiters ready themselves for action. But Bash just winks at me. “Make it quick, I miss you already.”

“I will, baby.”

With that the agents stand down as I make my way toward them. Mitchell slips into the bathroom before I do and is

waiting there with bated breath.

“Good job, now let’s get you out of here,” she says, taking me by the arm.

“No, wait,” I say, twisting out of her grip. “I don’t want to go.”

“We think he knows, Madison. All that information that he’s feeding us, it didn’t seem odd to you?”

I let my gaze fall away as if contemplating. “It’s not that unusual for Bash to discuss some aspects of his work. If you’re so concerned that he’s suspicious, let’s just remove the damn wire. It’s irritating as hell.”

She stares me in the eye. “You looked pretty scared out there, we can take you in, protect you.”

“Like he couldn’t find me at the hospital?” I say incredulously. “I’d be putting myself more at risk if I went running out of here like I’m guilty of something. Just remove the wire and let me continue my dinner. Even if he’s suspicious, once he realizes there’s no wire, I’ll be fine.”

Her scrutinizing gaze is unrelenting. “If you go home with him, there’ll be nothing we can do to protect you.”

“I get that, but no wire, no danger.”

Her face screws up in disbelief. “The guy’s a coldblooded killer,” she says tersely. “Don’t be a fool, Madison. Let us get you out of here.”

“If you won’t remove the wire, I will,” I say growing impatient with her.

“Fine, it’s your funeral,” she retorts as she begins helping remove the wire that’s been sewn into my gown. “And they say doctors are supposed to be so fucking smart,” she grumbles.

This irks me, so before I know it. “I’m a surgeon which means I’m just as lethal and can handle myself.”

She looks at me anew as if studying me. The hard edge in my words don’t exactly mesh with the demure creature that I portrayed at the dinner table. Is the gig up?

“I wouldn’t get overconfident if I were you,” she replies as she jerks the wire out my dress seam. “You just might be too clever for your own good, Madison.”

“Look, I just want to practice medicine in peace without the DEA breathing down my back. I played along and did what you all asked. Now please,” I yank the rest of the wire out and hand it to her, “leave me the hell alone.”

Before she can get another word out, I storm out of the bathroom past the other patrons and back to our table.

“You’re back, I was about to send out a search party,” Bash says, though his eyes are questioning me, eager to know what went down.

I hold up my phone. “Sorry, I was checking messages.”

“Everything alright?”

“Yep, apparently they *can* manage to go a day without me.”

“That’s got to hurt the old god complex, or rather goddess, I should say.”

“Ha, you’re one to talk.”

Our waiter, a new one, I note, arrives with our entrees.

Bash glances up at him. “Please tell me they fired the other fellow.”

The waiter looks confused. “I’m sorry...is there anything else that I can get you?”

“We’re fine, thank you,” I say, feeling sorry for the poor guy. My gaze drifts back over to where agent Mitchel is standing. Obviously, she’s still not convinced I’m out of the woods yet. Or is she finally beginning to suspect that Bash and I orchestrated this whole charade? When I ran out to her with the dress so that she could sew in the wire, I’d put on quite the act about how anxious I was about the whole thing. That they needed to stay close because if Bash ever found out I’d betrayed him, I was a dead woman for sure.

I’d refused their request to plant listening devices in our home but had reluctantly agreed to wear the wire. I realized this was another major turning point, my chance to cut Bash loose and take my chances. I could always claim that I’d operated on his brother Nick and his best friend Stieg under duress and throw myself at the mercy of the medical board. Bash would go to jail for murder, I’d be free of Bash and all his underworld ties.

The only problem is – I'd lose Bash...and heaven help me, I'm not ready for that. There are two things in the world that make me feel alive...holding someone's life in my hands in the OR and loving Sebastian Petrosky. If I can figure out a way to have them both, I'll risk anything to do it.



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## Chapter 28 – Orders from the Motherland

**T**he DEA managed to find Sergei's remains in the barrel Stieg's men had stuffed him into deep within Victor's main warehouse. The clever sniffer dogs also managed to find a very large stash of Pakistani cocaine. Suffice to say, Victor will be too busy trying to stay out of prison to give me any serious competition or for that matter, any more shit about not marrying his daughter.

I don't know if I'm completely off the hook with Agent Roberts, but at least he has his big fish to fry.

And after Victor put that hit out on me, he's lucky all he'll get is prison time. Thank goodness, in the form of Madison, Stieg will make a full recovery.

As I sit in my office, I check my watch for the third time this hour. Today is the day Madison will receive her infamous residency match letter that she's been obsessing over this past few weeks. I know she'll nail the surgery rotation, and fairly certain she'll land the cardiothoracic spot. But until she opens the envelope, she'll be on pins and needles.

For all her positive traits, Mads is a worrier. That's part of what makes her such a brilliant surgeon, she overanalyzes, checks and rechecks every detail, studies the topic ad nauseum.

I chuckle to myself. Knowing this about her, makes her falling for me all the more...astonishing, not to mention flattering. I think for the first time in her life, Madison didn't overthink it, she acted purely on instinct – she just jumped into the unknown, somehow confident that I'd catch her and never let her fall.

Even when the DEA tried to strong arm her into wearing the wire, she immediately ran to me and told me everything, once again, confident that I'd know precisely how to handle it. Her intrinsic trust in me was oddly moving and endearing her to me more than I thought possible. It makes me feel like I never want to let her down, like I want to be a better man...someone worthy of her.

So lost in thought, I nearly jumped out of my seat when my cell buzzed on the desktop. I grabbed it quickly assuming it was Madison.

But the fluent Russian voice quickly disabused me of that notion.

“Nam nuzhno pogovorit’, Sebastian Petrosky. Ochen’ skoro.”

It's Victor Volkov, aka, the Wolf, head of one of the largest crime syndicates in Moscow. I knew this call was coming but hoped it wouldn't be this soon.

He's just told me that we need to talk. Very soon.

“Privet, Victor. Rad slyshat' tvoi golos. Da, ya soglasen.” I reply in Russian, telling him that it's good to hear from him and that I agree.

“Good,” he replies in English. “Then I extend to you an invitation to visit me at my home.”

“I am honored, sir. Your call is excellent timing. I was planning to be in Moscow in two weeks. May I come visit you then?”

There is only silence on the phone for a moment. He was expecting me to drop everything and come running. Offending him is the last thing I wish to do here.

“With your permission, I'd like to bring someone with me to meet you. She won't be free to travel until then, otherwise I would come sooner.”

“Ah...” Victor says coolly. “Your surgeon-fiancée.”

“Yes, sir.” I'm grateful that he knows that much, and I won't have to waste much time explaining her value to the organization. “This is the only time that her rigorous work schedule permits, you see.”

“Then I will make an allowance. Be here in *two* weeks. You and your girl. Until then, Sebastian.”

“Until then, sir.” The call ends but my sense of dread begins. It could all go so incredibly well or so horribly wrong. They'll either see Mads as a valuable asset to bring in, or a burdensome liability to eliminate.

Either way, I must be prepared to act swiftly and strategically. Growing anxious, I rise from behind my desk and walk over to the windows to gaze out. Madison is already feeling apprehensive about going to Moscow with me and that's when we weren't planning to go until after her graduation in May. Now I'll have to convince her to take some overdue vacation time to accompany me before her break. If she senses my unease, she'll try to back out altogether.

Bringing her into the wolf's den is unavoidable. If we ever stand a chance of receiving their blessings, this is it. To avoid this path would spell our doom. This will also serve as the official anointing of me to the role as the regional head of the family which should minimize internal wars in the current power vacuum. Nonetheless, I will take the necessary precautions to ensure Madison makes it out of there alive.

My God, I'd give my life to ensure Madison's safety. But if there is even the smallest chance that we can live a happy life together, I will take it.

My intercom buzzes. Irritated I return to my desk and tap the button.

"Yes, Deidra."

"Sir, will you be joining your 2pm conference call with Gelman & Davis?"

Shit! I thought that Madison would've called by now to give me the news. I hope nothing has gone wrong. Why hasn't she called?

“Yes, please connect me.”

“You’re good to join.”

“Thanks, Deidra.”

“Ah, Sebastian, great,” says one of the partners. “We’re just waiting on Carl, and we’ll begin.”

“Great,” I say and hit the mute button. Just as I do, Chris Isaacs’ Wicked Games ringtone plays on my cell phone. Madison!

I nearly bobble the phone in my hands as I attempt to answer it.

“I got it, baby! I got it!” Madison screams.

“The cardiothoracic residency at Presbyterian?”

“Yes!” she exclaims.

“Oh, babe, that’s so amazing,” I say with a hoot. “I knew you’d do it. I knew it!”

“I still can’t believe I edged out Simon freaking Kinnard! We were neck and neck, same procedures, stellar recommendations, both killed it on our interviews and everything. Babe, this is so frickin’ unbelievable!” she screams in exhilaration.

“Fuck yeah! We’ve got to go celebrate tonight. Where would you prefer? We can—”

“Oh, oh, wait, honey. A few of us med students want to go out for a celebratory drink after being in the trenches for so long. So I told them I…”

My heart drops to the floor, my palpable disappointment fills the room, and my ears are buzzing. “Oh...I...”

“So, I told them hell no, because I’m celebrating with my baby tonight!”

“Mads!” I yell with laughter. “You cheeky little devil.”

“Jesus, Bash, did you seriously think for one second that there’s anyone else in the world I rather share this moment with? Huh, such an amateur.”

I’m grinning sheepishly. “Yeah, yeah, you got me. Payback’s a bitch though. All right, how does Le Brouche sound? Is that swanky enough for the occasion?”

“Uh...Sebastian, do you agree?” came the male voice on the speakerphone.

“Oh shit!” I hit the unmute button. “Yes, Brad, I’m on board,” I say confidently as if I knew exactly what they’re talking about. I hit mute again.

“I’m sorry, did I catch you in the middle of a call?” she says with laughter in her voice. “I’ll let you go. Le Brouche sounds perfect.”

“Great, can’t wait to see you tonight.”

“Yep, I’ll be taking off a little early today, so I’ll be home around 5 p.m. These last few days as a student are going to fly by. Before you know it, I’ll be Dr. Graham, the surgeon. Yes!”

Suddenly, I find myself wondering if she’ll take my last name when we’re married and go by Dr. Madison Petrosky.

I'd love it if she would, but ultimately, that'll be Madison's call. Maybe...

“Alright, Dr. Graham, I'll see you this evening.”

“Yep, bye, babe.”

I rejoin the call, but it takes about twenty minutes for me to stop smiling like a besotted schoolboy. Suddenly, even the impending trip to Moscow doesn't seem so perilous as I begin to believe that this might all work out.

I'm not so naïve as to think I shouldn't prepare for the worst but at least now I feel I have just cause to hope for the best. Now I just need to figure out how to frame the Moscow trip to Madison.

I decided not to raise the topic of the Moscow trip over dinner. This was Madison's night, and I didn't want anything to diminish her joy or take the spotlight off her significant accomplishments. We did spend time discussing where we'd go during her summer break before her residency began, but I was careful to avoid any discussion of Moscow.

She was radiant, absolutely glowing over the prospects for the future. I was delighted when she slipped in that it wouldn't be too out of the question to set a wedding date. This had to mean that she had truly come to grips with the compromises she'd need to make to be my wife. Just as I'm making huge changes to fit into her world. For her, I will become the respectable, i.e., legitimate businessman, burying my more nefarious businesses so deep her high society acquaintances will never suspect a thing.



So, I patiently wait, biding my time for a more appropriate moment to raise the topic. When we arrived back home, I played some soft music and dimmed the lights. We slow danced for, maybe, the length of two songs before we were hungrily tearing off each other's clothes and making passionate love on the sectional sofa, and then the ottoman. We went upstairs to take a shower, which escalated into further indulgence of our desire. Only then did we retire for the evening.

The morning's light streams into the windows, bathing Madison in its glorious rays. I sit there watching her, still in awe that this incredibly beautiful creature is mine and that she loves me with an equally all-consuming passion. It's her complexity that truly hooks me somewhere so deep inside me I can't separate it from myself.

She's chosen a straight and narrow path for herself, becoming a prestigious, highly admired surgeon. Yet for her love interest, she's allowed herself to fall deeply for, and to be compromised by, a known Russian mobster. I've taken her by the hand and led her into my world, and though she made minor protests, her feet never stopped moving, never stopped following me wherever I led her.

She's such a lovely enigma, brilliant and mysterious. My Madison.

It's 7:38 a.m. when she finally stretches lazily and yawns herself awake. She turns over on to her side as her eyes blink

open to find me propped up on my elbow, staring back at her. She closes her eyes and smiles warmly.

“Hey, you,” she says groggily, her hand reaches out for me. I clasp it, press it gently to my chest, let her feel the beat of my heart. The heart she holds in her hands.

Her hospital shift doesn't begin until 11am so there's no need to rush. I let her wake on her own time. She works so hard, puts more on herself than necessary, but that's why she is where she is today.

We remain that way for a couple of minutes longer before she climbs out of the bed and makes her way to the bathroom. I hear the toilet flush, hear the faucet run. There's the sound of teeth being brushed and light gargle. All things I did myself before laying back down next to her.

She emerges from the bathroom clad in one of my Cornell University t-shirts that she's made her own. I'm sitting up now, back against the headboard and eyes fixed upon her. Climbing back into the bed, she slides in next to me, cuddling.

“You working from home today?” she asks me.

I wrap my arm around her. “I'll probably take a call or two from here, then head into the office around ten.”

She snakes an arm around my torso and rest her head on my chest. “Good, I just want to stay like this for a while.”

I stroke her hair as she caresses my chest. “I heard from Nick, he's in Moscow.”

Her hand freezes in place. “Is he alright? Is everything ok?”

“Yes, yes, he’s fine. He’s there visiting our mother.”

“Oh.” She relaxes, continues stroking my chest. “Well, that’s good. I’m sure she must miss him.”

“Yeah but...”

“But what?”

“It’s been nearly two years since I’ve paid her a visit and she’s not in the best of health.”

“Oh...” she says but continues caressing me. “You’ll see her this summer. Did Nick tell her that?”

I sigh to let her feel my frustration. “Yeah, but she just thinks I’m putting her off, you know? She says if I really wanted to see her, I’d come sooner.”

“Hmm,” is her only response apparently not caring to interfere in my family’s affairs.

“She’s not entirely wrong,” I say, shifting a bit on the mattress. “I could make arrangements to be there in a couple of weeks.”

She groans. “How long would you be gone?”

My heart sinks like a stone. “I...I was hoping you’d come with me.”

She sits up and looks at me. “Babe, I have to work, I can’t do that.”

“You haven’t taken any of your vacation time,” I reply evenly. “Take a few of those days to come with me.”

Her brow furrows. “I was planning to use that time for a special rotation in cardio myopathy.”

“You’ve landed your residency, you don’t need anything else to build up your resume.”

“It’s not just a resume builder, it’s practical experience that I can take into my residency.”

“Mads, I’m talking about a few days, five tops. You’ll still have plenty of time to gain more experience.” I shift around to look her in the eyes. “Just put in for a few vacation days. I want you there with me, so I can introduce my amazing fiancée to my family.”

She just stares at me for a moment, I see her sense of defiance warring against her desire to please me. When it really comes down to it, she doesn’t have a valid reason for refusing me now that her surgical residency is a lock.

Her shoulders slump and she sighs in resignation. “I guess I could.”

“I know you like to be in the thick of things in the ER, but I need you there with me. We’ll be back before you know it and you’ll see you haven’t missed a step.”

She sits back against the headboard and stares straight ahead. “Moscow, huh?”

I look askance at her. “Christ, Mads, you act as if I’m taking you to Siberia. Moscow’s a beautiful city filled with great history, rich architecture, performing arts and science.” I shake

my head. “I thought you were too smart to buy into all the western propaganda about Russia.”

That gets her ire up. “It has nothing to do with propaganda, it’s the timing of this trip.”

I snort. “The timing couldn’t be more perfect given you just cinched the residency. Admit it, your objection has nothing to do with the timing.”

“You could be whisking me off to the Maldives and I’d have the exact same reaction. So don’t sit there and accuse me of being a victim of western propaganda.”

“So, then what is it?” I ask, folding my arms across my chest. “You think the hospital can’t survive a few days without the great Dr. Graham there? Afraid some other student’s going to be in the limelight for a bit?”

Her mouth drops open, and she can’t formulate a response which tells me I’ve hit the nail on the head.

“Mads, you have your entire career to dazzle your colleagues with your brilliance and you know it,” I say with a warm smile. “I know I come second to your career, I’ve made my peace with that, but I need you to come with me on this trip. Can’t you do this for me?”

She sits back and closes her eyes. “Give me the dates, I’ll have to run them by Emma to make sure it’ll work.”

“You’re not on call yet, it’ll work,” I say removing her last obstacle. “We’ll leave in two weeks, April 7 and return on the 12<sup>th</sup>.” Moving off the bed, I slip my feet into my slides. “I’m

going to make us some breakfast. French toast and eggs.” I know it’s one of her favorites.

I see the smile tugging at the corner of those sensuous lips. “Whatever.”

As I reach the doorway, she calls out, “I’m looking forward to seeing Moscow with you. I know I’ll have a wonderful time because I’ll be with you.”

Her words floor me, and something inside me melts into little puddles. ““Ya lyublyu tebya, Madison Graham.”

Her grin spreads wide. “I love you too, babe.”

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## Chapter 29 – Two Weeks Later, Two Weeks Late

I don't know how long I've been sitting here, staring at this plastic white stick. The phrase in my head plays on repeat: How did this happen? How did this happen?

I'm still sitting on the sofa when I hear the jingle of keys and the sound of the door opening.

“Mads, what is it?” Comes Sebastian's anxious words. All I told him was to come home immediately. He hurries to my side, dropping down next to me on the sofa. “Honey, you're scaring me, what's wrong? What's happened?”

Not looking at him, I unfurl my hand from around the stick and hold it out to him.

“What is t...” he's a second processing the significance. “Wait...the two lines that's...that's positive, right?”

I still don't look at him, but merely nod.

He goes silent. We both sit there contemplating the magnitude of this development. I've been faithfully on the patch for years. I've never been pregnant, have always been



ridiculously careful. Even after Bash and I both took test to ensure we were clean, I still made him use condoms...most of the time.

How the hell did I get pregnant??

Out of the corner of my eyes, I see him scratching his head, obviously pondering the very same question.

“Well, we’ll simply have to move up the wedding date to get you down the aisle before you start showing.”

I spin around on him, staring at him as if he’d gone mad. “I can’t have a baby. This can’t happen, there’s no way in hell. I’m about to start my goddamned residency.” I rise to my feet. “No, Bash. I’m sorry, but there’s no way this is going to happen.”

He remains seated, elbows on his knees and hands clasped together. “Please explain to me why two successful people who are very much in love with each other, are already engaged to be married can’t bring a child into the world.”

He’s being so freaking calm and logical it’s infuriating. “Because I’m not ready! I’m not starting my surgical rotation with a belly out to here,” I say sticking my arms out. “They’ll sideline me, mark me as one of those women who cares more about being a mommy than being a doctor!”

“No, they won’t because they’ll see that you are just as dedicated a doctor as you’ve always been and that you’re more determined than ever to prove that.”

“How will that happen when I’m up all night with a crying baby, feeding it and changing diapers. You saw what it did to Dr. Weiss. No, Bash, I won’t let that happen to me. That’s not what I signed up for.”

His posture and tone haven’t changed. “So, that’s why we’ll hire a nanny and a nurse, the burden won’t fall on you, Mads. I promise.”

“Bash, you’re not listening to me,” I yell. “I don’t want to have a baby right now and that’s final!”

He remains seated and simply stares at me with those hauntingly beautiful eyes.

“I’m sorry if I’ve disappointed you, but you know how grueling my life is going to be over the next few years. The absolute last thing in the world that I need is some mewling infant to care for.”

His gaze shifts away from me as if he can’t bear to look at me at the moment. “It wouldn’t be some mewling infant. It would be our child, born out of our love.”

“And when the time is right, we’ll have a child to raise and love. But this is the worst possible time. Can’t you see that?”

He slowly rises from the couch. “No, Mads, not really. All I’m really hearing is what a massive inconvenience this will be for you.”

“Spoken like a person who won’t have to carry it for nine months or have your career detrimentally affected by it. And then I’m supposed to cast off the responsibility to a caregiver

just so I don't miss a beat with my career. Yeah, that doesn't make me look like some callous, career-driven bitch."

He glares at me with clenched jaw. "As usual, you're overreacting, making a far bigger deal out of it than it is."

"That's very easy for you to say."

"My God, Mads, a few months of inconvenience, that's all we're talking about. In return, we get a family. You're telling me it's not worth it?"

"Maybe I don't want a family," I scream at him. "Maybe I don't want anything that's going to stand between me and my career. Marriage, family none of it was what I wanted."

He suddenly approaches, forcing me to take quick steps back.

"Your career, your fucking career," he bellows with hands raised to the sides of his head. "You know, for all your brains, you don't have a goddamn clue about what real power is and who has it. Who can make your career and who can destroy it!" He jabs his finger at his chest. "I'm the greatest thing that ever happened to you and if you'd get your head out your ass you'd realize that!"

My eyes blur with tears. "I didn't need you to earn my residency spot, and it never would've been in jeopardy if I hadn't met you!"

"Bullshit, Mads." His sapphire eyes are large and angry. "I saw the fucking documents and notes at Presbyterian, you weren't their top choice for the coveted surgical residency

position. Simon Kinnard was but I leaned on one of the board members to flip his vote to you.”

His words hit me like a sucker punch to the gut. “Liar, you fucking liar!” I scream backing away from him.

“Who’s on the board,” he begins ticking them off on his fingers. “Doctors Jamison, Hurley, O’Brian. Kirkpatrick and Williams. You needed three votes and only had two,” he’s glaring pure malice. “You merely play at being a god, well I’m the one who got your third vote to land you your dream match. So, what does that make me?”

Stunned, I stare openly at him as if seeing him for the first time. “Why, Bash? Why?”

His eyes narrow with fury as his jaw clenches. “Because I’d do anything for you, Mads. Don’t you know that!”

The veracity of his words leaves me shaken to the core. In my arrogance, had I blinded myself to the truth that I wasn’t the most talented student in my class. Do I owe the coveted position to Sebastian?

What all is this man capable of? Are there any limits to what he’ll do?

My legs give way and I crumble to the floor. Hot tears sting my eyes and roll down my cheeks. All this time I’d been strutting around here acting like I was God’s gift to the medical world, all the while Bash knew the truth and said nothing. I am so humiliated.

I feel Bash near me. Hear his voice in my ear. “I’ll give you the world, Mads, whatever you want. But don’t you *ever* take me for granted or try to dismiss me. Your career and the hospital aren’t the center of your universe...*I am.*” He then takes me by the hands and gently lifts me to my feet. “The private jet leaves for Moscow in 2 hours, you need to be ready.”

Feeling utterly deflated, I allow Bash to lead me up the stairs to finish packing. I feel so utterly disillusioned and uncertain. What do I do with this information about the residency? What do I do about this pregnancy? I am so lost and torn.

And now I must fly thousands of miles away to a place I’ve never been with this man whom I love but hardly know.

As we fly over the Atlantic in the Gulfstream G650 that Sebastian chartered for our trip, I’m buffeted about in a whirlwind of doubt and uncertainty. I wasn’t the top choice for the surgical residency! True more than a hundred candidates were vying for the position and coming in second place is still impressive, but it’s the difference between finding out you only won the silver when you thought, and maybe even boasted, that you’d won the gold.

And now I’ll be forever beholden to Bash for pulling strings to get me the gold.

And now a baby! This is not how my life was supposed to play out. I was going to spend the next seven years dedicating my life to my residency and fellowship. How would a baby fit into this? Bash would, no doubt, honor his offer to hire a

nanny and night nurse. But how will I appear to my colleagues when shortly after having a baby, I return to work putting in long hours and barely spending any time with the newborn?

They'll look at me the same way they look at Chief Resident Emma – like some cold-hearted machine who only cares about getting ahead in her career. Let a man work like that and he's a freaking hero, but a new mother? Forget about it.

But is there a part of me that is grateful Bash is taking such a staunch position on this? In my heart of hearts, I must admit that a small part of me is grateful for two reasons. One, it further demonstrates his commitment to us, not just as a couple, but as a family. And two, for all my blustering about how I'd never go through with the pregnancy, when it really came down to it, I don't know that I could've gone through with terminating it. I've never been in this position, so I honestly don't know.

And finally, if I do go through with it...how do I feel about a crime lord being the father of my children. It's one thing for me to put myself at risk, but is it fair to bring a child into this arrangement? Even when I accepted his marriage proposal, the idea of children seemed such a distant prospect that it didn't really bare much consideration.

“Are you planning to give me the silent treatment the whole ride over?” Sebastian's voice intrudes on my thoughts.

I glance at him from the corner of my eyes. “I thought we weren't going to have any more secrets. I can't believe you did all of that behind my back.”

“Babe, I didn’t want to steal your thunder. I wanted you to have all the glory for your accomplishments.”

“Yeah, I get that, but you let me go on and on about it knowing I didn’t really achieve my goal. I feel like such an idiot right now.”

“Why? Nearly a hundred candidates were up for the residency, you made it to the number 2 spot all on your own because you’re a gifted doctor. You and Simon were neck and neck, the only thing that put him over the top was that his father is close friends with Kirkpatrick, they attended Yale together.” He scoots around in his chair to face me. “On the other hand, your Ace in the hole was me,” he says with a cheeky grin. “Long before the decision was made, I’d already conducted a little research into their background to look for leverage just in case we needed it.” When I close my eyes and shake my head, he adds, “Oh, you preferred that I hadn’t interfered? When we return to New York, you can always turn it down and hand it to Simon if it will make you feel any better.”

I roll my eyes letting him know hell would freeze over first. If Simon’s only advantage was his father’s connection, why shouldn’t I use Sebastian’s?

“Yeah, I didn’t think so,” he smirks.

I rubbed my brow in my frustration. “It’s just sucks to know I wasn’t the best.”

“Uhm, I believe I just told you that you and Simon were tied for the number one spot. The deciding factor was his father’s

connection. I merely tipped the scales back into your favor. You got yourself 95% of the way there, I merely provided the last five. Are you going to begrudge me that?”

I look at him perplexed.

“You’ve no idea how much it meant to me to be able to help you get that spot. I’m going to be your husband, Mads. Is it such a horrible thing that I want to help make your dreams come true? I’d do anything to make you happy.”

The look of pure adoration in his eyes is breathtaking. I could forgive him anything when he gives me that pleading, puppy dog look.

“Your victories are my victories, just as mine are yours,” he says taking my hand in his. “You’ve helped me during some of my most critical hours and now I’ve helped you. We’re a team, that’s what we do.”

I let him lace his fingers through mine. And a thought occurs to me. “What information did you find to swing the vote?”

He shakes a few strands of hair from his eyes and replies, “Dr. O’Brian from likes his conquest barely legal. So, I had one pay him a visit—”

“Bash!” I say horrified at the thought of him sending an underage girl to entrap a man.

“Relax, it’s not what you think. Janine is twenty-four but could easily pass for fifteen. But when I sent O’Brian the pics, he didn’t know Janine was of legal age and therefore, he



hadn't committed any crimes. I only made him think he did. To buy my silence, he voted for you."

I groan. "So now that pig thinks I'm willing to overlook his alleged crime just to land the residency?"

He chuckles. "No, because after they finalized the selections. I sent him a photo of Janine's driver's license, so he'd know she was fully legal and that he'd switched his vote for nothing. Serves the pig right."

Despite myself, I find myself smiling. "That was pretty ingenious of you."

"Anything for my girl."

My smile softens as a knot forms in my gut. Sebastian's resourcefulness and total disregard for the norms of society leave me a little unsettled. For now, he uses his power for good to elevate me, but what if he ever turns against me and uses it to tear me down?

Suddenly this embryo growing inside me takes on a much greater significance. Will the child serve as a protection making me the sainted mother of his children or will it serve as a tool he'll use to control me?

When I lift my gaze to his. He's still smiling softly but the pensive look in those eyes tells me he's studying me, wondering what I'm thinking and how he can always remain three steps ahead of me.

"Try to get some sleep, love," Bash says, pressing the recline button on the control panel. My spacious seat glides back to a

full horizontal position making a very comfy bed. “When we land it’ll be about 8 a.m. Moscow time and we have a big day ahead of us.”

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## Chapter 30 – Threading the Needle

**M**adison is pregnant! This development presents a marvelous opportunity as well as new complications. The stakes are so much higher now. Not only am I protecting my future wife, but I'm also protecting my little family.

Though her resistance to this fate is diminishing, it still persists. Her reluctance to embrace this way of life, not to mention the life growing inside her is a troublesome problem that must be solved soon. After all, I've proven to her that I'm a valuable asset to her not a liability to be renounced and rejected.

I know that deep inside she feels the harmony of our resonance, knows that we vibrate along the same frequency. That's why we fit together so well that it feels as if we were literally made for each other.

When in her confused state, she attempts to stray from the path, I'll be strong enough to hold us together in whatever form that takes. One day she'll come to understand why I've done all that I have to secure our future.

On schedule, we touch down in Moscow to sunny but cool spring weather. Madison had a good night's rest and is ready to tackle the day. We disembark the Gulfstream jet and into the crisp air to walk across the tarmac and into the bustling Sheremetyevo International Airport. A baggage handler follows behind us carrying our luggage on a trolley as we make our way through the busy terminal. Our driver is holding up a sign for us and within minutes we're in the BMW sedan making our way down the highway toward the city.

I keep a 2-bedroom apartment in the Tverskoy district, one of the more affluent areas home to many businessmen and professionals. As Madison gazes out the car windows in wonder, she declares it feels like we're in any world-class European city. She concedes it's like being in Manhattan, only much cleaner and less noisy.

We arrive at my place and the driver helps haul our luggage into the apartment. Nick had recently stayed here, and the cleaning lady aired out the place yesterday so it would be in prime condition for our arrival.

I intentionally chose to arrive on the day that Victor was away and wouldn't return to Moscow until tomorrow evening. This would give Madison and I time to explore the city and see many of the iconic landmarks. I want to do this before any potentially unpleasant business takes place upon introducing her to Victor. I don't want anything to sour her initial impressions of my home country.

“I hope you can be comfortable here for the next few days,” I say as she looks around the place with a satisfied smile.

“I like it,” she says, wandering from the chic kitchen to the living room. “It’s really nice, Bash.” She looks at me. “You only come here once a year? It just sits here empty all the rest of the time?”

“Nick uses it whenever he’s in town as well as other family members. I occasionally rent it out Airbnb style,” I reply as I follow her into the master bedroom.

“All the modern amenities,” she says surveying the bathroom with the granite countertops and large garden tub and separate shower.

I lean against the door frame. “Try not to sound so surprised, will you?”

She turns to me. “I confess, maybe western media has colored my outlook a little more than I realized. I stand duly corrected.”

“And you haven’t even seen the sights yet, but prepare to be dazzled, my dear.”

She walks over to me, wraps an arm around my waist. “From what I’ve seen, Moscow’s almost as beautiful as you.” She kisses me. “How did they let one of its most valued treasures escape?”

“Meh, they loaned me out, Moscow’s still my home. New York is a close second.” I kiss the tip of her nose. “You want to go get some breakfast and see the city on foot?”

“Yep, let’s do it. Just let me freshen up first.”

The enthusiasm in her voice warms me, gives me greater hope that she won’t object to us spending more time here. Maybe someday, calling it our second home.

It’s about a twenty-minute walk to Red Square, the heart of Moscow, it’s iconic center. On my phone, I show Madison where we’re headed for breakfast. The location is adjacent to Red Square.

I chuckle when she pronounces GUM (State Department Store) like the word gum. I tell her it rhymes with room, not gum. The actual place itself rivals the most opulent shopping malls in the U.S. and there are many charming cafes along the way. We stop in one just short of the GUM for breakfast.

I love the way Mads’ face lights up at our surroundings and how at ease she is. I’m impressed when she makes an attempt at ordering her food in Russian. The waitress smiles politely and tells her that she understands English.

Mads smiles self-deprecatingly and proceeds to ask for the Blini pancakes with honey, pelmeni filled with potatoes and espresso.

“The city is so vibrant and majestic, Bash. I’m so glad I came.”

“So am I, Mads,” I reply. “You should see yourself, it’s like you’ve come alive.”

She closes her eyes and tilts her head to the side. “You do that to me, the city’s just the icing on the cake.”

“I hope you still feel that way after you meet my mother tomorrow,” I chuckle.

She frowns. “You anticipate it not going well? How much does she know about me.”

“Word travels fast, she knows all the obvious things about you, and she knows I’ve brought you to meet her.”

“And?”

“She’ll be fine.”

“Will be fine?” Mads sits back in her chair and eyes me carefully. “Let me guess, she’d prefer you’d brought home a nice Russian girl. Definitely not one of mixed heritage?”

I shrug. My mother’s never been one to harbor hateful attitudes toward any ethnicity, but then again, I’d never dated a non-Russian girl. “She comes from a different generation, Mads. Allowances must be made. But the important thing is, she knows I’m absolutely head over heels in love with you and she’s making her peace with it.” I nod. “Who wouldn’t love to have a stunningly beautiful surgeon as a daughter-in-law?”

“Ah, well. It’s not like we’ll see her very often with her living in Moscow,” she replies soberly as she sips her espresso.

My heart sinks a little. “She’s going to love you, Madison, you’ll see.” I don’t want her to have any excuse to avoid returning here.

“By the way, did you ever ask your mom about...”



“About what?”

She scrunches her nose as if she doesn't want to say it.

“What?” I laugh.

“Sergei's claim that he's your father?”

“Oh...”

“I'm sorry if you don't want to talk about it.”

“No, it's...I haven't asked her.”

Her brows pinch together. “Why not?”

“What's the point?”

“Uh, to find out which one of them was your father.”

“Alexi was my father, end of discussion,” I say a little too abruptly.

“Okaay,” she says and sips her espresso.

I sigh. “What if that miserable, depraved bastard was my dad? I don't want to hear that. I don't want...what good could come of it?”

She bites her bottom lip as she considers it. “Well, if she gets all judgmental about us, you could always throw the fact that she slept with your dad and his brother in her face.” She hitches up her shoulders. “And then lied to you about who your father was.”

Hearing it phrased that way, makes me realize why I've been avoiding bringing up the subject with my mother. I didn't want to face what all of it implied about her. When I saw the video

recording of Sergei making advances at her, I didn't consider that he might have just been trying to rekindle their relationship. Had they really been an item before she started up with his brother...my dad?

"I just have too much on my plate to deal with that right now. He's gone, I just want to forget about all of it."

She raises her brows and looks away as she says, "Not the healthiest way to deal with it, but whatever."

"Look, I'll deal with it, just not during this visit, okay?"

"Fine, fine, it's your life."

"It's our life," I say firmly. "We'll work through it, just not now. Can you give me that?"

She nods. "Sure." Her eyes brighten. "Can we go see Red Square now? I'm dying to see the iconic St. Basil cathedral."

"Let's go." I toss a few ruble bills on the table and rise. I grab my backpack off the chair as Madison adjusts her jacket.

We spend the rest of the day winding our way around the city, visiting several iconic landmarks. We tour St. Basil cathedral, the Kremlin, the luxurious GUM shopping mall, the famous Tretyakov Art Gallery and end our day at the famed Gorky Park.

We strolled through the grand entry way with towering columns down toward the fountains. Before entering, Madison had said she was exhausted, but she had a new burst of energy upon seeing the beauty of the park. Several friendly park goers

offered to take our photo, so we'd have plenty to remind us of the wonderful day we'd enjoyed.

Once again, seeing it all with Madison made it magical and creates memories that I'll always treasure. I look at the happy couples walking by pushing strollers with their babies. And I envision Madison and I doing the same about a year from now.

For the first time in my life, I am truly...happy. I will do anything to protect and preserve my family.

Finally, at about 5:37pm, we decide to call it a day with plans to see the grand palaces tomorrow morning. For now, we'll go home, rest up a bit before going out to dinner at the famous rooftop restaurant O2 Lounge at 8pm.

As we dine at the opulent restaurant Madison stares out in awe at the beautiful city vista. "Bash, this has got to be one of the most memorable days of my life. Seeing this amazing city and seeing it with you has been one of the great highlights of my life."

"This is only the beginning of our life together, Mads. There's so much that I want to share with you. You're my dream come true, and I'll do whatever it takes to be yours."

The most serene look falls across her face, like she too feels the warmth and gravity of this moment. Like she finally believes the stars aligned for us and we're meant to be together no matter what the costs. She's committed heart and soul to us.

That evening, when we go home, we lay in our bed and tenderly make love to each other, a true joining of the spirit.

As I lie above her, looking down into her captivating eyes, I tell her how much she means to me, that she is the very heart of me. I ask her, to please embrace the child growing in her womb, to be as happy about it as I am, to love our family as much as I do.

Tears stream down the sides of her face as she nods wordlessly that she'll do just that.

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## Chapter 31 – Meeting Ekaterina and the Wolf

**A**fter we spent the morning touring the Tsaritsyno Palace – the once royal residence of Catherine the Great, we stop for a bite to eat and make our way to Sebastian’s mother’s home.

I go fully prepared to be kind and polite, come what may. I’ve fallen in love with the city and the people, and am therefore, determined that his mother will do nothing to dispel the wonderful impression I have of Moscow.

Ekaterina lives in a lovely part of the city in a modest but elegant home. She and a gentleman, I assume to be her current love interest greet us at the door. I’ve seen pictures of her, so was prepared to see an attractive older woman, but seeing her in person it was quite apparent why she’d easily won a number of beauty contests in her day. It was also apparent where Sebastian got his good looks.

Her stunning blue eyes fix upon me, taking me in, weighing me up. A polite smile touches her lips when Sebastian

introduces us. She extends her hand in greeting and in a thick Russian accent says, “A pleasure to meet you, Madison.”

“Likewise, Ekaterina,” I reply, shaking her hand.

She in turn introduces us to her handsome friend, who appears to be ten to fifteen years her junior. His name is Ulyan. The way it’s pronounced it rhymes with Julian.

“Please come in,” she says with a sweeping gesture to enter.

Sebastian places his hand on the small of my back, urging me forward. We follow Ekaterina passed the foyer and into the tastefully decorated living room. She gestures at the sofa to take a seat. There is a tray of tea and biscuits on the coffee table before us.

“Would you like some tea?” she asks, still in English.

“Da, pozhaluysta,” I reply in my best Russian. The corner of her mouth twitches up as her eyes dart to Sebastian.

“Madison is learning Russian, early days yet,” he says giving my hand a squeeze.

I feel my cheeks heat with embarrassment as she pours our tea. Is my accent that horrible?

“You have a lovely home,” I say, as she withdraws to a chair catty-corner to the sofa. Ulyan has seated himself across from her.

“Thank you,” she says, her gaze heavy upon me. “Sebastian tells me that you are an imminent surgeon in New York. At such a young age, this is impressive.”

I glance at Sebastian and smile nervously. “Thank you. I’ve been able to scrub in and assist in many surgical procedures and have been chosen for the cardiothoracic residency where I’ll develop and hone my skills as a surgeon.”

“She’s being modest,” Sebastian says, smiling, “She’s top in her class at NYU and received the most coveted surgical residency slot.”

Ekaterina smiles appreciatively. “Your parents must be so proud of you, Madison. Do they also live in New York?”

“Uh, no, my father lives in Anchorage, Alaska, retired Naval officer, and my mother passed away when I was very young.”

“I’m sorry, yes, I do recall Sebastian mentioning that. She was from...” Her gaze lifts to the ceiling as she pretends to search for the word, “Panama, right?”

“Yes, she grew up in Paraiso, Panama near the Canal zone. My parents met when my father was stationed there at Rodman Naval Base.” Yes, I want to say, that my Panamanian mother is where I get my smooth honey-brown complexion and wavy dark hair. The narrow bone structure and hazel eyes come from my dad’s Irish-American side of the family.

Her mouth turns down a little. “Oh, it must have been very difficult growing up in America being of mixed blood.”

“Actually, no it wasn’t,” I readily reply. “My life was no more difficult or worse off than any of my friends I grew up with on the navy base. Life is what you make of it.” I then chuckle. “Don’t believe all the Eastern propaganda telling you



that America is some horrible, divisive place to live. It's actually one of the best places in the world to live for someone who looks like me," I say with a smile and a wink.

I feel the stroke of Sebastian's hand down my back, telling me well-done, but now ease off the subject. I take the hint and switch gears.

"I've been having such a wonderful time in Moscow. The city is absolutely breathtaking, and the people are so wonderful. I'm very pleased to be here and to meet you."

Her smile is rigid as is her posture. "It pleases me that you enjoy our city." She shifts uncomfortably in her chair. "And it is good to meet you as well."

I breathe a sigh of relief feeling as if we've reached a little milestone.

"What sites have you seen so far, Madison?" Ulyan asks, his gray eyes alert and attentive.

"Oh, I've been to Red Square, toured the Kremlin, St. Basil Cathedral, Tretyakev Gallery, the GUM and Gorky Park. That was yesterday. This morning we toured Catherine the Great's former residence Tsaritsyno Palace. It was absolutely incredible. It reminded me a good deal of the palace de Versailles."

"Of Paris, yes, they are both equal in their beauty and grandeur," Ulyan replies. "You must have Sebastian take you to Arbat Street as well for more fine shopping while you are here."

I nod eagerly, “Yes, we plan to go there tomorrow.” I glance at Sebastian for confirmation.

“It’s next on the list,” he replies.

“How long will you be staying in Moscow?” Ekaterina inquires. “Hopefully, long enough to join us for dinner one evening.” Her smile is still brittle, but she’s trying, I’ll give her that.

“We’ll be here through the end of the week,” Sebastian answers. “Madison has to return to work.”

“Oh,” she says, “Well, perhaps we can have dinner together the night before you return home.”

“That would be lovely,” I say. “Now that I’m here I almost wish we could stay longer. There’s so much to see.”

“Madison has a two-month break before she starts her residency,” he glances at me. “We can return for an extended visit then, if you’d like.”

I’m a little surprised by the suggestion, but not unpleasantly so. I nod, “That definitely sounds doable. It’d be nice to visit when it’s a little warmer.”

“Yes, then you can venture outside of Moscow to St. Petersburg and Sochi.”

“Ah,” I snap my fingers, “where they held the winter Olympics in 2014.”

“Yes, that is right,” Ulyan says with a big grin. He tamps it down after a frosty look from Ekaterina. He raises his teacup

to his lips.

“Ekaterina, do you visit the U.S. often?” I ask to break an awkward silence.

“No,” was her curt response.

Sebastian gives her a look. She averts her gaze but continues.

“I have not returned since my husband was killed there.”

“Oh...I’m sorry.”

“Why? You were not involved.”

“No, I mean, I’m sorry for your loss and that America holds such a negative memory for you.” I think about it a moment. “But it can’t be all too bad as you’ve sent Nickolaus there to study at Cornell University.”

“He does not like it there and I agree that he should return home to continue his studies here in Moscow.”

I’m really trying not to take that as personal slight that she wants to prevent her youngest son from meeting up with another...non-Russian. I can’t help wondering if she knows what happened to Nick or that I was the one who treated his gunshot wounds.

“Nick was homesick, mom. But I think he should stay to better learn the western mindset to help me run things there.”

She sniffs and turns her head.

The house phone rings. “I will get it,” Ulyan springs up from his chair and leaves the room.

“You could always come visit so Nick wouldn’t be so homesick,” Sebastian pushes. “Your reason for staying away has been...eliminated.”

Her eyes go wide as she stares at her eldest son. He holds her gaze without flinching.

“The last time I saw him, he told me something, mom,” he says, and now his gaze falters. “He told me that the two of you had been lovers and that he was my father.”

Ekaterina and I both nearly choke on our tea. Jesus, I encouraged Bash to address the issue, but I didn’t think it was going to go down like this. I’m wishing a doorbell would ring so I’d have an excuse to leave the room.

She’s glaring at him, she utters bitter words in Russian.

“I’ve already told Madison everything, I don’t have any secrets from her.” He swallows in a dry throat. “Was Sergei lying?”

She turns away from him refusing to utter a word.

“Even your silence speaks, mom. A DNA test will speak even louder, but I’d like to hear the truth from my mother.”

When her silence persists, Sebastian adds, “You left me there to be raised by the man you believed killed your husband. You took Nick but left me behind with him. Why? Was it because Sergei was my father?”

She blurts out more angry words in Russian, her eyes are tearing up.

“That was the agreement? Leave me, there with him in exchange he’d leave you in peace and keep the secret that I was his son.”

She breathes in deeply and rubs her hands across her face. She replies in Russian.

“In English, please. I’m going to tell her everything anyway.”

“Yes,” she says angrily. “We were together a brief time until he showed me who he really was. By then, Alexi had been so kind to me, and he saw how Sergei had treated me. He encouraged me to leave Sergei. He did not know that I was falling in love with him...or that I was carrying Sergei’s child. But he had secretly loved me too, so we married. In the end, I think that is why he killed Alexi. He wanted to kill me too until I told him that you were his son, the timing of your birth confirmed the truth. He allowed me to leave, to return to Russia but only if I agreed to leave you to be raised by him.” The tears slid down her cheeks and she wiped them away in angry swipes. “I did what had to be done.”

For the next moment nothing but an oppressive silence fills the room as Sebastian processes the information. It’s finally broken when Ulyan returns.

“It was the cleaner,” Ulyan explains as he hesitantly retakes his seat. “She says she will come Thursday instead of tomorrow. I told her it was okay.”

Ekaterina gives a terse nod.

“Ulyan,” I blurt out. “Could you please show me your gardens, I noticed them when we pulled up.”

He pops back up out of his chair. “Of course, I would be—”

“Sit down,” Ekaterina barks. “I too keep no secrets from Ulyan.”

“What more do you wish to know, Bash?” she asks coolly.

“You never returned and barely ever called,” he says in a quiet voice.

She continues her harsh wordless stare. If Sebastian wanted answers, he’d better phrase it as a question. Ekaterina wasn’t planning to offer any more information than was absolutely necessary.

“Did you intentionally keep your distance because,” he paused blinking several times, “because you saw him in me?”

She draws up, her shoulders go rigid. “How did Sergei die, Bash? Answer that, and you answer your own question.”

His face darkens with anger. “I was only twelve when you left. Maybe I’d have a different answer if you hadn’t abandoned me to him.”

“I had to save one of you,” she retorts. “I saved Alexi’s son.”

He glowers at her with jaw clenched.

She gives him a cruel smile and gestures at him. “You turned out not so bad with your American Ivy league MBA and your,” she looks me up and down, “American surgeon. Maybe I did the right thing after all, huh?”

“You did what was most convenient for you. To hell with me, right, mom?”

And now I began to understand Sebastian’s intense anger over my initial response to my pregnancy.

“I did what I had to,” she says defiantly. “I will not live with regrets, not over this.”

He presses his hands together as if praying, he holds them against his lips and closes his eyes. Ekaterina stares at him for a few beats more and rolls her eyes and looks away.

What a cold bitch, I think. Feeling a protective instinct, I place a hand on his back to sooth him.

His eyes flick open. “I know that you haven’t asked for it, nor probably even want it...but I forgive you, mom. I’m about to start a new chapter of my life. I’ve got to let go of the baggage, of all the things pulling me down into the mire. I’ll make my own way and won’t be defined by Sergei...or even you, for that matter.”

She flinches as if he’d slapped her.

He abruptly rises from the sofa and holds his hand out to me. I take it and stand alongside him.

“You’ll understand if I choose to keep this visit brief.” He turns to Ulyan, gives him a curt nod.

Ekaterina and Ulyan rise as well.

“Yes, this is best,” she replies, smoothing the fabric of her blouse.

“It was a pleasure meeting you,” Ulyan says to us both with an apprehensive smile.

“Likewise,” I say.

We all make our way to the door with nothing but the shuffling of feet to be heard.

When Sebastian reaches for the door handle, Ekaterina reaches out for him, grasps his arm. He turns to look at her with a hard edge in his eyes – eyes that mirror hers. She moves forward and gathers him into her arms.

Ulyan and I exchange bemused looks.

At first, Bash’s arms remain at his side, but then they slowly rise to return his mother’s rare embrace. Ulyan looks away as if the moment is too intimate to gaze upon.

My stomach knots up with emotion sensing what this must cost them both. I hear her whisper in Russian, but I’m fairly certain she is saying that she’s sorry.

He hugs her tighter, burying his face in her shoulder.

When they finally release each other, both sets of eyes are wet. She gives him a tremulous smile and then glances at me. “I will call you to make dinner plans before you leave.”

I smile back. “I’d like that, Ekaterina.”

We slip out the door and don’t say a word until we’re back in the car half a mile down the road. Bash’s hand encloses mine.

“You were right,” he says softly. “It was good to clear the air.”



“I’m so proud of you, Bash. I know how difficult that had to be, but you handled it so well.”

“It helped having you there, it calmed me.”

“Really?” I chuckle. “Because I was nervous as hell.”

He smiles. “You did great. Despite everything, I think my mom liked you.”

“Pfft. I’ll believe it if she actually calls us for dinner.”

“Maybe she will, it doesn’t matter.”

“Don’t say that.”

He glances at me.

“What?” I say. “Don’t pretend like it doesn’t matter, I’d question if you had a heart if it didn’t.” I give a derisive laugh. “I was this tempted to cut her chest open to see if she had one and if it was made of ice.”

“Jesus, Mads,” he says taken aback.

“Well, she was pissing me off with that whole ice-queen attitude when she could plainly see you were hurting. It made me want to hurt her.”

His frown softens. “Why?”

“Why? Because anyone who hurts you is going to have to deal with me.”

His lips curve into a smile. “Yeah?”

“You think that’s funny? As a surgeon, I know about a thousand different ways I could make someone suffer...

horribly.”

His brows hike up. “I believe you.”

“That’s better,” I say as I lift my hands out in front of me. “Respect the skill, baby, respect the skill.”

“I do.” He looks at me again. “Mads.”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t know how much your love means to me.” He nods pensively. “It’s enough to make me want to forget about all the things that ever hurt me in the past. You’re...healing me.”

I squeeze his hand and smile warmly. “That’s my job, babe. Always.”

We shop the exquisite commercial district of Arbat Street and it’s everything that Ulyan had said it would be. I’m utterly charmed by the elegance and beauty of the place. Pretty soon Sebastian and I are weighed down with shopping bags full of designer clothing, shoes and artwork. Anything I expressed interest in, Bash immediately whipped out a credit card or rubles to acquire it. It was the most decadent shopping spree I’d ever been on.

When we passed a baby apparel store, we both exchanged glances and then decided to go inside. We ended up needing to buy a little cart just so we could haul around all the little baby items we’d purchased. I know it’s bad luck to do so much for the baby while in the first trimester, but we were too high on the moment and on each other to care about such things.

As we exit the store, Sebastian glances at his watch. “We’d better head home.”

I notice a nervous hitch in his voice. We’re scheduled to have dinner at the home of Victor Volkov, a high-ranking business associate. From what I gather, Victor is none too thrilled about Sebastian backing out of his engagement to Natasha. He’s even less enamored with the new direction Sebastian wishes to take the organization. I’m sure his choice of new bride isn’t helping matters. Nonetheless, Sebastian is determined to march forward with his plans.

We arrive back at his place around 6 p.m. Dinner with Victor is at 8 p.m. After hauling in our goods, we relax on the sofa with a small glass of wine. But then Sebastian ops for something a little stronger, some Beluga vodka, a regional high-end Vodka known for its rich, smooth taste. I refrain from drinking anything other than a little wine. We sit back with our feet up in silent contemplation of the evening to come.

If all goes as he hopes, he’ll gain the backing of Victor as the new head of the family. If it doesn’t go well, it’s not simply a matter of him failing to get the appointment...it might result in his removal altogether. He hasn’t explicitly stated this, but I can read between the lines.

By 7 p.m., the vodka has effectively taken the edge off, and we silently prepare for dinner. I apply a modest amount of makeup and pull my hair up into a stylish bun. Sebastian places a stunning diamond necklace around my neck and adorns my ears with matching earrings. I’m wearing an

elegant black cocktail dress, Sebastian is in an equally refined designer suit. If nothing else, we make quite the fashion statement.

We don our coats, Sebastian insists I make an exception and wear a gorgeous full-length mink. By 7:40 p.m., we're on the road well on our way to Victor's whose home should only be about a ten-minute drive away. We arrive at his stately home surrounded by high security gates. We drive up the cobbled driveway, park out front and ascend the grand entry way.

A man servant meets us at the door and escorts us in through the arching foyer and into the great room. It's built for grandeur, and it doesn't disappoint. It was a room worthy of a spot in the grandest of palaces.

Standing next to the huge fireplace is a refined gentleman I estimate to be in his late sixties. Time has done its work, but it's apparent that back in his day, he likely turned a few heads.

"Ah, Sebastian Petrosky," he says as we enter. "How good to see you." He embraces him, kissing him on each cheek.

"It is very good to see you, sir."

He laughs. "Call me, Victor tonight." He then turns his attention to me. A wolfish grin spreads across his face. "Please introduce me to this exquisite creature."

"Victor, this is Dr. Madison Graham, my fiancée."

My hand is swallowed up by Victor's. "What a pleasure to meet you, my dear."

“The pleasure is all mine,” I reply with my most alluring smile as I hold his gaze.

His grin broadens as he snaps a finger at his servant. “Bring drinks for my guests.” He says, never taking his eyes off me. “Is this your first time to Moscow?”

“Yes, it is but it won’t be my last, I assure you.”

He hitches up a thick gray brow. “Oh, so you’ve enjoyed our fair city?”

I close my eyes dreamily. “I’ve absolutely fallen in love with it. It’s one of the most beautiful cities in the world.”

“Beauty knows beauty,” he says slyly. “Please come, have a seat.”

“Victor, this is for you,” Sebastian hands Victor a gift-wrapped bottle of very expensive Beluga Vodka.

He takes it and examines it. “Ah, a very fine vintage. You have excellent taste.” His eyes flick toward me. “In everything, it seems.”

We follow him over to the sofa. He sits in an armchair across from us and sets the vodka on the coffee table. “Sebastian tells me that you are a cardiothoracic surgeon,” he says clearly impressed. “How did you become interested in this field of medicine?”

“My mother passed away of a rare heart disease when I was a child,” I reply with enough sensitivity to suggest it was difficult but not enough that I was forever debilitated by it.

“So, the study of the heart became critical to me. I hoped I could help others avoid the tragedy that I suffered.”

“Ah, most admirable,” Victor says, “but surgery...that’s not the mere study of the heart. You,” he made a sawing motion with his hand, “cut into the chest, hold the heart in your hands.” His gray eyes narrow at me. “Was it at all difficult to overcome any aversion one might naturally have to such things.”

I chuckle demurely having this conversation with numerous others. “During biology classes in high school, I may have... been sick a few times before I learned to control it. By the time I reached medical school, I could cut open the chest of a cadaver without blinking an eye.”

His eyes narrow further as he studies me, trying to figure me out. I have a strange feeling that I have...disturbed him. As if he’s having great difficulty reconciling the woman before him with a cold-hearted butcher.

He’s got it all wrong. “I want to help people, make them better,” I offer. “If that means I have to do the difficult work of removing or repairing damaged parts of their body, then I must set aside any aversions I might have and get the job done. I save lives, Mr. Volkov.” I give him a coquettish smile. “I don’t cut open people for pleasure.”

His face smooths out and he nods appreciatively. “I can see why young Sebastian has fallen so completely for you, such beauty, brains and wit are a rare combination in a woman.”

Or a man, for that matter, I resist saying. I'm here to help charm him, not school him on feminism.

“And please, dear girl, call me Victor.” He crosses his legs and sits back as he appraises me. “I believe your father was a captain in the United States Navy.” He lifts his chin. “How does he feel about you taking up with a Russian boy, huh?”

I take a deep breath and I consider how best to answer. “Since my mother’s death, my father has gone into a state of depression of sorts. I was mostly raised by my aunt after my mother passed away. Father and I speak occasionally, but he seems to have contented himself to a hermit’s life in Anchorage, Alaska. You know, where he can use his telescope to stare at the stars and keep an eye on the Russians.”

His expression falls at that. But then almost imperceptibly, a smile creeps across his face as he wags a finger at me. “Ah, a sense of humor too. I like this girl of yours, Sebastian. If I’d been a much younger man, I would give you quite the challenge.”

Sebastian chuckles, even as I sense him bristle at the suggestion.

“But seriously, my father really doesn’t have much to say to anyone these days, much less opine on my love life.” I turn to Bash. “I love Sebastian. I love practicing medicine. As long as I have those two things, nothing else really matters.”

The servant enters the room carrying a tray filled with drinks. I take what appears to be a pear martini and pretend to sip on it. Bash and Victor take what appears to be shots of

bourbon. I begin to regret that we started drinking before we arrived. He'll be smashed by the time the evening is over.

We engage in a little more small talk about my visit, about my residency and even about whether I'd consider a fellowship here in Moscow. All in all, I think it's going remarkably well. So why do I get this sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach?



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## Chapter 32 – Opening Salvo

**S**hortly after we arrived, another guest, a lady friend of Victor's, shows up stylishly dressed for the evening. She's introduced as a dear old friend who was visiting from London.

As expected, the dinner table in Victor's home was elegantly set with fine China, crystal glassware, and beautiful table linens. The staff were attentive and solicitous of our comfort as they hovered about as we ate.

In grand style, we start off with Beluga caviar served with blini chopped eggs, onions, and sour cream. Madison had never tried caviar before and put on a brave face, consuming it without flinching at what she'd referred to on occasion as raw fish eggs.

Next, we were served a traditional Borscht soup and pelmeni, along with beef stroganoff and poached salmon. All of this takes place amidst amiable conversation, but the pointed looks Victor keeps giving me tells me he needs to speak to me pronto.

I give him a curt nod, letting him know that I understand and will seek the first opportunity. Fortunately, he's invited this British companion who can hopefully keep Madison distracted while we talk business in another room.

After the traditional dessert is served, medovik and ptichye moloko, we adjourn back to the living room. Victor skillfully encourages Donna to explain some of the context of the artwork hanging on the walls. Donna, being an art buyer, readily agrees to do so. Victor grips my arm and leads me out the main corridor and down to his study.

"Is it true that you took out Sergei?" he says his old gray eyes now lively and alert.

"He killed my father and had taken Madison," I reply succinctly. "Yes, I did it to avenge my father." I wonder if he knows the truth about my parentage as well.

"Yes, yes," he pats my shoulder. "The bloated pig had it coming, but you should have gone through the proper channels before you acted. I need to know I have a man there who shows respect for order and for the old ways."

I lower my eyes in deference to him. "That was my intention, but Sergei surprised me by kidnapping Madison. He...he touched her, and I responded accordingly."

"As would any man," he says, then looks askance at me. "Is it true she cut Boba's dick off?"

I give a curt nod.

He shakes his head with a half-smile. “Don’t ever piss that one off, Bash. I’ve no need for an eunuch.”

“I’ve been duly warned,” I say dryly.

“We’ll come back to your girl later,” he said dismissively. “I want to talk about this new direction you mentioned for the business. I don’t like it, Bash. It’s too much too soon. It would be too disruptive.”

“I’m not suggesting we transition overnight, sir. We do it gradually over the space of 16 – 24 months.”

“You’re talking about handing off businesses that yield millions of dollars.”

“To focus on businesses that will yield billions of dollars for you.”

“In hedge funds?”

“Yes, hedge funds.”

“But not all above board, no?”

“We’ll be exploiting a few loopholes, using some tricks that I learned at Goldman Sachs. As long as we keep moving the ball, and distract them with shiny things, we stand to make more than all these petty shops put together. Plus, focus on more of the cannabis production on the legitimate end. I can show you the numbers, I’ve been running small campaigns to demonstrate the growth potential and general viability.”

When Victor’s face twists with skepticism, I add, “Let us play their game, take advantage of the gaps to play it better

than they ever imagined and make a fortune in the meanwhile. Where is the flaw in the logic?”

He shakes his head. “It all sounds good on paper, Bash. But with the Albanians breathing down our necks, it’s not the best time to introduce a radically new business strategy. Now that Sergei is gone and Gregor has been indicted, they sense weakness and will seek to fill the power vacuum. I’ve already heard much talk of them coordinating their efforts with the Irish to strike a hard blow,” he says smacking his palm with his fist.

“I will be ready, all I need is your blessing on my rise as head of the family. If I have that, I can galvanize our forces for battle.”

“You’re losing support over Sergei, for all his enemies, he made a lot of powerful people richer. And then the move against Gregor – there are some who would have *your* blood next.”

He bobs his head down the hall. “Now with this girl,” he frowns. “It’s too much, Bash. To dump Natasha, to take up with this American. It doesn’t matter that she’s a doctor or that she’s very beautiful, she’s not Russian. Who knows where her loyalty lies, what assurances do we have that she would keep our code?”

“She’s loyal, trust me on this,” I plead hoping to hell I won’t need to use my trump card.

“Why because she loves you?” he snorts. “A woman’s heart is as fickle as the wind, Bash. Don’t be so naïve.”

“She’s agreed to take on the role as our dedicated surgeon,” I argue. “She’s already performed two successful operations.” I lift my phone. “I have it as proof. Her medical career would be destroyed if this ever got out.”

His eyes go wide as he holds his hand out to me. “Let me see it.”

I grit my teeth, I’d prayed it’d never get this far. But desperate times...I find the video and open it for him.

He watches it eagerly, a slow ugly grin spreads across his face. “Send me this video.”

My instincts tell me this is a huge mistake, but what choice do I have if I want his support? “Is that really necessary?”

The color rises in his face. “You want my support, you give me the collateral I need. Who knows what this girl will do? She could be the very weapon used to destroy you!”

“She won’t because there’s more at stake than just her career.”

His eyes narrow as he glares at me. “What else?”

“She’s pregnant, we just found out. Our child will serve as the guarantee on her silence.”

His expression turns a degree more devious. “Yes, yes. This could work.”

I feel like a fucking fiend for even suggesting our child could be used as leverage, but I know it’ll never come to that. This is

just a bargaining chip to get what I need right now and that's Victor Volkov's backing.

"You'll get my backing when I get the video and I want you to keep me updated on the arrival of your child."

Anger surges in me like a tidal wave ready to crash onto the shore. I tap at my phone screen and hit send. My gaze fixes upon Victor with steely determination. "There'll be no need for your involvement or concern over the baby. Madison will be made to understand that if she ever turned on me, her career will be destroyed, and she'll never see her child again because it'll remain with me."

He smirks. "I gave you an order, Sebastian. This is the price you must pay for flaunting our conventions." He lifts his chin and stares down at me with his cold gray eyes. "An ambitious career woman like Madison won't have time to properly care for an infant, so you'll need a live-in caregiver. As a gift, I'll send you a good one from Russia." He must see my face cloud over because he quickly adds, "Oh, don't worry, Bash. If Madison is all that you say, you'll be a happy family for a very long time. But if not, it is your little family who will suffer."

It takes every ounce of self-control not to throw him against the wall and shove the barrel of a gun to his head for even implying that he'd hurt Mads or our baby. But I remember my objective. I need his support. For now.

I'm nearly trembling with rage, but I force a smile to my face. "I accept your terms."

He extends his hand. “Then you have my blessings, Sebastian. You have one year to show and prove your plans. Don’t make me regret my decision.”

I give his hand a firm shake. “You’ll be too busy counting all the money I’m making you to regret a damn thing, sir.”

He chuckles. “I hope you’re right, Bash. I really do.” He glances out at the corridor. “Our business is concluded, let’s rejoin the women, shall we?”

When we return, Madison and Donna are laughing over something Donna has said. They both turn to look at us. “Ah, I was just about to send out a search party, love,” says Donna. She moves over to Victor’s side and takes his arm. “I was just telling Madison about how we first met.”

He smiles warmly at her. “Really, you must stop boring people with that story.”

She’s not Russian, I think resentfully, but then again, Victor isn’t trying to marry her. Donna’s obviously just something to amuse him for the time being.

Madison catches my eye with a questioning look in hers. She wants to know if all went well and whether I received the elusive blessing from Victor. I give a slight tilt of my head and she smiles in response. But if she only knew what I had to sacrifice to obtain it, she’d skewer me for sure.

Before we depart that evening, Victor offers us his box seats to see the Bolshoi Ballet perform Swan Lake at the



internationally renowned theater. He insists that Madison not leave until she's seen the pinnacle of performing arts majesty.

Much to my pleasant surprise, Ekaterina did call to invite us to dinner. Her icy demeanor remains intact, though there are the occasional glimpses that suggests it's beginning to thaw. So, on our final night in Moscow, Madison and I dined with her and Ulyan, and together, the four of us watched the breathtaking performance of Swan Lake. At the conclusion, Madison rose to her feet, along with all the others, to join in the thunderous applause. It was a magnificent night.

On the flight back to New York, I contemplated the monumental tasks before me. To accelerate the expansion of my operations into the more respectable aspects of my business while delicately exiting the less savory parts. Those could be spun off to the Albanians or the Irish to help make peace with them, otherwise, as Victor stated, they'd come for my head to take it by force.

In the interim, Victor's coffers must remain full, in fact, they should be overflowing if I expect him to continue to back me and leave my family in peace. I truly believe he was charmed by Madison and sees the merit in bringing her aboard. But that won't stop him from putting two bullets in the back of her head if he ever suspected her of betraying us. Nor would it spare our child.

The next few weeks will be critical to all our survival.

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## Chapter 33 – Married to the Mafia Boss

The first thing that Sebastian wanted to do once we returned from Moscow was to obtain a marriage license. We estimated that I was about six weeks pregnant and a trip to my gynecologist confirmed it. He wants to get me down the aisle well before I start showing, exhibiting his strong desire for his family to adhere to the social norms for a respectable family structure.

With limited time it's a rather small affair scheduled for the day after I graduate from NYU medical school. Sebastian had joked that this way, he was officially marrying a doctor as opposed to the student.

As we stood in the county courthouse, my head was reeling. Had it only been a matter of six months since the fateful day that I'd met Sebastian during the EMS run? We'd dated, fell in love, got engaged, got pregnant and are about to exchange wedding vows.

I've reconciled in my mind that I'll have a foot firmly planted on either side of the law by aligning myself with

Sebastian. If it were ever discovered that I performed medical procedures on victims of violent crime without reporting it to law enforcement, not only would I be fired, but I could also face other penalties, and possibly be charged with a 1<sup>st</sup> degree misdemeanor. But Sebastian is the only one with proof of my infractions and those were all done to help his family and close friends. The knowledge is safe with him.

I'm wearing a sleeveless white linen dress with a matching cropped jacket, very Jackie Onassis looking, in my opinion, but it works. Sebastian is wearing one of his signature designer suits looking as devilishly handsome and debonair as ever.

God! I can't believe this is the gorgeous hunk that I get to wake up to for the rest of my life. As lucky as I think I am, Bash is the one who gushes about how fortunate and honored he is to have me. Like he's some humble servant who's caught the eye of the queen or something. That's the way he looks at me...it's the way he's looking at me right now as we stand before the altar and the minister.

Nicolaus, Stieg, and his wife, Lorna, stand by as witnesses to our nuptials. I had phoned my father, but while he wished me well and even spoke to Sebastian, he informed us that he wasn't in the best of health to be traveling down from Alaska. I'm neither surprised nor disappointed, such has been the nature of our relationship since mom died.

But as I stare into the fathomless blue pools of Bash's eyes, I see my future. I see my home. I see my family. And it is enough.

He takes my hands in his and there's a contented smile on his lips as we stand before the minister.

“Mads,” he says and exhales tremulously. He begins speaking slowly in Russian, and then translates. “I loved you, within my soul, not fully extinguished. I love you to the depths of my life. And if there is a God, I love you to the last torment.” He closes his eyes a moment, and then continues. “From the moment I laid eyes on you, I thought, this woman is going to save you, in so many ways. With you, the wounds inflicted upon me are healed and I am richer for it. I don't know what I ever did to deserve you, but I'll spend the rest of my life finding special ways to make you forever happy that you agreed to become my wife.”

My eyes glisten, blurring him in my vision. I blink back tears as I smile.

“Bash, I look at you and I see all the things I ever wanted in a lover, a best friend, a confidante, in a word, a husband. In you, I have found my other half, my true soulmate. And for that reason, I gaze upon life's journey with immense joy and abounding hope as I walk it with you.”

The minister turns to Nicolaus. “The rings, please.”

Nicolaus moves forward and hands the ring to Sebastian. He lifts my left hand and begins reciting his vow.

““I, Sebastian Xavier Petrosky, take you, Madison Lynn Graham, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for

poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part. And hereto I pledge you my faithfulness.”

He slips the ring onto my finger. Nicolaus hands me Sebastian’s ring. I take his left hand in mine and speak my vow. “I, Madison Lynn Graham, take you, Sebastian Xavier Petrosky, to be my lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part. And hereto I pledge you my faithfulness.”

The minister smiles broadly. “And with that, I pronounce you, husband and wife.” He nods at Bash. “You may kiss your bride.”

Sebastian gently cradles my face in his hands, tilts his head and presses his lips to mine to the applause and cheers of Nick and Stieg.

I’d always imagined the day I’d announce myself as Dr. Madison Graham, but now I roll the name Dr. Madison Petrosky around on my tongue. Eh, I could get used to it. Taking Sebastian’s surname would help avoid any awkwardness over our child having a different name from mine.

We’ve decided not to inform the hospital administration until it was abundantly obvious that I’m expecting lest I immediately be downshifted to less interesting procedures.

Sebastian rented a truck and some movers to officially move all my things into his...our place. My name has been added to his bank account and credit cards have been issued in my

name. I'm not naïve enough to think I have access to all his holdings, but I have more than enough to be very comfortable. This is good to know because, as a resident, I'll only pull down about \$60k a year until I enter private practice.

“You ready, Mads?” Bash calls from downstairs.

“I'm coming.” I gather up my handbag and sling it over my shoulder. Even though my summer break has begun, we're not really feeling up for a major trip so fresh off of our Moscow vacation. Instead, for our honeymoon, we decide to spend the weekend at our house in the Hamptons. We've no major plans and are simply looking forward to some downtime just to enjoy being newlyweds before the mad chaos of my surgical residency begins.

Sebastian has warned me that during the same time, he'll be extremely busy endeavoring to wrangle the business and expand operations around the hedge funds. We both hope we'll find a comfortable rhythm by the time the baby arrives.

We throw our bags into the trunk of the convertible Porsche and are soon pulling out of the garage. We see Dmitri and his brother in their black SUV pulling out onto the road to follow us. The security detachment is our constant reminder of the dangers we face on a daily basis. Only now it's become commonplace, a price I've agreed to pay to be with Sebastian.

I ignore the feelings of guilt over bringing a child into this world. I decided to accept the risks, but what will I be exposing our child to? How will he or she acclimate to having a mother who's a surgeon and a father who...well, by that

time, surely Bash's dealings will have the strong appearance of legitimacy, at least to the uninitiated.

"Hey, look at this," I say showing him the text on my phone. "Your mom says that she's sending some kind of Russian sweetbread dessert. She said it used to be your favorite as a boy."

A reluctant smile touches his lips. "It's been years since I've had it."

I rub his arm. "Who knows? Maybe being a grandmother will suit her better than being a mom."

He shrugs. "Stranger things have happened."

"It's progress, Bash. Unless we're planning to trek to Anchorage, Alaska, Ekaterina may be the only grandparent this kid will ever know."

"We'll see," he says morosely. "Over the years, I've just learned not to expect a thing from her. So, it's a little hard to start now."

"Yeah, I get it," I reply evenly. "We'll just take it one day at a time, no pressure."

"We'll do just fine on our own," he says, with a soft smile. "But the door will always be open if she decides to show up."

"Oh my, that's awfully well-adjusted of you," I laugh. "You almost sound like a happy man."

He glances at me. "I'm an extremely happy man, Dr. Petrosky."



“Hey.” I frown mockingly at him. “I don’t recall agreeing to that.”

His expression falls a bit. “I know, I just like saying it.”

“It’s growing on me, but the jury’s still out on that.”

He nods. “Fair enough...Dr. Petrosky.”

I laugh and bat his arm.

It’s about sundown by the time we pull up to our East Hampton home. Sebastian grabs our bags while I go to the front door with the keys. I love the smell of the fresh, salty seawater and look forward to taking a nice walk along the shore. I walk into the kitchen and set my bag down. Fortunately, the refrigerator is well-stocked, and the place is immaculate.

“We good on supplies?” Sebastian says as he enters the kitchen.

“Yep, Lena did a great job.” I reply as I head toward the large panoramic windows facing the ocean. “We have enough to feed a small army. Dmitri and his brother needn’t fear they’ll go hungry.”

“Great, well I’m going to go fire up the grill, I’m starving,” he says. “Did she leave the steak and tuna fillet marinading?”

“Sure did,” I reply. “I’ll bring them out to you. I’m going to steam some broccoli to go with it.”

“Sounds good.”

Less than an hour later we're sitting at the table out on the deck overlooking the ocean, we leisurely enjoy a delicious meal. We leave plenty for Dmitri and his brother to partake of when it suits them. We remained on the deck, watching the mesmerizing sunset and talking about our future plans until night fell.

We withdraw inside and Sebastian lights a fire in the large stone fireplace. I find a blanket and a couple of pillows to lay on the floor before the hypnotic, dancing flames. The lights are dimmed, and Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata is playing softly in the background setting the perfect mood.

"Hey, you," I say as Bash lowers himself onto the blanket and moves close to me.

"Hello Mrs. Madison Petrosky," he grins and kisses me playfully, which only makes me want him more. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back, less play, more passion.

He responds in kind, pulling me close until his chest is pressing against mine. I feel the pounding of his heart, feel my own blood pulsing through my ears.

I love this man. I love him with everything that I am.

My Bash— strong, cunning and powerful. Beautiful Bash.

My mouth is on his neck as I breathe in his masculine scent and taste the salt of his skin. I'm snatching his shirt open wanting to kiss his chest, I want my hands on his flesh. I want

all of him. His hand grasps my chin as he urges me to look at him.

Our eyes meet, the burning passion in his is layered with something else – something vulnerable and raw. Like he’s opening himself to me in every possible way.

“I love you, Madison,” he gasps. “I love you so much. Everything I do, everything is for you, for our family.”

I stroke his face. “I know, baby, I know,” I say as I tenderly kiss his face. I feel the tension in his taut muscles and know that something’s troubling him.

He takes me and kisses me so deeply, I fear I’ll lose myself in him altogether. I want to ease his torment and give him peace and solace. I want to heal all that ails him and never let him go. I need this more than I need my next breath.

As Bash’s eyes poured hungrily over me, the delicate bud between my thighs spasmed with anticipation and trepidation. He’s holding me so tight, as if for dear life, and I know his passion will be unrestrained. Bash’s needs have been so demanding and relentless of late, like I’m the drug he can’t get enough of. I braced myself eager to please him, no matter how intense things get.

Bash’s hands are all over me, everywhere at once, squeezing my breasts, pulling off my blouse, sending buttons scattering across the hardwood floors. His heated mouth devours my flesh as he breathes me in. He sucks hard at my neck while his hand works the waistband of my pants, sliding them down off

my hips. Within seconds, I'm completely naked before him as he looms large over me.

Bash's hand slips down my back, firmly grabbing my bare bottom. His hungry kisses grow more insistent, prodding me to part my mouth to his. He holds me flush against his body, I feel his member stiff as a rod against my thigh. I tense with the anticipation of the tour de force that is Bash's ardent lovemaking.

But he must sense my unease, because he rolled to the side and deftly maneuvered me on top, allowing me to set the pace this round.

He was so beautiful laying beneath me, staring up, so eager for me. I ran my hands slowly over Bash's muscular shoulders and chest. "I love you, Bash," I whisper. "Since the moment I first met you, I've been in complete awe of you."

"And I of you," he replied in a husky voice, he strokes my thighs straddling him. I could feel the heat from his throbbing shaft behind me against my bare cheeks. I know he's dying to lift me onto it. But I can't resist making him wait for it. I grin at him and then lean down to kiss the tip of his nose, then his lips. Bash's hips rise, while he nudges my hips backward. He wants to be inside of me so badly.

"Not yet," I whisper, ignoring the lustful pleading in Bash's haunting blue eyes.

His hands grip my waist firmly and his expression is tortured, "Please, Mads," he moans, squeezing my buttocks firmly as he grinds his hips against me. A gasp escapes me in

anticipation of the pleasure Bash's body will soon bring me. I allow him to pull me down, taking a breast into his hot mouth.

He hears my throaty moan and breathes in my ear, "I need to be inside you, baby...now."

The mere sound of his voice sent a tremor through me. "Yessss," I say breathlessly, as I lift my hips and pull Bash's shaft forward. I gaze deep into his eyes as I slowly slide down the length of it, letting it fill me to the hilt.

We both moan with deep satisfaction.

"Mhmm," he groaned, his hips undulating beneath me. "You feel so hot and tight inside, angel."

I arched my back, and Bash's hands slid up to my breasts and squeezed them hard as I ride him, hips rocking back and forth, rising and falling in slow controlled, rhythmic motions.

I wanted to memorize the glorious expression on Bash's face, he is sublime with teeth gritted and muscles taut as he struggles to maintain control. I grin as I quicken my pace, steadily driving him toward the edge, toward his release.

As if determined to see me surrender first, Bash kneads my nipples between his forefinger and thumb. I suck in a sharp breath. "Oh...damn." It would be a close finish again, I muse as I clench and release my inner muscles with each measured stroke. Bash's moans grow louder, letting me know unmistakably that I'm driving him out of his mind.

Pleased, I continue riding him madly, rising and falling, rolling my hips back and forth with his throbbing cock deep

inside me.

Suddenly, Bash's undulating body goes still beneath me. Triumphantly, I await the familiar pulsation of Bash's release. But that doesn't happen.

"Oh shit!" Bash exclaimed, abruptly lifting me off of him.

"Bash, what the hell?"

"Did you hear that?" he says, springing to his feet. From out of nowhere, he's got a gun in his hand as he runs to the front door. "Fuck! Get upstairs, now!" he yells at me.

"What's going on?" I cry out, pulling on my shirt.

His eyes are wide with rage as he hurries back to me and grabs me by the arm. "Go to our bedroom lock the door and don't come out until I say so." He's practically dragging me up the stairs.

"Bash, you're scaring me," I say as I stumble up the stairs in his grip. "What's going on?"

"There are 3 cars outside and Dmitri's lying face down in the driveway."

"Oh, my God," I exclaim as we reach the landing.

He goes to the nightstand and produces another gun. "Here, take this. All you have to do is pull the trigger," he says with a terrifying look in his eyes. "In the back of the closet, remember I showed you the crawl space hideaway. Hide in there and don't come out unless it's me. Anyone else, you fucking shoot them, Mads. You understand?"

The gun is shaking in my hands. “Bash, stay with me, don’t go down there.”

“Do you understand me?” he thunders.

I jump. “Yes, yes, ok.”

He leads me to the closet, and pushes aside some boxes to expose the hidden door expertly camouflaged into the wood decor. If one didn’t know what they were looking for, they’d never find it.

“Go!” he barks.

I crouch down and slip inside, he tosses in some clothes for me.

He looks in. “See the backpack there, it has everything you need. Just like I showed you.”

With that, he shuts the door, leaving me in the darkness. I hear him sliding the boxes back into place before I hear the closet door shut.

I’m trembling uncontrollably too terrified to move or think clearly. What’s happening down there? With three cars, how many men is Sebastian facing on his own? I’ve got to help him!

I set the gun down and fish in the backpack for a flashlight. I find it and switch it on to light up the space. I stick my arms through the sleeves of the shirt and pull on the jogging pants. The bag also contains wads of cash, a cell phone, false IDs for us, another gun, and some energy bars and water.

I hear muffled noises, the crashing of glass, and the bumping of furniture being knocked over.

“Oh, God, Bash,” I cry, clamping my hands over my mouth. I know Bash told me to stay inside here and wait for him. But he can’t face those odds alone! With Dmitri and his brother down, he’ll be overwhelmed. I’m not about to become a widow within 24 hours of becoming a bride!

I grab the gun out of the bag and stick in my pants pocket. I take the gun Bash gave and bring it to bear. I struggle with the door for a bit but manage to yank it open. I’m dripping with sweat as I shove the boxes aside.

I pause as I stand in the closet, mentally preparing myself to do what needs to be done. I could be killed, but I’d rather risk that than live with the thought that I did nothing while Sebastian was gunned down.

There’s the sound of more violent scuffling, raised voices speaking in a foreign tongue. I can’t tell if it’s Russian or another Slavic language. I ease out of the bedroom and get low to the ground, crawling on my belly out onto the landing where I can peer down into the living room. I immediately spot three bodies on the floor in pools of blood. Suddenly, two men come crashing into the floor, fists flying as they pound each other. It’s Sebastian and an assailant. He’s getting the better of him, slamming his fist repeatedly into the man’s face until it’s a bloody pulp. Just then something must catch Sebastian’s eye because he stops and turns to see another man approaching. He lunges off the assailant, grabs a gun, and fires



twice dropping the intruder instantly. I'm astonished at how Sebastian managed to wreak this much devastation on his own, but I breathe a sigh of relief that the danger appears to be over. Only then does it occur to me that now might be a good time to slip back to my hiding place before Bash realizes that I left it.

I slowly crawl backward until I'm back in the bedroom. Halfway back inside the hidden hall, I hear more commotion and gunfire. I run back out to the landing, but there's no one in sight except for the dead men on the floor.

Where is Bash?

The sound of car engines rumbling to life draws my attention. I run to the window in time to catch sight of Sebastian struggling valiantly as three burly men finally manage to shove him into the trunk of their car.

"No!" I scream in my helplessness and frustration. I attempt to note the license plate number, but it's obscured by the angle of the car and the darkness. The driver hops back in the car, but the two others exchange words and then look up at the house. They're coming back!

I fall back from the window and return to the closet. I close the door behind me and attempt to arrange the boxes so that it's not obvious someone shoved them aside. I open the hideaway door, slip back inside, and shut the door firmly.

I hunch down, gun in hand pointed at the doorway. The second I see that nob turn, I plan to unload the bullets into them. Maybe it will be enough to stop them from driving off

with Bash. My heart's pounding like a jackhammer in my chest as sweat trickles down the side of my face.

I hear the creak of the bedroom door opening, hear the sound of boots clunking across the floor. My hands are shaking by the time they open the closet door. The sound of hangers being shoved aside, and the boxes being moved about have me nearly faint with fear. Perspiration rolls down into my eyes, stinging them, but I maintain my gaze steady on the door ready to blast the intruder clean into the next life.

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## Chapter 34 – Paging Dr. Mads

I try to keep track of time as I sit here somewhere halfway between death and life, in this dark and musty basement. Nothing but a naked lightbulb hangs overhead, offering meager light in my fetid dungeon. With no time to grab shoes, my bare feet are covered in grime from the filthy floor. There's one folding chair and a card table across from me which is usually occupied by my tormentor – a guy they brought in from Albania who specializes in this sort of thing. My hands are bound behind my back, the ties cutting so deep into the wrists that I can't even feel them anymore. The taste of blood fills my mouth. I can barely see out of eyes swollen shut and the broken nose isn't helping matters.

But I'll take this punishment and worse for the pleasure of knowing that Madison's safe. Apparently, they'd been instructed to grab her too, but couldn't figure out where she was hiding. Thank God she listened and remained hidden in the crawl space at the back of the closet.

They've yet to inform me as to why I'm here. They just keep wailing on me, working me over like I'm their favorite new punching bag. I recognized one or two of them that initially attacked me in the Hamptons. Unfortunately, I had to kill them to keep them from reaching Madison, otherwise, I would've worked them over until I got the truth out of them.

Who sent them? Whose authority were they under?

At one point when I told them they'd have to answer to the Russian wolf for putting their hands on me, they seemed to hesitate and took a brief conference before they returned to rain down a new hail of fists on me.

But the fact that they'd hesitated told me that they weren't under the Wolf's orders and that they were nervous about what they were doing. I find it hard to believe that the Albanians would be this bold and brash. Not in this region anyway, they've yet to establish a strong enough foothold.

No, the Albanians might be the attack dog, but someone else has got to be holding the leash. Maybe the Irish or the Italians? Surely, no one from our own camp would have the balls to go up against the Wolf. That was sheer suicide.

But it's obviously someone who wants me out of the way but wants to pound on me first before delivering the coup-de-grace. So, it's someone with a personal axe to grind, a very big axe. There's only one person that could be that angry considering he's already tried killing me once.

Gregor Orlov!

I broke my engagement with his daughter and set him up to take the fall for Sergei's death. But he's preoccupied with defending himself against murder and racketeering charges. The last thing he'd be caught up in is abducting me. Especially when he knows the Wolf has formally anointed me as the new family head. This little stunt would bring down the full wrath of the Wolf. Not because he's sentimental toward me, but because of the flagrant disregard for his authority. I've known the Wolf to eviscerate men for far less.

Has Gregor lost his mind?

One thing's clear, I've got to find a way out of this. I refuse to die in this shithole when I have Madison and a new baby on the way. We've got our whole lives ahead of us. It can't end here, not like this!

I have to think.

Madison must be going out of her mind, frantic and worried. But she's a smart woman, a very smart woman. She'll see that I was taken away not killed, which means I'm likely still alive. She'll try to figure out where I've been taken. She can't do it on her own, she'll call for help. Not the police...she'll try Stieg, maybe even the Wolf. Most likely, she'll start with Stieg. He'll go there, investigate the scene and figure out that the Albanians were behind the attack. He'll place Madison in a secure place, keeping her under heavy guard. He'll track down some local Albanians, put them in a room similar to this, and work them over until they cough up the information on my whereabouts.

Stieg and Madison won't stop until they find me. All I have to do is stay alive until they do. Stay alive or find a way to escape.

I try my hands again, but my arms have gone numb from the restraints. How long have I been here? A few hours, has it been a day?

Damn, how can I be this thirsty and need to piss so bad my bladder's going to burst? I've got to calm down and think my way through this. I'm going to be a dad, I can't let my child grow up fatherless.

Eventually, they're going to send someone in here to make their demands, carve information out of me before they lower the boom, or put a bullet in my head. I've got to find out who's paying them and make it worth their while to deal with me instead.

I must have dosed off at some point because I awaken to a clattering noise at the door. I stare at the rusty gray thing as I listen to the voices on the other side. Now they're speaking *Russian!* Who the fuck is on the other side of that door?

When it finally opens, one of the Albanians enters the room first, followed by another, and then finally my captor approaches. My swollen eyes nearly pop out of my head.

Natasha Orlov! You've got to be fucking kidding me.

She's immaculately dressed in brown suede as she sneers down at me. "Look at you," she says in Russian. "Filthy animal." She spits at me. "You killed my Sergei and framed

my father for his murder!” Her hand flies across my face, but it barely registers amidst all the other pain I’ve suffered.

“What...what do you want, Natasha?” I manage to say.

“I want my Sergei back you, bastard! But they say that they only found pieces of him, you monster!”

I lift my eyes to her. “You do know he killed my father, right? What was a son supposed to do with that information, Natasha? What would you have done?”

She scoffs, planting her hands on her hips. “You’ve framed my father for murder, he’ll go to prison for the rest of his life. What do you think *I* should do about that?”

“Fair enough,” I say evenly. “What do you need me to do?”

“I need you to fucking die, you pig,” she shouts with hands balled into fists.

“How can I help your father if I’m dead?”

“You’re going to confess that you murdered Sergei and that you framed my father.” She snaps her fingers at one of the men. He comes forward holding up a phone and aiming the camera lens at me, intending to record my confession.

I stare at her for a moment. “Look at me, Natasha. Who would believe the confession wasn’t coerced? They’ll know I spoke under duress, it will be inadmissible in court.”

She glares back at me, cheeks flushed, blue eyes ablaze. But I can see that she’s already worked this out. This whole thing



hasn't gone according to plan. I wasn't supposed to be the one sitting here, Madison was.

“The only way they'll believe it is if I go on the stand or walk into the police station and confess of my own volition.”

Her eyes narrow to menacing slits. “And why would you do that?”

It's clear that they don't have Madison, otherwise, their threats would be directed at her to coerce a sincere confession from me. But it doesn't mean they're not still hunting for her.

“I won't,” I say coolly. “But let me out of here and I'll be willing to make you a captain in my organization.”

She snorts. “I don't want to work for you, I want you dead, you imbecile!”

“Two seconds after you kill me, the Wolf is going to gut you and hang your sorry carcass in the streets.” I look at her two goons. “That goes for all of you!” The fear in their eyes is encouraging. “Let me go now and we can forget this all happened. I'll consider it payback for breaking the engagement. But you need to end this now, Natasha.”

She grinds her teeth and scowls at me. “No, the Wolf only appointed you head of the family because my father's been indicted. I free him and he has just as good a chance of being the boss.” She walks forward and roughly grabs me by the chin, digging her nails in. “You are going to confess in great detail exactly what you did to Sergei and how you stashed his

body in my father's warehouse. It'll be enough to introduce enough doubt into my father's conviction."

I look at the other two men. "You know she's planning on killing you after you finish this job."

Her eyes go wide. "Shut up!"

"She used Albanians so this couldn't come back on her father's crew, only she can't leave any loose ends that would trace back to her. You're all dead men."

They turn cold, suspicious eyes on her.

"You're going to listen to this desperate fool?" she yells. "He'd say anything to get out of here. Can't you see that?" For emphasis, she kicks the chair in anger. Distracted by this, they don't see her pull her weapon. Before they know what hit them, she shoots them both, a bullet to the head.

She looks at me and shrugs. "You were right, Bash. But now you know I mean business."

I hold her gaze. "You're not going to shoot me."

"No," she says, sticking her gun back in her jacket. She walks over to one of the guys on the floor and retrieves a rolled-up cloth filled with nasty-looking carving tools. "I'm just going to start cutting off some of your favorite body parts until I get a full confession out of you. How does that plan strike you, Bash?"

I glare at her. "I need to take a piss."

Her laugh is ugly and cruel.

“I have to go bad. I’m about two seconds from going in my pants.”

She glances around for a container and spots an old garbage pail in the corner. Emptying the trash onto the floor, she sets it down a couple of feet from me and pulls out her gun.

“You try anything,” she says pressing the muzzle to my temple. She then lowers it to my scrotum, “I’ll blow them right off and still get my confession.”

I hold her gaze as I slowly rise from the chair. My whole body aches from the repeated beatings and from sitting for so long.

“My hands,” I say, turning slightly.

“Oh, no,” she says and gestures with the gun for me to approach the pail.

I take two steps forward. “You going to do the honors?”

She smirks as she holds my gaze and reaches down to unzip my jeans. Taking hold of my shaft, she gives it a squeeze and curls her lip disapprovingly, “Now Sergei, he was a real man.”

I roll my eyes as I begin to relieve myself. God, it felt good. Good enough to let me think more clearly as I fill the trash bin. Even my restrained arms have a little more life in them. I slowly flex my fingers behind my back.

Natasha still has the barrel of the gun aimed at my balls. This all must be executed with precise timing.

“Ahhh,” I sigh loudly, tilting my head back with eyes closed. “What a relief.” When I’m sure she’s looking at my face as she tucks me back in, I kick the bucket over so that all the urine comes splashing out onto her pant legs.

Disgusted, she leaps back and trips over the legs of the fallen body behind her. The gun is knocked clear of her hands. I’ve never struck a woman before, but I’ve no choice but to kick her hard in the gut knocking the wind out of her. As she balls up, gasping for air, I scramble for the gun.

Her angry eyes are upon me as I squat down and grab the gun behind my back. I stand, turning sideways so that the gun is aimed at her.

“It’s over, Natasha. *Don’t* make me shoot you!”

“Bastard,” she gasps and cradles her stomach as she struggles to elude the spreading puddle of urine.

“Stay down!” I bark as I edge toward the door.

“Ahhh!” she howls in anger as she attempts to stand but slips on the slick grimy floor.

The door swings open and one of the Albanians comes in, eyes wide taking in the scene. I turn to fire at him, but Natasha leaps up tackling me from behind. They’re both attacking me. I kick the man hard enough to send him sprawling back. But the impact jars the gun from my hand.

Natasha picks it up and aims it at my head. She’s a furious mess covered in dirt and urine.

“Sit the fuck down!” she bellows as she holds a protective hand over her belly.

The other man is on his feet, grabbing me by the arms to thrust me back into the chair. Refusing, I struggle with him. That’s when I hear the bang and feel the searing heat shooting through my thigh.

That crazy bitch shot me!

I’m herded back into the chair and pistol-whipped for good measure.

“I’m not playing games with you, shithead!” she screams and turns to the Albanian. “Get some more rope, tie his legs.”

Through the debilitating pain, I notice that she’s still favoring her belly. Not as if she’s in pain, but rather as a protective measure. That’s when it dawns on me. “How far along are you?” I say, letting my gaze fall to her belly.

“None of your fucking business!”

I nod having my answer. “So, Sergei was going to marry you off to me while you’re carrying his child.” I shake my head. “I’m sorry, I never would’ve kicked you there if I’d known.”

The other man returns and begins tying my legs to the chair.

“Get them out of here,” she says, motioning at the two bodies on the floor.

As they’re dragged away, Natasha begins removing the cutting tools from their slots. Wielding a razor-sharp knife, she

stalks toward me. “I will have your confession, even if I have to cut it out of you.”

“My leg, you have to stop the bleeding,” I say, speaking over the pain.

“I don’t have to do shit,” she snaps and presses the barrel of the gun down against my wound.

My groan of agony produces a vicious grin on her face. Retrieving her phone, she holds it up to me. “Are you ready to confess, Sebastian Petrosky?”

“Fuck you,” I pant. The punch to the face was worth the look on hers.

“I don’t have time for these games,” she says as she puts her gun away and begins unfastening my jeans.

“Natasha, I’m giving you and your unborn child one last chance to walk away with your lives. Let me go!”

She ignores me and pulls my dick out. She holds it in one hand while reaching for the sharp knife.

I lurch wildly from side to side in the chair, anything to keep this crazy bitch from cutting my pecker off.

“Stop it, you asshole!” she shrieks.

But I topple over onto the side still strapped to the chair. She leaps on top of me like some deranged animal determined to finish the job. In our struggle, I barely register the commotion behind the door and only look up when a group of men come pouring into the room.

“Bash!”

I turn at the familiar voice. “Stieg! Get her off me!”

They’re pulling Natasha away just as her blade slices my thigh dangerously close to my groin. “Shit!”

“Grab the knife!” Stieg yells. Yuri wrestles Natasha to the ground and sits on her, smashing the side of her face into the grime.

“Tie her hands and get off her,” I order, remembering she’s pregnant even as she screams like a banshee.

“Damn, what the hell was she doing?” Stieg says as he cuts the ties off my wrists. Mikael is untying my ankles.

“She’s fucking crazy, was trying to get her dad off the murder charges,” I say as I rub my raw wrists. Shit, they burn like hell. “Where’s Madison? Is she all right?”

“Yeah, we’ve got her stashed away at Last Call, the security is tighter than Fort Knox.” He helps me up off the floor, he and Mikhael act as my crutches. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“How long have I been down here?” I ask as we make our way into the hallway and then up some old wooden stairs.

“About a day and a half,” Stieg answers. “The Albanians are some tough motherfuckers. We were working on this guy for over a day, but he’d tell us nothing.” He chuckles. “We might still be working on him if it wasn’t for that new wife of yours.”

“Madison?” I grimace. “What did she have to do with it?”  
We emerge into the kitchen of an old, abandoned farmhouse.

Stieg looks at me and shakes his head. “That woman may have missed her calling.”

“What happened, Stieg?” I ask tersely.

“All right, so this guy isn’t saying shit no matter what we do to him,” he laughs. “But when Madison finds out we’ve got nothing, she asks to be left alone with the guy only she’s carrying her medical bag with her.” He holds his hands up for my silence when I start to talk. “He’s tied down tight, he ain’t going nowhere. We’re outside that room trying to figure out how to fuck this guy up when all of a sudden, the guys screaming like a little eight-year-old girl.”

“What the hell?” I say incredulously.

“We open the door, and Madison’s standing there with a scalpel in her hands and blood smeared on her shirt. But she just looks pissed like we disturbed her in the middle of surgery or something,” he chuckles. “So, then she goes back to work on this guy, sticking the scalpel into an incision just above his hip. Man, this guy starts singing like a canary. That’s how we figured out where you were. It was thanks to Dr. Mads.”

“Dr. Mads?” I say as we exit the kitchen door with about five others of my best guys.

“Yeah, that’s the nickname we’ve given her.”

I laugh despite my agony. “Not bad.”



He grins and laughs. “One word of advice, don’t ever piss your wife off.” He leans in. “And see if she won’t consider that line of work on the side.”

“Stranger things have happened,” I say, grimacing past my pain. “Look, I want to get word to her that I’m all right, she must be going out of her mind. Then I need a shower to wash all this crap off me.”

“Alright, yeah, I think there’s a bathroom down the hall here. I’ll call Madison and let her know her favorite patient is back, and she’ll need to patch up your leg.”

About forty minutes later, I was back home, all clean and drugged up enough not to wince too bad when Madison leaped into my arms and hugged the life out of me. When she saw my wounded thigh, she immediately had me lie down and went to work on it. Fortunately, the bullet went clean through, requiring minimal surgery and sutures.

Our security detail has doubled even though the converted warehouse is a veritable fortress unto itself, with so many secret hideaways and a rich weapons cache. It’s designed to be an intruder’s worst nightmare. Nonetheless, when the Wolf heard about what happened, he sent a small army to serve as my security detachment. The first thing they did was grab Natasha to send her back to Moscow. She’ll remain there until she has Sergei’s baby, and then the Wolf will decide what to do with her. After what she pulled, she’s far too unhinged to leave to her own devices. Order and proper respect for authority must be maintained at all costs.

I recuperate in the guest bedroom Nick had stayed in since it's on the first floor and climbing stairs is off limits according to Dr. Mads. Yeah, the name sort of stuck. Even she thought it was amusing.

She's sitting in the chair next to my bed when I wake up.

"Hey, you," she says with a sleepy smile.

"What time is it?" I ask groggily.

"Uhm, 6:08 a.m.," she replies, glancing at her watch.

I note the blanket across her legs and the crumpled appearance of her clothing. "You slept there all night?"

She shrugs. "Where else would I be?"

I pat the empty space at my side. "Here, next to me."

She gives me a dramatic frown. "I don't sleep with my patients, Mr. Petrosky. What kind of doctor do you think I am?" The smile stretches across her face. "I didn't want to bother your leg or your broken ribs. You needed your rest, babe. Doctor's orders."

"No argument here." I rest my head back on the pillows and just gaze upon her for a moment. She's all smiles and good humor, but Stieg told me how frantic she'd been when she first called him from the Hampton house to report what had happened to me. He said she was shaking with fear...not for herself, but over my fate. She wouldn't eat or sleep until she knew I was back home safe. And then there was the matter of the interrogation...

“You know how sorry I am about all of this,” I say. “Victor’s sent his best guys to take over our security. His men have gone out and sent a very clear message that we are under his special protection, untouchables. I just want you to know that.”

She nods. “He called while you were asleep and told me as much. It seems I’ve been assigned a permanent driver to transport me back and forth to work, and anywhere else I need to go. All ex-military, special forces caliber.”

“Nothing but the best for my family,” I say, glad that she’s taking this all in stride. “You know, I never thanked you.”

“For what?” she says, sitting forward, elbows on my bed.

I look askance at her. “Stieg tells me that without you, I might still be sitting in that farmhouse basement, less some of my favorite body parts.”

She laughs. “What?”

My smile fades. “He told me...what you did to the Albanian...to get him to talk.”

Her face flushes and her gaze falls away. “I...I was desperate, sick with worry. I lost my head.”

I lay my hand upon hers. “I’d have done the same, if not worse, if someone were keeping me from you. You don’t know what it...” It surprises me when my voice chokes off, “What it meant to me, to know I have someone like you who cares that much for me. I didn’t think it was possible to love you more than the day I married you, but I do.” I squeeze her hands. “God help me, I do.”

She lifts her sweet hazel eyes to mine. “So, you don’t think I’m some kind of twisted little psycho now?”

“Oh, you’re *definitely* a little psycho, babe,” I say deadpan. “I sensed that from the moment we met. I thought—now here’s a woman with the perfect balance of brains, beauty, and danger.”

She laughs. “You did not.”

“Mads, why do you think we fit so well together? As if we were tailor-made for each other.”

Her head tilts to the side as she studies me. “Bash, do you ever get the strange feeling like...like we knew each other in a past life, and we’ve just made our way back to each other in this one?”

A heightened sense of awareness spreads through me like a warm blanket on a cold winter’s night. I experienced a keen sensation of coming home or finally waking from a long deep sleep. “Yeah,” I say softly, “something like that.”

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## Epilogue

Sebastian and I have been married for just over a year now. We are the proud parents of a happy and healthy 4-month-old, baby boy who, according to Ekaterina, is the spitting image of Sebastian as a baby. We've named him Xavier Graham Petrosky.

Victor, aka, the Wolf, surprised us with a most generous baby gift from Russia — a full-time nanny to care for Xavi. Her name is Mika, she's a middle-aged, grandmotherly type who's managed to fit in nicely with our little family. I think she's a godsend, though Bash seems a little resentful of her at times.

Odd...

Ekaterina came to stay with us for a few weeks, she and the nanny often have their heads together, speaking in Russian as they fawn all over little Xavi. Between Mika and Ekaterina, Xavi is very well taken care of as Bash and me further our careers.

True to Sebastian's word, having a newborn has had minimal impact on my career or diminished the number of hours I spend in the operating room honing my skills. Nonetheless, at least twice a week, I have them bring my baby boy in to have lunch with me while I'm at work. It's always the brightest part of my day.

Even the Wolf has made his way over the Atlantic to pay a visit. He's been well-pleased with the copious amounts of revenue Bash's hedge fund business is generating. And I'm pleased with the strong air of legitimacy that it gives my husband.

It goes over well at the numerous fundraiser/social events that we must attend for the hospital. Bash has even picked up a few new clients there. His charm and devilish good looks go a long way to make them oblivious to the fact that after Sebastian collects his exorbitant fees, another two basis points of their gains go to line the Wolf's pockets.

Kylie and Zhi have also paid us a visit and a burgeoning friendship is on the horizon. Kylie is such a riot. I'm getting all sorts of interesting back-stories on Bash. She keeps remarking at how domesticated the unabashed playboy has become now that he's a happily married man and a proud daddy. She never thought she'd see the day.

Things have smoothed over with the Irish and the Albanians. Sebastian managed to successfully off-load most of the seamier side of the business operations over to them while expanding operations into hedge funds and emerging markets

of legal marijuana distribution. He remarks that now it's no different from being involved in the distribution of alcohol and tobacco.

The DEA is satisfied that they caught their big fish, and Gregor Orlov is doing serious prison time. So, they haven't come knocking on my door since I joined the Presbyterian Hospital residency program. Plus, now that I'm Mrs. Petrosky, I can't be forced to testify against my husband.

Tonight, we dine with Victor Volkov at the famed, luxurious Russian Tea Room. We're sitting in one of the iconic red booths and I'm captivated by the opulent décor complete with gold-leaf ceiling and antique samovars for the elaborate tea service. The high-end Russian cuisine is exquisite.

We're in the middle of our entrée when the Wolf broaches the subject.

"Tomorrow night, we will have a new patient for you, Dr. Mads."

Bash and I exchange glances. "What's his condition?" Bash asks.

"He's been dealing in human trafficking, keeps bringing it into our territories when we've strictly banned any such activity. He won't reveal his sources or divulge how they keep eluding our gatekeepers to bring in such depravity." His stone-cold gray eyes lock with mine. "Someone from the inside is helping him. This diabolical predator preys on the young and innocent. I won't have this on my watch. I need you to extract the names, Dr. Mads."



My fingers twitch in anticipation of the intricate medical procedure I'll perform to harvest the answers in the most expeditious manner. Sebastian sees the little movement and smirks.

I lock eyes with the Wolf. "Give us five minutes alone with that monster. We'll get you what you need."

The Wolf lifts his glass to me. "You always do, my dear. You *always* do."

Bash's grin widens as his eyes pour all over me, letting me know he's dying to get my ass back home. It's funny how much this side of me turns Bash the fuck on.

I smile content in the knowledge that for now, I seem to have it all – I'm happily married to the love of my life, we have a sweet baby boy we adore, my medical career is the stuff of legends...and I've discovered I have a rather unique talent for extracting vital information out of depraved criminals.

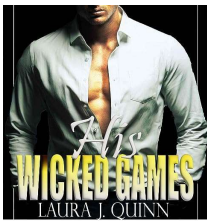
Yeah. Life is good.

—Until next time—



## Also By

Thank you for reading *Owned by the Mafia Boss*. If you enjoyed it, you will love **His Wicked Games**. [Click here to read!](#)



*My billionaire boss tricked me into a fake marriage — the two pink lines on the stick tell me he'll never let me go.*

[Click here to read now!](#)

I couldn't believe my luck when my drop-dead gorgeous boss selected me for the executive mentoring program.

At work, late-night meetings turned into dinner for two over sparkling glasses of champagne.

With that dreamy, green eyed gaze and devilish smirk, he soon

claimed me, wrapping me in his satin sheets.

The marriage proposal came fast, and I was way too high on him to question it.

But soon my fondest dreams turned into my worst nightmares.

He didn't want a wife— he wanted a pawn for his twisted love games.

Leaving is not an option, he'd hunt me to the ends of the earth to keep me under his control.

Just when I think there's a way out, the doctor cheerfully delivers the news that seals my fate — I'm pregnant with his twins.

[Click here to read now!](#)

His Wicked Games excerpt:

I'm all alone tonight.  
Dane's words keep playing over and over again in my head. And the way he looked at me when he said them...oh, my God. All I can think about is getting tangled with him in the sheets.

Is he going to kiss me now? Please, please, please!

He smirks and lifts a finger toward my face. "You've got a little something there."

What? I brush my cheek. “There, did I get it?”

“No,” he chuckles softly. “A little lower.”

“Here?” I say, touching the corner of my mouth.

He shakes his head, “Hold on, let me.” Dane leans in closer, his fingertips lightly brush my cheek. “There,” he says, but he remains close, his fingers linger upon my cheek. His gaze doesn’t waver, the intensity in his green eyes shoots a heated rush downward to a rather sensitive pleasure point. His thumb grazes across my lips. He’s so close, so close I can feel his warm breath on me.

“Logan,” Dane breathes my name like he’s tormented. No man says a woman’s name like that without it meaning something! His mouth is only a whisper from mine. I want his lips on mine more than I want my next breath. It would take no effort to simply lean forward and lift my mouth to his. Feeling emboldened, I do just that.

Instantly, Dane recoils as if my lips burned him. He rises swiftly from the sofa looking flustered and lost.

“Oh my God,” I gasp, clasp my hands over my mouth in complete mortification. “I-I am so sorry, Mr. Berganhoff. Please I—” words fail me. I’ve never been so humiliated in my life.

“No, uh, it’s fine. Really,” he says starting toward me, then halts in his tracks.

I can’t bear to see the look on his face. “I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to do that,” I say, scrambling for my notepad and

proposal package. I stand and dash out of his office.

“Ms. Greer!”

I’m out in the hall and I’m hitting the elevator button like it’s done me harm. “Come on, come on, please,” I cry as I hear his hurried footsteps.

“Logan, please wait.”

I make one last attempt to apologize. “I swear, I’ve never done anything like that before. Please don’t fire me,” I say before I step through the doors, but Dane reaches in and pulls me back out.

“Hush, you didn’t do anything I wasn’t dying to.” He gathers me into his arms, holding me flush against his tall lean body. And I come undone.

**Read what happens next!**