



RUTHLESS
BETRAYAL

THE GALLO FAMIGLIA BOOK TWO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BROOKE SUMMERS

RUTHLESS BETRAYAL

GALLO FAMIGLIA

BOOK 2

BROOKE SUMMERS

CONTENTS

Books by Brooke:

Content

1. Inessa
2. Inessa
3. Niccolò
4. Inessa
5. Niccolò
6. Inessa
7. Niccolò
8. Niccolò
9. Inessa
10. Niccolò
11. Niccolò
12. Inessa
13. Inessa
14. Niccolò
15. Inessa
16. Inessa
17. Niccolò
18. Inessa
19. Niccolò
20. Niccolò
21. Inessa
22. Niccolò
23. Niccolò
24. Inessa
25. Niccolò
26. Inessa
27. Inessa
28. Niccolò
29. Inessa
30. Niccolò

31. [Inessa](#)

32. [Niccolò](#)

33. [Inessa](#)

[Are you ready for Portia and Dario's story?](#)

[Books by Brooke:](#)

[About Brooke Summers:](#)

[Want to know more about Brooke Summers?](#)

First Edition published in 2023

Text Copyright © Brooke Summers

Edits by Farrant Editing

All rights reserved.

The moral right of the author has been asserted. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published without the prior written permission of the author. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

BOOKS BY BROOKE:

The Kingpin Series:

Forbidden Lust

Dangerous Secrets

Forever Love

The Made Series:

Bloody Union

Unexpected Union

Fragile Union

Shattered Union

Hateful Union

Vengeful Union

Explosive Union

Cherished Union

Obsessive Union

Gallo Famiglia:

Ruthless Arrangement

Ruthless Betrayal

Ruthless Passion

The Fury Vipers MC Series:

Stag

Mayhem

Digger

Ace

Pyro

Shadow

Wrath

Reaper

Standalones:

Saving Reli

Taken By Nikolai

A Love So Wrong

Other pen names

Stella Bella

(A forbidden Steamy Pen name)

Taboo Temptations:

Wicked With the Professor

Snowed in with Daddy

Woody by Daddy

Loving Daddy's Best Friend

Brother's Glory

Daddy's Curvy Girl

Daddy's Intern

His Curvy Brat

Taboo Teachings:

Royally Taught

Extra Curricular with Mr. Abbot

Private Seduction:

Seduced by Daddy's Best Friend

Stepbrother Seduction

His Curvy Seduction

Never worry about what could have been...

Always dream of what can be...

CONTENT

PLEASE READ CAREFULLY.

T here are elements and themes within this book that some readers might find extremely upsetting.

Please click [here](#) for that list of potentially harmful topics. Please heed these as this book contains some heavy topics that some readers could find damaging.

Or go to <https://brookesummersbooks.com/contentwarnings/>

INESSA

AGED FIFTEEN

I push past the pain with every step that I take. It's been days, and my body isn't healing as fast as I'd like it to. God, they did a number on me this time. Usually, they miss my face, but for whatever reason, they lost it and beat me until I passed out.

Silence surrounds me as I make my way around the back of the building. It's deserted. There's no one here. There never is.

"There you are," I hear my best friend, Chiara, say as I step out of the shadows. "Oh, Nessa," she whispers. "God, what have they done to you?"

I'm relieved that I'm here, finally. Years ago, this warehouse was burned down and later condemned. Since then, nothing has been done with it. It belongs to the Russians, and since it does, the homeless stay away from it. Chiara and I have been using it as our meeting point every Friday. We never miss it. It's our only way to stay connected now.

I gingerly walk toward her, my body protesting, but I ignore it. It's been a week since I last saw Chiara. I've missed my friend. She's the only one who gives a crap about me. The only one who ever has. As I get closer to the light, I notice she's been crying. Her brown eyes are bloodshot, red, and

puffy, she's got tear stains down her face, and her nose is running.

“What happened?” I ask softly as I take a seat on the rickety chair.

Her bottom lip trembles as she brings her legs to her chest. “God, Nessa, it was awful,” she cries. Big fat tears fall from her eyes. “It was the most horrific thing I've ever seen.”

“What was?” I ask, wondering what has caused this reaction.

Both Chiara and I live in a world where evil happens. The men are dangerous and have no qualms about hurting people. For me, I'm so immersed in the Bratva, I'll never get out. I wasn't born into that world. I was sold into it.

I was three days old when the Bratva came looking for my parents. Both owed them money. From everything I've heard, my parents weren't awful people. They were actually some of the nicest you'd ever meet. They set up a business on the edge of the Russian border, and in typical Bratva business, they came to my parents and offered protection. No one could refuse the men. They would have died if they said no. So my parents agreed. Except it wasn't just small money they wanted; it was huge amounts, and they couldn't afford it. Not with a brand-new business and a child on the way. So my parents quickly descended into debt, and soon enough, they were in over their heads and couldn't breathe.

Then I was born, and they contemplated fleeing; leaving the business behind and running away. They never got the chance. They were given a choice, and they chose the wrong fucking path. They were told they could go debt free if they gave their baby over, or they could die. So, they gave me to

the Bratva at three days old, and the moment I was in the Russian mafia care, the bastards killed my parents anyway.

Aleksei Belyaev is the Pakhan of the Bratva, and he is one of the meanest sons of bitches in the world. The reason he wanted me was because his wife couldn't give him children, so he did the only thing he could think of. He took me and gave me to her. But he was resentful of me. He hated that she liked me, and the older I got, the weaker Vera got until she died. I was seven when she took her last breath. Since then, it's been nothing but pain and suffering for me. I've been beaten until I passed out, threatened, and I know the men are waiting for the go ahead to take me. And the moment they do, I'm going to break. I know it. They know it. It's just a matter of time before they take what they want.

“Chiara, what's happened?” I ask once more.

“Abs,” she gasps, pulling in a harsh breath.

I still. Abagor is the son of one of the Bratva captains. He's also the guy Chiara has been dating for the past six months. I've never seen my best friend as happy as when she's with Abs. “What about Abs?”

She swallows hard. “I saw him come into the house,” she cries, trying her hardest to speak through the tears. “I followed him. I was confused as to why he was trailing through the house rather than coming to see me. He knows he's not meant to do that. If Papà saw him, he'd lose his mind.”

That's an understatement. Niccolò Caruso is one of the most dangerous men I've ever encountered. He's filled with a darkness that simmers beneath the surface. Those dark brown eyes of his hold so much anger, they almost look black in the sunlight.

“He went to the outbuilding, the one at the edge of our land. The one Papà uses for work. I followed him. My gut was screaming, Nessa. It was screaming at me. The moment Abs entered the outbuilding, Papà shot him.” A wail unlike anything I’ve ever heard spills from her lips.

Oh my god. Why would he do that? Why did he kill him?

“Chi,” I whisper, horrified that my best friend witnessed the man she loves die in front of her.

“He shot him in the head. All his blood and brain matter soaked me.” She starts to scratch at her body, her nails biting into her skin as she does. “I’ve tried to get it off, but I can’t. He’s on me, Nessa, and I can’t get him off.”

Tears burn the backs of my eyes. It’s been a long time since I’ve cried, a hell of a long time. I learned at a young age that crying doesn’t help matters. It only encourages those who hurt us. It gives them the satisfaction of knowing they’re getting to you. But hearing the pain and suffering in my best friend’s voice is something that affects me. It hurts to hear it, and to know there’s nothing I can do to help her but be here for her.

“I’m so sorry, Chi. I’m so damn sorry.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t stop seeing him; seeing the blood and brains and seeing his lifeless body on the ground. I can’t get him out of my mind. How do I make this pain stop?”

“I don’t know,” I reply softly.

She turns to me, her eyes filled with so much pain, I swallow back a flinch. “How do you push aside the hurt, Nessa? How do you go about each day without letting the pain of it all get to you?”

“It gets to me,” I confess. “It hurts me so much. I’ve never done anything to those men. I’ve never hurt anyone. I’ve never betrayed anyone. But I’m their punching bag, their servant. They do whatever the hell they want with me, and I’m not allowed to complain. There’s a pit in my stomach that just sits there. It’s always there. It’s filled with pain and rage, but I have to tamper it down, because I know that if I let it out, I’ll die. So every day, I push it down and it continues to grow. I wish I had an outlet for it. I wish I knew how to let it out, but I don’t. There’s no relief. Not even for a second.”

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small clear baggie. “I have this,” she whispers. “It’s meant to help.”

I stare at the white substance in the packet, and I know exactly what it is. Cocaine.

“No,” I say harshly. “There has to be another way.”

Chi shakes her head. “There’s no other way. I’m sick and tired of the pain and the memories. Just one night, that’s all I need. One night without the nightmares, without having to worry about whether Abs will be there waiting for me every time I close my eyes.”

My heart hurts for her. It really does. “Chi,” I begin softly. “We both know the devastation of what drugs can do to people.” The life we’re in, there’s no other choice but to be surrounded by the death and destruction the men cause. “Don’t become one of those people, please. There has to be another way.”

“I’ve tried it all. Six days, Nessa, that’s how long Abs has been dead. Six fucking days and I can’t breathe without the pain. There’s no other way. I need this.”

I hate that she feels this is her only option. I truly wish she was able to find another way. “I love you, Chi. Please don’t do this.”

She shakes her head. “I’m doing it. I need it.”

Her words are filled with determination. There’s no way I’m going to be able to change her mind. I close my eyes and fight back the tears as I hear her moving around. I’m not going to watch her destroy her life. I should leave and go back home, but I can’t. She’s going to need me, and I can’t leave her here alone. Anything could happen to her.

An hour later and she’s high as a damn kite. “Here,” she tells me as she reaches into her pocket. “I tried this. It gives a tiny bit of relief, long enough to make it worthwhile. It could be something you could use.”

I blink, confused at her words, but then I see a glint of silver between her fingers and realize she’s holding a blade.

“I only have three,” she says. “You’re going to need to sterilize them when you use them. But it should be enough to get you started.”

I stare at my best friend and wonder why the hell she’s giving these to me. I don’t need them. I’m going through life okay.

“Nessa, I love you, and if you don’t do something about this, you’re going to die. You need some relief, and this is the only way.” She thrusts the blades into my hands. “Don’t go too deep, okay? Just a little. You’ll feel the rush once the blood starts to flow.”

I swallow hard as I wrap my hands around the blades. “Thanks,” I whisper, knowing I’m not going to use them. I won’t. She’s in such a dark place; she’s trying to find a little

light. I get that. But I don't want to be dependent on something that'll make me ill, and self-harming is an illness.

Daylight disappears and darkness takes over. I'm unsure of how long we've been sitting here, neither one of us talking. We're both lost in our own minds and pain. Chiara's cell starts to ring, and she sighs. "He's always calling me because he's worried." She shakes her head in disgust. "He should have thought about that before he killed my boyfriend."

The pain I feel as I get to my feet is so overpowering, it takes the breath from me. "Do it," she tells me. "You'll thank me later," she assures me as she helps me to a standing position. "Do you want me to call someone?"

I shake my head. "I'll be okay," I promise her. It's only going to take me twenty minutes to get home.

She pulls me in for a hug. "Be safe," she whispers. "I love you, Nessa," she says with a little smile. "I'll see you soon."

I nod. "Same time next week," I assure her. I'll never miss a day. Not ever.

I watch as she walks away, my heart heavy at seeing her leave and knowing I won't know how she is for another week. It's crappy, but I'm praying she'll be okay.

I arrive home and find the house shrouded in darkness. Is nobody home? My heart jumps at the thought. Could it be that I'm alone?

I carefully enter the house, and the moment I do, a light switches on. I freeze, my gaze moving to where the light's coming from, and I see Aleksei Belyaev sitting on the chair. "You stupid, *shlyukha*," he growls as he gets to his feet. "Where the fuck have you been?"

I swallow hard. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, knowing that it doesn’t matter what I say. He’s going to do whatever the hell he wants.

“You’re a lucky woman, *shlyukha*. A very lucky woman. Had you not been, I would have had uses for you. As it stands, you are not to be touched in that way.” His words are confusing. What does he mean? Before I’m able to ask, he’s lashing out, the back of his hand striking my face. The force is brutal, and I’m unable to stay upright. I fall to the ground with a harsh thud, but that doesn’t stop Aleksei. No, the man is furious, and I have no idea why. But I do know he’s nowhere near finished. He kicks me, landing blow after blow over my already battered and bruised body.

I bite my lip to stop myself from crying out. I won’t give him the satisfaction of knowing he’s hurting me. With every kick to my body, the anger and pain in the pit of my stomach grows into a tight ball. Chiara’s right, I’m not going to be able to keep it contained much longer.

“Get the fuck out of my sight,” he snarls once he’s finished with me. I hear his footsteps move away from me as I lay on the floor, blood pooling around me. “Clean that shit up,” he growls, just before he slams the door shut.

I try my hardest to get to my feet, but the pain is too much, I think something in my wrist is broken. The front door opens, and I hear a dark curse.

“Fuck,” I hear the deep, baritone voice, and my heart stutters. No. Not him. “Malenkaya,” he says as he reaches for me, lifting me off the floor and helping me to my feet.

He’s the worst of them all. The most disgusting and dangerous man I know.

“Soon, Malenkaya, you’ll be mine,” he breathes. “So pretty,” he grunts as he runs his finger along my jaw. I resist the urge to shiver in disgust, knowing that if I do, he’ll hurt me too. It wouldn’t be the first time. He presses a kiss to the corner of my lips, and I bite back the flinch. God, I hate him. I hate him so much. “Be good, Inessa. I’m watching,” he says, before moving toward the door Aleksei exited through.

I despise him with every breath I take. *Sergei Turgenev*, the second in command to Aleksei. The man who has made it known that he wants me—a fifteen-year-old girl—and has no qualms about taking me. He’s just waiting for the go ahead from Aleksei.

I quickly clean up the blood that’s on the floor with an old rag. Once I’m finished, I hold it to my face and make my way toward my room—if you can call it that. It’s the smallest room in the house and barely fits a bed inside, but it connects to a bathroom—one that doesn’t have a lock on, and the men who work in this house use it frequently, whether or not I’m in there.

I glance at the mirror, the one that’s covered with a black bin liner and tape. I haven’t seen what I look like in three years. I hate myself. Every time I would look in the mirror, I’d be filled with rage and despair.

I climb onto my bed and reach for the blade Chi gave me. Maybe, just maybe, this will help?

My hands are shaky and my heart races as I bring the blade to the top of my thigh. The moment the blade makes contact with my skin, I release a hiss of pain, but soon, that pain vanishes, and in that moment, it feels as though everything fades away. All the hurt, anger, and suffering disappears,

almost as though it's leaking out with the blood that pours from the cut.

I close my eyes and let the blood seep from me, hoping and praying that it'll take the pain away with it. That I can finally find a sense of peace.

INESSA

SIX MONTHS LATER

I glance at my wrists and shame hits me. I was stupid last night. I was so damn stupid. It's been six months, and every day I use a damn blade to ease the suffering I feel at the hands of the Bratva. It's a short-lived relief, because as soon as the blood stops flowing, everything I felt before I cut comes flooding back to me. It's like a wave coming to shore—when I cut, it washes away everything, but then once it's stopped and the wave goes back to sea, everything is right where I left it.

Today's Friday. It should be my day to see Chiara, but I can't. My best friend hit rock bottom and began using drugs more often than not. She was a mess. Worse than I could have ever imagined. It was horrific, and there wasn't anything I could do to help her. No matter how often I tried talking to her, it was as though I was hitting a brick wall. The Chiara I knew was gone, and in her place was someone awful and mean. I feel partly to blame. I should have stopped her. I should have made sure she didn't take the damn drugs, but I couldn't. I wasn't strong enough.

Two months ago, Chiara got clean. I've seen her a few times since then, and I know she's doing a lot better. Her father has men watching her every move. Everything she does is under scrutiny. And I'm glad he's helping her. She's doing

better, and although we're not allowed to see each other anymore, I still miss her. I'm proud that she's managed to fight her demons.

"What are you thinking about?" Artyom asks me.

He's always been nice to me, and he's often made time for me. He's not like the other guys who work for Aleksei I like Art and really appreciate that he's a friend.

I shake my head as the sun beams down on us while we stand in the backyard. It's the only place I'm allowed to be now. Aleksei put his foot down and told me I'm not allowed to leave the house. Artyom is the only person I'm allowed to speak to. He's the only friend I'm allowed to have.

"Nothing really," I lie. I have so much on my mind. Once again, I'm bruised and beaten. Last night, Aleksei had a meeting with the other members of the Bratva and it didn't go well. He came home and took his anger out on me.

"Your parents?" Art asks. "You never speak about them."

"I don't know them," I say, my heart aching. I hate that they sold me to Aleksei I wish they had done what they thought of doing and fled. Maybe we could have all been together, and I wouldn't be stuck in this terror of a life.

He shoves his hands into his pockets and sighs. "Have you ever thought about them?"

All the damn time. "Never," I lie. "What's with all the questions?" I ask, wondering why he's gotten so inquisitive.

He releases a heavy sigh. "Dad's next in line to be the Pakhan."

I smile at him, and it's forced, but he doesn't know that. "He's wanted that position, and he's worked hard for it. Why

don't you look happy?" Being one of the most trusted men in the organization is an honor, one that most men work their asses off to achieve.

Sergei Turgenev is one of the most lethal men in the Bratva. The man is six feet of pure power and danger. He's killed countless men and women, all in the name of the Bratva, and has no qualms about starting a war if he thinks it'll benefit him or the family. I've heard the rumors about his brutality, I've seen the destruction of what he does, the pain he leaves behind to the family of those he kills. He's a monster.

Since the night I started cutting myself, Sergei has made sure he's always around. He's always touching me and making crude comments about my body. He tells me that I'm his. I'm terrified of what that could even mean.

"You know what that means, Inessa," Artyom hisses. "It means that in the next few months, I'm going to be inducted into the Bratva."

My blood turns icy cold. My friend, the only one I have, is going to become a cold-blooded killer, and the boy I know will no longer be.

"You have to do this," I whisper, knowing that it's not what he wants. "Art, you know what'll happen if you don't do what is expected."

He clenches his jaw and turns to look out the window. "I know, Inessa. I know that if I don't kill someone and become inducted into the Bratva, I will be killed. I'll be seen as a failure, and my father will no longer be able to become the Pakhan."

The pain in his voice has my heart clenching. God, I hate that he's so torn, that he's being forced to do something he

doesn't want to do. Artyom isn't like the other men of the Bratva. He's got a good heart, a pure heart. He loves fiercely and he protects those he cares for. He's not like his father. He's not a monster. But if he doesn't become inducted into the organization, he's going to die.

"What are you going to do?" I whisper as I step closer to him.

"We could leave," he replies low. "Get out of here and travel to Europe. We could leave, Inessa. We could both be free."

I swallow hard. Free... God, I wish that were possible for me. That I would be able to live a life without pain and heartache. But that's not on the cards for me. The moment my parents sold me at three days old, I became shackled to the Bratva. I'm there to do as they want. I'm enslaved to them.

"You know that would never be able to happen," I say, my heart hurting at the thought of my friend being so unhappy that he would run away. "Not to mention our ages. We'll never get out of the country, let alone the state, Art." I don't think he's thought this through. I have.

The past four years, I have come up with plan after plan of a way to get the hell out of this hell that I'm in. But it's no use. I'm stuck here. If Art was older, then maybe, it would have worked. But two fifteen-year-olds running away is definitely going to be impossible.

He turns to me, his eyes blazing with anger. Those brown orbs are so dark with rage, they look black. "You think I don't know what goes on when I'm not around? You think that I'm stupid? Inessa, I know everything. The men gloat about it. They laugh about how they hurt you."

I glance away, hating that the men laugh about hitting me. That they think it's a joke to make me bleed. I've worked hard to keep the pain buried deep inside, but knowing they laugh about it breaks my heart.

He grips my chin and roughly pulls my face back to his. "Listen to me," he cries. "You think for one second that I'm going to stand around and let them hurt you? You think that can be something I'd do? Inessa, come on, you know me better than that." His fingers curl around my neck, where the tattoo of a barcode sits. It's one I've had since I was a kid. Whenever I asked about it, I was ignored. I have no idea what it means, but it's forever on my skin.

I pull away from his grip and take a step backward. Talking like this is what can get him killed. He has to stop. He needs to stop. I can't and won't let him do this. He's fifteen, for Christ's sake. He's not going to be able to do anything. My fate was sealed years ago. The best thing for Artyom is for me to walk away, otherwise he's going to lose everything, including his life.

"Goodbye, Art," I whisper as I take another step backward.

"Don't do this, Inessa," he implores. "Please."

A lone tear falls from my eye. God, the pain in his voice has my heart aching. But I need him safe. I need him to be alive. I'm doing the best thing for him.

I walk into the house and close the door, my heart breaking at the thought of our friendship being over, but it's the only choice I have if I want to keep my best friend alive.

"You're lucky," I shiver at the deep voice of Aleksei Belyaev. I hate how he's always around, sneaking up on me and leering at me.

I stare at him, my heart in my mouth. “For what, sir?” I ask softly.

“You didn’t take the boy up on his offer.”

I swallow hard. How does he know about that?

His chuckle has my heart sinking and my blood running cold. “He was sent to test you, girl. To see if you were stupid. But no, you were lucky.”

He set me up. Artyom set me up. He was trying to get me to go with him, knowing it would be a death sentence if I did.

Aleksei moves toward me, his weathered hand gripping my arm, his fingers biting into my skin. “You’re lucky you said no, girl. So fucking lucky. Your time is coming soon, *shlyukha*. Soon, you’re going to become a whore for my men. They’ve been waiting, biding their time. The moment they get the go ahead, you’re going to be completely ruined.”

I don’t react. I’m not stupid. Far from it. I know the men have been wanting to touch me. I can see it in their lusty looks and the way they ‘accidentally’ touch my breasts or ass as I walk past. My puberty hit early. I was nine. I thought I was dying. The moment I started my monthly bleeding, those animals went from suppressing their lustful looks to openly gawking and touching.

“I should send you to The Backroom and let them have their way with you.”

Bile burns in my gut. I’ve heard about The Backroom. It’s a brothel in the city, a place where the men frequent. From what I’ve heard, Aleksei and his men steal women and force them to work in the brothel.

“I’m sorry,” I say, bowing my head slightly. It’s all about respect for Aleksei He’ll kill you if you slight him, and that’s

not something that I want to happen.

He removes his hand from my arm and viciously backhands me. Thankfully, I stay standing.

“Your days are numbered, *Shlyukha*. Remember that.” He walks away, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I truly believe that I’d have been put to work in the whorehouse long ago if it weren’t for his wife. Aleksei hates me, always has. He would have set me to work at the age of six had his wife not cared for me. When she died, something changed. He hated me so much more, but he also lusted after me. I hadn’t realized what the looks were that he gave me until I got older. It makes my stomach churn to know that he and so many of his men would have taken me at the age of seven or eight if they had the chance.

The deep scent of leather and musk hits me as calloused hands slide around my waist, and I freeze. God, I know who it is. Only one man smells like that.

“Malenkaya,” Sergei breathes into my ear. “Your birthday is in two weeks. Are you excited?”

Absolutely not. I have never celebrated a birthday, and it scares me that he’s talking about it. I hate when he calls me Malenkaya, I’m not his little girl. It’s creepy. Why is he interested?

“No, sir,” I reply.

He grounds his thickening cock against my back. “Trust me, Malenkaya, you’re going to love this birthday,” he growls, his lips pressing against the outer shell of my ear. “It’s going to be perfect for you.”

I bite back my sarcastic retort. There’s no way in hell I would ever get the chance to celebrate my birthday, and

absolutely no way any of the men would celebrate it unless they were getting something out of it too.

“What’s happening?” I ask, my heart racing and my palms sweaty.

He spins me in his arms so that I’m facing him. “That, Malenkaya, is for you to find out. We don’t want to spoil the surprise, right?”

I swallow hard and plaster on a fake smile. “Right,” I reply. “I should probably go and clean up. I need to make dinner.”

Thankfully, he releases me, and I take a step backward. His eyes darken with rage, and he reaches for me again. “You do not leave without saying goodbye,” he snarls.

I feel my brows knit together. What the hell is he talking about?

“You fucking kiss me when you’re leaving.”

I blink, surprised at the venom in his words, not to mention by his request.

“What? Why?”

His anger whips through his body and stifles the air between us. “You are mine, Malenkaya. All fucking mine. And you’ll do as I say.”

I stare at him, completely shocked at his words.

“Kiss me,” he snarls. His hand wraps around my wrist, the one I suspected was broken months ago and was never set. It’s still painful, but each day, it gets better. The grip he has on my wrist is painful, and I fight back a flinch. His lips slam against mine, and he kisses me. It’s hard, punishing, and awful.

When he pulls back, he's wearing a satisfied grin. "That, *shlyukha*, is what I expect when you leave."

I nod, my stomach rolling in protest. "Of course, sir," I respond politely.

His grin turns slightly feral. "Good. Now go. Tonight, you're cooking for the men. Do not disappoint." He turns and walks away.

Once he's gone, I'm able to breathe, but the moment I pull in some much-needed oxygen, my stomach churns. I make it to the bathroom in time to empty my stomach contents.

I'm so damn screwed. So hurt and broken right now.

My friend is gone, my other friend betrayed me, and now I belong to *Sergei Turgenev*.

The next in line for the Pakhan position.

The father of the man who betrayed me.

The man who is going to own me.

I'm stuck here forever. Freedom doesn't exist for me. It never will. I'm destined to become the Pakhan's whore.

NICCOLÒ

“**T**he fuck is Chiara?” I ask my wife, Maria. The woman is pissing me the fuck off. She’s glued to her cell phone and waves her hand at me to leave her alone. “Maria,” I snarl, stepping further into the room. “Where the hell is our daughter?”

I got a call over two hours ago from one of my men. He had been trailing my daughter, watching her to ensure she remained safe, but she entered the house, and he hasn’t seen her since. He told me that Maria was with her, so he didn’t enter the house. That was his first mistake, and the fucker had better hope Chiara hasn’t done any drugs, otherwise he’ll be losing his life.

She sighs, finally putting down the damn fucking cell. “Why are you always on her case, Niccolò? She’s a teenager. Leave her be.”

I glare at the woman who’s been wearing my ring for the past seventeen years. Christ. When did she become such a fucking bitch? “Your daughter isn’t a normal teenager. Had you fucking checked in the past six months, you’d have realized that. Christ, Maria.” I shake my head. It’s fucking useless talking with her.

She's been so focused on her work—something that isn't usually allowed in the famiglia. The women are to stay home and be a housewife and raise the children. But as Chiara got older, Maria started to fall into a depression. I gave her the option to get out of the house and find work, which she did. Now, she's so immersed in it that she doesn't see anything else.

I turn on my heel and stalk through the house. Chiara must be somewhere. She knows she's not allowed out of the house unless she's with a trusted guard, someone I know that will watch out for her.

Killing the stupid fuck she was dating was never the plan, but the moment I found out that he was using my daughter to find out information on the Famiglia, there was no way he could stay alive. No one will ever survive trying to bring down the Famiglia. I never intended for Chiara to see what I was doing. I never wanted her to see that side of my life. My baby girl has always been protected, the way it should be. But one mistake and she saw the worst side to me, and she's struggling with it. Struggling to reconcile the man she saw as her protector versus the man who's filled with darkness.

“Giacomo,” I call out to my right-hand man. “Have you seen Chiara?”

Giacomo has been my best friend since we were kids. Our fathers were part of the Famiglia, and we were inducted at the same time. Giacomo was at my side as I grew through the ranks and made it to Captain. Chiara sees him as her uncle. He's been a vital part of our lives—for me, he's the voice of reason, especially when I'm in a cloud of rage.

“Nico, no, I haven't.” His words are tainted with worry. “Did she come home?” he questions.

I nod. “Yes. Pavel was watching her. He brought her home and saw her enter.”

His brows knit together. “I haven’t seen her, boss. I’ve been here all day.”

There’s a heaviness that settles on my chest. Where the hell is my daughter?

Chiara has been drug-free for the past three months. When I found out she was taking drugs, I about lost my mind. My fucking daughter was hooked on cocaine. The moment I discovered that, I made sure to keep her clean. I’ve wanted to ensure that she’s okay and thriving. That means keeping a tighter rein on her. Making sure that she’s never alone, and that she’s okay. My daughter got mixed up in the wrong crowd. She should never have been near those Bratva brats. Not fucking ever.

“I’ll call the men, see if they have seen her,” he tells me, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his cell.

I nod. “I’m going to search outside,” I say, knowing Chiara likes to be outside and away from the house sometimes. She feels claustrophobic being inside, so she escapes outside to breathe.

I make my way outside and scan the vast land my home sits on. There’s not a lot of places to hide. I continue down the path, my gut screaming at me. There’s one place where no one’s been to in a while, and I’m praying to fuck that she hasn’t gone there. The outbuilding that I used to kill Abagor. It’s been vacant for the past six months. It used to be where my men stayed whenever they needed, but then that shit went down with Abagor, and no one has used it since.

Could she be in there? I fucking hope not.

I quicken my pace and enter the building. “Chiara?” I yell, hoping she’ll hear me if she’s close by. That tightness in my chest is getting heavier. I’m finding it hard to breathe. Where the fuck is my daughter?

But my calls are unanswered. There’s only silence. Fuck. Where the hell is she?

I move through the building, wishing it was smaller. There are way too many places that could be hiding spots. This was the building my father used to house his mistress when he and my mom lived here.

A chill forms throughout my body, and I know Chiara’s here. I can feel it in my soul. Dread sets in at what I may find. I continue through the house, searching every room I come across, until there’s one left.

My footsteps sound like drums as I creep into the bedroom. I know she’s here. I can feel it in my gut. My eyes fall to her still figure on the bed. It’s as though someone has scooped out my insides and left a gaping hole. I shuffle closer to check for a pulse, but I already know the answer: there is none. Her face feels cold, but it doesn’t hurt me as much as the vacant expression staring blindly up at the ceiling. I press two fingers to her neck where I pray that I could somehow feel a faint pulse fluttering under the skin. My hope dying with each passing moment because there’s nothing. Not even a flutter. She’s gone.

I slide to the floor next to the bed. Tears stream down my cheeks as I press my lips to her hand. God, she was doing better. She was recovering. She was off the drugs. What the fuck happened?

I glance at the bed and see the multiple plastic empty bags, white powder residue on the packet as well as my daughter’s

nose. Fuck. Where did she get it? How did she manage to get the drugs? She should have been with Pavel today, so how the fuck did she get cocaine?

Every fucker who had a hand in making my daughter turn to drugs is going to pay. They're all going to pay for what they've done.

I make my daughter a vow. Those fucking Russians are going to know what I'm going through right now. They are the reason. Every single one of them. But most of all, Inessa Koskava. Chiara's best friend, the girl who was the closest to her. She should have known what my daughter was going through. She should have stopped this. She should have kept my daughter safe.

I swallow my tears and rise to my feet, tamping down the pain that has encased my heart. I have a fuck of a lot of work to do. I press one last kiss to Chiara's face, closing her eyes so she can rest peacefully.

"Rest easy, *Principessa*," I whisper, my words hoarse and filled with pain.

It takes me a few moments before I'm able to pull myself together to do what needs to be done. The burning rage I feel inside is like a tsunami.

I pull out my phone and dial Giacomo's cell. "I've found her," I say when he picks up.

"Is she okay?" he asks warily.

"No," I reply. "I'm in the outhouse. Have the doctor come. He's going to need to sign the death certificate."

"Christ," he growls. "What do you need from me, Nico?"

I take a deep breath. Revenge is coming, that much I know. “Find out everything you can on Inessa Koskava.”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line. “Inessa, that’s Chiara’s best friend. Are you sure you want to go after her?”

“Absolutely,” I reply without missing a beat.

“Okay. I’ll start digging. I’ll call the doctor. He’ll be here soon. Do you need me with you?”

“No. Call the doctor, Gio, then find out everything you can about Inessa.”

I hang up the phone and wipe my tears away, steeling myself for what’s to come. Questions—everyone is going to want to know what’s happened. Every fucker is going to want information.



I enter the house after the doctor has gone and Chiara’s body has been removed to the morgue. The anger that I have is beyond palpable. The second I close the door behind me, I hear Maria’s laughter. Hearing it angers me. The past six months, she’s been an absentee mother. She didn’t give a fuck about Chiara.

Tonight, Maria will pay for her neglect. I never loved the bitch. It was merely an arranged marriage that suited our fathers. Thankfully, those two bastards are long gone, and my marriage was a sham. But for the sake of appearances, we are a happy family. I gave Maria what she wanted: Chiara. She was a good mom until she went to work, and then everything changed. I’ll never forgive her for the way she neglected Chiara these past few months. She should have been helping

her through it all. Instead, she didn't give a fuck. She wasn't interested in her daughter's life.

She deserves to feel the pain. Knowing that our daughter is dead, the bitch needs to know my pain.

Walking into the bedroom, I find her lying on the bed, wearing a silky robe and a smile as she scrolls through her cell, watching stupid fucking videos. She's oblivious to everything that's happened today. She didn't once call to check on Chiara. She didn't give a fuck.

I stand at the foot of the bed with my arms crossed, watching her. She's completely oblivious to everything around her.

"Maria," I snap, pissed that this bitch is so callous about her daughter's whereabouts. She has no idea what's happened, and she doesn't even care.

She sighs, not pulling her gaze from her cell. "What, Niccolò? I'm busy."

"Chiara's dead," I snarl, beyond pissed at her disinterest.

She turns to me. The blood drains from her face, the grip she has on her cell tightens, and her eyes widen with fear. "What?" she whispers, horrified.

"You heard my words, Maria. Our daughter is dead, and you're laying here with not a fucking worry in the world. Some fucking mother you are."

Pain and anger slash through her eyes. She pushes up from her position on the bed and lunges for me. The bitch should know better. I wrap my fingers around her throat, and I'm not gentle about it. This woman has pushed me too far today. I'm done.

Her skin turns puce as the red creeps up her face. She's struggling to breathe.

"You fucking bitch," I snarl at the cunt. "Don't act as though you care. It's been months since you paid our daughter any attention." I bring my face closer to hers. "Your daughter was struggling, and you didn't help her."

I release her throat, shoving her backward. She collapses on the bed, sucking in deep breaths. "What?" she gasps. Her robe has come undone, revealing her body. I used to think she was beautiful, but beauty is only skin deep with her. She's a fucking bitch.

"You," I hiss as I reach for my knife that's sheathed at my hip. "You didn't even care that Chiara was in need of help," I growl, unable to control my temper any longer. "You never cared about anyone but yourself."

"Chiara?" she croaks. "My baby," she sobs.

Hearing that bullshit fall from her lips angers me even more. "You fucking bitch," I hiss as I grip her hair and drag her toward me. "You don't get to act as though you care. You didn't give a fuck about what happened to her. My daughter died, and you were too fucking busy on your cell to even notice."

Her body begins to tremble as the tears fall harder. "No," she cries. "Not my baby."

The wails that come from her would haunt a better man. They'd make someone take note and maybe even feel a little sorrow for her. But not me. No. All her words are doing are pissing me off further. She's fucking delusional. The past few months, she's not given a fuck about Chiara, and now she's acting like the doting mother. Fuck no.

I don't hesitate. My knife slices through her skin like butter. The wails turn painful, but I don't stop. No. I fucking live for this. I enjoy killing. It's ingrained in me. Has been since I was a boy. Feeling the life slip from my enemies' eyes is the only thing that lessens the bloodlust.

"Please," she whimpers, pleading with me. "Don't do this."

I ignore her. She should have thought about this shit a long fucking time ago. She chose herself over our child. The rage takes over me as I continue to slice across her skin, not leaving any part of her untouched. Her cries soon fade to raspy whimpers, her body slack against my hold. There's nothing but blood everywhere.

"You'll die knowing that you did this," I growl at the fucker as my knife slashes across her throat.

It's done.

She's dead.

And yet, I don't feel any fucking better.

My daughter is dead, and the revenge is only just beginning.

I don't care if it takes me years, they're all going to die.

Every single fucking one of them.

INESSA

“Get your ass out here,” Aleksei yells, and my blood runs cold. He never calls me for anything. Usually, he’ll happen upon me and then start yelling, and that then leads into a beating. It’s been two weeks since my last one, and I’m still not fully recovered from it. It’s taking me longer to bounce back.

I hurry out of my room, and my heart stutters when I find Aleksei in his office. It’s dark and cold in this room. The walls are painted a deep brown that matches most of the furniture in here. There are no pictures of anyone, just paperwork. It’s creepy as hell. I despise this room. Hell, this entire house. But there’s so much darkness in this one room that it cloaks the air and makes it stifling. It’s hard to breathe. I look at Aleksei. He’s seated behind his big desk, his arms crossed over his chest and his lips set into a harsh line. His eyes are cold as he watches Sergei. The man seems to always be around. I’ve tried my best to hide from him, but it’s no use. He always seems to find me.

“What’s going on?” I ask, trying to keep the fear from my voice. But I’m scared. This isn’t like any other time I have been summoned. Right now, I have a feeling that something bad is going to happen. My legs start to feel like Jello, and I

lock my knees so that I don't fall. My hands begin to tremble, and I clutch them together, hoping it will hide my fear.

"I'm glad you asked," Aleksei says, a dark smile on his face. "I've told you before that you'd have done well in The Backroom. Not only would you have done well, but I would have been rich. Sergei has other ideas, and as he is my closest man, and someone I owe, you have not been put to work," he growls, and I can hear the pissed off tone to his voice. He's not happy. Far from it. "You're a woman now, Inessa. You've been one for a long time, but I made a promise to my wife. If you weren't put to work, you'd be kept intact until you were old enough to know why. That time has come."

I blink. "I don't understand," I say, wondering what he's talking about. Nothing makes sense.

That grin of his turns sinister. "You would have known that eight years ago, Sergei's wife died. She had a nasty fall and never recovered."

I nod. Everyone heard about what happened to Ingrid. Everyone's heard the rumors. Sergei threw her down the stairs and killed her.

"It's time for Sergei Turgenev to take a bride, and Inessa, he has chosen you."

Bile rises up my throat. He can't be serious. There's no way in hell that I would ever marry Sergei Turgenev. It's just not going to happen.

"Listen to me, *shlyukha*, you don't have a choice. You are going to marry Sergei, and you are going to do everything that he tells you. If you don't—" he pauses, leaving the words hanging in the air. "You are to go to him whenever he needs you."

There's a ringing in my ears. It feels as though I'm underwater and I can't breathe. This can't be happening. Oh. My. God. I'm going to belong to a maniac and there's no way I'm going to survive.

Sergei turns to me, his grin filled with triumph. "The wedding will take place the moment you turn eighteen," he growls. "But you belong to me before that, Inessa. You're going to belong to me in every way possible."

I glance between Aleksei and Sergei, wondering why the wedding is happening in two years rather than right this minute. I know other women who have been married off at a young age.

"You need your guardian's signature, but since you do not have any of those, it'll wait." The hardness in Sergei's tone makes me shiver. His words sound plausible but I'm not buying it. There's more to this than that, and I want to know what they're hiding, but at the same time, I don't.

Sergei prowls toward me, possessiveness burning in his eyes. He reaches out, and I don't move, trying my hardest not to flinch. "You are mine, now, Malenkaya," he growls, his fingers clenching my jaw. "All fucking mine."

I hate that I'm going to belong to him. I despise that I'm going to be married to a monster.

I have hated my life. I have been conditioned to be a nobody. I'm always dismissed and put down. But I wasn't owned. I was able to have a little bit of hope that one day, I could get out of this hell hole. Now it's all gone. Being married to Sergei means that I'm forever shackled to him. Will always be owned by him.

No complaining, no crying, and no talking to anyone.

That's what my life is going to be like now.

He takes my hand and leads me toward the door. "You're coming with me," he says, his eyes filled with the same lust I have witnessed for the past eight years. He's always made it known that he has wanted me, and now he's got me, and there's absolutely no going back.

We get into his car, and he has his driver, Ivan, take us to his house. It's not that far from Aleksei's home. The closer we get to the house, the more my heart races. The air in the car is suffocating. I can feel and see Sergei's excitement and lust. I hate it. My stomach rolls at the thought of him touching me. But there's nothing I can do that'll stop this. Nothing I say or do will ever have him changing his mind.

I'm stunned by how beautiful his house is. Everything is pristine. The white walls, the marble flooring, the grand staircase. Everything is immaculate. And then I realize that Sergei is a control freak. He'd freak the fuck out if something was out of place. It makes sense as to why it's so clean. But what gets me is there are no pictures. None of his wife, Ingrid, none of his son, Artyom. It's as though this house is for show.

He leads me toward the back of the house and into the dungeon. A light flickers on and illuminates the room. I pull in a ragged breath when I see it. It's such a stark contrast to before. Gone are the pristine white floors and walls. In their place are dark red walls and black flooring. It's hauntingly terrifying. But then again, it makes sense. It's another part of his personality. The dark and dangerous man would have a dark and terrifying room.

My breathing deepens as he pulls me further into the room, and that's when I see it. A huge bed in the center of the room.

My heart pounds harder when I notice the shackles attached to the bedposts. Huge fucking metal shackles.

“What’s going on?” I whisper, terrified of what’s about to come.

He pulls me toward the bed and smiles deeply at me. “This,” he says thickly, “is where we play.”

I blink. “Play?” I don’t want to play. I don’t want to be here.

He towers over me, his six-foot frame dominating mine. I shrink back, and he reaches for my arm. I wince at the new pain as he drags me up to the head of the bed, cuffing me to it as he does. The band of metal biting into my wrist stings; it burns like fire under the shackles. I swallow back bile as more fear rushes through me.

I clamp my eyes closed and try to regulate my breathing but can’t control myself. Black spots creep in around the edges of my vision, spreading until they consume me. “No... oh no,” I moan. My breaths are shallow as horror rises within me.

I can feel his hot breath on my neck as his fingers trace down my spine, sending shivers through my body. His deep chuckle reverberates through the room. I try to pull away, but the chains holding me in place don’t budge an inch. My heart races as I realize the extent of my predicament. I am at his mercy.

He moves closer, his lips brushing my ear as he whispers, “You, Malenkaya, are going to have so much fun.”

I struggle to keep my breathing even. It’s too much. I try to pull away from him, but he leans in to kiss me. His lips are rough and demanding as he explores my mouth, leaving me breathless and wanting him to die. I hate that I’m stuck here,

that I'm going to be hurt yet again, because men don't know how to take no for an answer.

As he pulls back, a wicked grin spreads across his face. "Now, I'm going to claim what is mine," he growls.

My heart races and I feel lightheaded. Fear squeezes the breath from my lungs and darkness threatens to overcome me. I've never been so frightened in my life. Never felt so scared to breathe before. The darkness pulls me under, and it's bliss.

I come awake at a low humming sound. I open my eyes, and it's as though I've woken up in a nightmare. I see Sergei kneeling between my legs, that humming sound getting louder.

"What?" I ask, my voice low, but he hears me. "What's going on?" It's at that moment I realize that not only is one hand shackled to the bed, but both my hands and feet are and I'm completely naked.

"I'm glad you're awake," he says thickly. "I thought you were going to sleep through it all."

I let out a high-pitched moan, the vibrations from the humming toy turning my cry into a whimper. His fingers splay against my stomach as he presses down hard on my pelvis, forcing me to take a deep breath.

"What is happening?" I ask, eyes wide and confused.

He pushes the vibrator up and down along my pussy lips. "Shh," he whispers, his hot breath right next to my face. "You need to breathe, Malenkaya, and then you need to watch me take you."

I swallow hard. I plead with him to stop, but my voice is weak.

His laughter is cruel and dark; the sound of the devil. “I have waited a long time for this honor, Inessa. I have fought for years to have this right, and I’m not going to stop. You will take what I give you, or I can pleasure you. It’s now time for you to decide.”

I try to close my legs to stop him from doing this to me. I suck in a deep breath when he pulls the vibrator away from me, and the humming sound stops.

“I fucking warned you,” he snarls. The anger in his voice has my stomach dropping.

Within seconds, he’s reaching for a rope, his movements filled with purpose as he ties my hands to my feet, the shackles biting into my skin. Tears slide from my eyes as I realize he’s not going to stop. He’s just ensured that I won’t be able to move as he takes me.

“This,” he growls as he gets between my legs, “is going to hurt. It’s going to be messy, but you’ll remember that you did this. That you caused this.”

I swallow hard when I see a glint of silver. He has a blade, like all men in the Bratva. They’re trained to be artists with their knives. I suck in a hiss as he slices the inside of my thigh.

He has no idea what he’s doing. For me, this is my pleasure. I love the feel of blood seeping from me. It washes away the pain that I feel deep inside.

I try to keep the moan contained as he cuts me once again, and this time, it’s a little deeper than before. I don’t want anyone to know how depraved I truly am. That cutting myself is the only way to get through the life I have been dealt.

The low, humming sound starts again, and I tense. No. No. No. I can handle the cutting, I can deal with it. But I can’t

handle him touching me. I'm paralyzed with fear, utterly helpless as he runs the vibrator along my folds.

"Look at you," he growls, not stopping with the vibrator. "Your cunt is so pink, so fucking pure, and now it's all mine." He runs the toy over my body, and I can see the blood soaking it. He's smearing it all over me.

I suck in a harsh breath as he continues to work my body over with that toy. I hate that my body is responding to him. I hate that he's touching me and there's absolutely nothing I can do but lie here and take it.

There's a dull pain in my back from being pulled up where my hands and feet are tied together. The asshole continues to run that vibrating wand over my body. There's no pleasure, none whatsoever. All I feel is dirty for him touching me.

He looks over at me, his eyes look so black and are filled with darkness. "Not enjoying yourself, Malenkaya?" he says thickly.

I clench my jaw, unsure of what he'll do now.

"That's okay," he says, dropping the vibrator. "You'll enjoy this," he tells me.

A shiver travels down my spine as I hear the distinct sound of his zipper. My mind races, my fingers clench into fists, and my heart pounds. The air is thick and heavy, like a dense fog enveloping me. My breaths are short and shallow. I know what's going to happen next. I know that he's taking me. My entire body freezes. I close my eyes, a lone tear slipping out as he looms over me.

With one sharp thrust, he breaches my innocence. Pain unlike anything I've ever experienced hits me. The scream that tears from my lips is horrific and terrifying.

“Good girl,” he praises me. “So fucking perfect.”

I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, silently begging him to stop.

He grips my hips, his fingers digging into my soft flesh. “Watch me, Malenkaya,” he demands. “Watch me take you.”

My heart races wildly, a sob escaping from my lips. I turn my face away from him and shake my head. He grips my jaw harshly and yanks it toward him, so I have no choice but to look at him. “Now,” he orders. “Give me your mouth, Malenkaya.”

I turn my face away again and shake my head. I can’t do this. I don’t want to do this.

“Inessa,” he growls, laughing softly. “You’re going to learn to give me what I want, when I want it.”

I’m petrified, afraid to say anything. I know that no matter what I do or say, he’s going to have his own way.

There’s a sharp slap to my face. Pain radiates through my cheek and my eye begins to swell. He slaps me repeatedly, his hand connecting with my face again and again, his rhythm in sync with every thrust of his cock.

The pain is unbearable. I want him to stop more than anything in this world. I say a silent prayer as he continues to violate me.

This is what my life is going to be like from now on. This is what I’m going to have to deal with being Sergei’s wife.

I hear footsteps and my body freezes. “Ah, Aleksei,” Sergei says darkly. “I started to think you weren’t coming.”

“You’d wish,” he replies with anger in his voice as he steps into the light. “Do you know how long I’ve wanted this,

shlyukha? How long I've waited to finally destroy you?" The coldness to his voice has me shivering in fear. "Now, I finally get it."

I blink, wondering what the hell he's talking about. But then I hear the sound of his zipper and my heart sinks.

"You've taken her pussy," he snarls at Sergei, sounding pissed. "Now I'm going to take her ass."

I swallow back a cry as he steps toward me. God. No.

I thought I knew fear. I thought I knew what pain and suffering was. But nothing compares to this.

I'm in Hell, and there's no escape.

NICCOLÒ

SIX MONTHS LATER

“Niccolò,” Kirill greets me with a sharp nod. “You shouldn’t be here. I’d have met you someplace else.”

I understand his trepidation. Meeting at a bar on the edge of Bratva territory is reckless not only for me, but for him also. My days of cautiousness went out the fucking window the day I found my daughter lying on the bed, eyes open, and no pulse. I have a mission, and I’m not going to stop until I have done what I need to do.

I glance around and see that it’s busy for a Thursday night. It means that the conversation we have will not be overheard, but it also means the probability of me being seen in this territory is high. I don’t give a fuck. I need answers and that’s what I’m going to get.

“That may be so, but you know why I am.” It’s taken me six fucking months to get this close to one of the Bratva’s inner circle, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to walk away just because I shouldn’t be here. Fuck that. I’m not giving up on my vengeance. My daughter died at the hands of the Bratva, and I want every fucking one of them to pay.

He gives me a grim smile. “I’d be the same if the situation was reversed. But you have to know, Niccolò, if Sergei or Aleksei find you here, they’ll kill you.”

“I do know that, but it’s a risk I’m willing to take. Now, Kirill, what have you uncovered?”

“Inessa hasn’t been seen since the day Chiara died. She’s still at the Pakhan’s house. He’s keeping her close.”

My jaw clenches and my fists ball up. Christ. Why are they now keeping her hidden? The girl has always been in the public eye. The rumors have swirled about how she came to be with Aleksei. Most believe she’s his illegitimate daughter, and him now hiding her makes that rumor seem even more true.

“What else?” I ask.

His gaze slides away. “From what I’ve learned—and this is just talk among the men—your daughter was in debt with Aleksei. She owed him money for the drugs she was on. When you took her to ground and had her get clean, the boss wasn’t happy. Far from it.”

My eyes narrow. He’s holding something back. The way he’s shifting on his stool, the way his eyes slide to the left, almost as though he can’t face me... “What is it?”

He pulls in a heavy breath. “Chiara,” he says softly. “I’m sorry, Niccolò. I hate that I’m saying this. But Chiara used her body in order to get the drugs. She sold herself to get them.”

Blind cold rage hits me. What the fuck were those animals doing to her?

“She was fourteen,” I hiss. “She was a fucking child.”

He nods. “I know. From everything the men have said, only Aleksei touched her.”

“Did he know who she was?” I demand to know. Not that it even fucking makes a difference. No fourteen-year-old girl

should have been touched and certainly not my fucking daughter.

Kirill nods. “I’m sorry, Niccolò. Everyone knew who Chiara was and who she belonged to. Aleksei had a plan. He wanted Chiara, so he had Abagor get close to her. He wanted her from the moment he saw her and had plans in place to ensure he got what he wanted. I know that you killed him, Niccolò, and I also understand why, but just as you want revenge for Chiara, Fyodor wants revenge for killing his boy. He doesn’t know that you are responsible.”

That surprises me. I hadn’t realized the Bratva didn’t know I killed the asshole, Abagor. His father, Fyodor, can try and come for me. I’ll take out any fucker he sends my way. “You never told them. Why?”

His jaw is clenched. “Your daughter is not the only one Aleksei has taken against their will, Niccolò. He is a monster. A man who shouldn’t be leading the Bratva. A man I do not trust.”

“You want him gone,” I say, knowing that he can’t do it. If he does, it’s instant death.

He nods. “I do. I want him gone. But he goes and then Sergei is in charge. He is even worse than Aleksei. No one’s daughters would be safe.” The anger and defeat in his voice tells me just what I’m dealing with. I’m wondering what’s happened. No man would ever turn his back on his boss. No one would do what Kirill is doing. If they did, they’d have to have a damn good reason.

The Bratva have always had a bad reputation. They don’t care whether you’re a man, woman, or child. If you have wronged them, or are even associated with someone who has wronged them, you’ll be taken out. They’ll wipe out entire

families to get their justice. Aleksei Belyaev is notorious for his reign of terror, but his right-hand man, Sergei Turgenev, is feared even more. The two of them are animals. They have girls as young as twelve working for them—working as whores. They should die. They need to die. If I take out Belyaev, it doesn't get rid of the cancer that is within the Bratva. It never will. After Belyaev, there's Turgenev, and after him will be someone equally as fucked up.

“What are you planning on doing?” I ask him, wanting to know if he has a plan of action.

He shakes his head. “I'm in the inner circle. There would be no place me or my family could hide from the men if I were to take out Aleksei. I wish I fucking could but my wife has been through enough.”

I finally understand. Kirill's wife has been hurt by those fucking animals. A man in love will go to the depths of Hell to protect the woman he loves. Kirill is a rock in a hard place. He wants his wife free of the bastards who hurt her, but he knows if he does it, he'll be leaving her at their mercy.

“I get it,” I say to him as I get to my feet. “It'll be done, Kirill. He's going to burn for what he's done, and I'm going to ensure that he suffers.”

The fucker's lips twitch. “Good. He fucking deserves it.”

“I'm not finished, not by a long shot.”

His brows practically hit his hairline. “What?”

“They're all going to pay, every fucking one of them. They are the reason my daughter is dead, Kirill. There's no fucking redemption. Not for them.”

He's silent for a beat, his gaze firmly on mine, but then a smirk forms. “Take them all out,” he agrees. “Those men, they

deserve everything that's coming to them.”

I grin darkly at him as I turn to leave. Little does he know that it's not just the men that I'm taking out. No. Inessa Koskava. She was Chiara's best friend. She's the woman who ties all of this shit together. She's the one who's going to pay the most. Her punishment? That has yet to be decided. But it's going to hurt and is the one I'm most looking forward to.



“What the fuck is going on with you?” Rocco Gallo asks. He's the son of the boss. He's a man I trust and someone I respect. Unlike his father. Aldo Gallo is useless. He shouldn't be leading the Famiglia. The men have lost faith in him, have done so for the past few years.

I know Aldo's secret, something that he doesn't want getting out. The fucker beats his son. The youngest, Dario, has become his punching bag, and that's a fucked-up thing to do. No matter what your kid has done, you don't treat them like that. If you're angry, go take it out on a number of assholes who have wronged us. You want to unleash that rage? Go to the fucking gym or fight. What you don't do is put your hands on your kid.

“What?” I growl as I stand with my arms crossed.

I like Rocco, I do, but fuck, right now I don't want to be answering questions about what the fuck I'm going to do.

“Nic,” he begins. “Whatever you've got planned, let me help you. You don't have to go through this alone. Chiara was your daughter. She was family. Whatever you need, you've got it.”

I run a hand through my hair. Over the past six months, it's gotten longer. It's unkempt, and from what the men have told me, I look like a deranged monster.

"I'm taking down the Bratva," I tell him.

His expression doesn't change. There's no emotion. "Thought so. Now, what do you need?"

This is why Rocco is a man that I respect and even admire. He's always got the best interests of his men in mind. He should be head of the Famiglia, not his fucked-up father.

"Aleksei is going first," I grind out.

He nods. "We do this, we do it right," he says. "We will have only those we trust implicitly." He flashes me his shark's grin. "For you, that's no one. But we need a few. Dario and Elio are trustworthy."

I incline my head. He's right, they are. Rocco and his brothers are close. They will do whatever Rocco tells them and they'd never betray him. "I want Giacomo," I tell him.

"What about Pavel?" he asks, and I hear the hesitancy in his voice.

The day Chiara died, Pavel was supposed to be guarding her. He dropped the ball and now she's dead. "I don't know if I trust him or not," I tell him.

His jaw tenses and his eyes harden. "I get that. I mean, he was guarding her so how did she get the drugs? I'll have Andrea look into him."

Andrea is another Captain. He, like me, has lost respect for Aldo Gallo.

"Have you got a plan?" he questions me. "Nic, you want to take out the Bratva, that's going to take time and planning."

You can't go in guns blazing."

I sigh. "I know. As much as I'd love to take out all the fucking bastards at once, I know it won't happen like that."

"So we bide our time. You have a man on the inside, correct?"

I nod. "I do. He's protecting his wife. He won't be much help when it goes down, but he's giving me information."

Rocco's jaw tightens. It's a huge fucking no-no. You don't turn your back on the family, no matter what. Kirill has put his wife's and his lives on the line by coming to me.

"We take out Aleksei." Rocco grins. "We take him out and make it look as though it was an inside job. It's been six months since Chiara passed. A few more months won't kill us. We'll gather everything we can on the Bratva. We'll make sure we know their every move. When we strike, it's going to be when they least expect it."

The tightness in my chest, the one that's been heavy since the day I found Chiara, starts to ease. Revenge is all that I'm working towards. It's all that I live for. Those cunts are going to pay for what they have done to my daughter, and when they do, I'll know that I'll have done what's right. I'll have avenged her death.

"We've got a lot of work to do," he says, the darkness in his eyes shining brightly. "We'd best get to it."

I lift my chin, thankful that he's at my side. If I had gone to his father with what I have told Rocco, I'd have been told to back down and not start a war. They have to know. A war is inevitable. You kill my daughter, you pay the price.

There's no going back.

An eye for an eye.

No one is safe. Once this war starts, it's going to be utter carnage.

INESSA

I hear the men moving around outside my room. I've locked the door, grateful for the reprieve. It's been the worst six months of my life and there's been no let up. None whatsoever. Aleksei and Sergei take turns on me. Hell, they even take me together. I'm so emotionally closed off that I just lie there and take whatever the fuck they do to me.

I'm dead inside. There's no hope, no love, no spark. I've withered away until the darkness that threatened to consume me over the years finally did so. Nothing I do matters. Nothing I say will ever get me out of this hell hole that I'm in.

The excitement has been building over the past few days. The men are like vultures. The moment they hear that someone's got a bounty on their head, they want them gone. Today, I finally heard what's going on. Aleksei has put a hit out on Niccolò Caruso—Chiara's father. He was seen in the Bratva territory and Aleksei is beyond pissed. The moment he found out, he came to me and released that anger.

The men of the Bratva are partying like they've killed Niccolò rather than just put a hit on him. I know that if I am ever going to escape, now is the time. I reach for my jacket and pull it on me. Thankfully, it's bigger than what I usually wear—something that Aleksei had one of his women buy me.

Nausea hits me and I take a few moments to let it pass. I'm so fucking scared. I'm terrified of what's going to happen. But I know this is my only chance for escape.

I pull on my shoes and take a deep breath. I used to be able to exit the room without a worry. I could creep out of the house, and no one would be any the wiser. But it's different now. It's harder. I haven't left the house alone in months. The last time I did was when Aleksei and Sergei told me I was going to marry Sergei once I hit the age of eighteen. I won't be able to survive. I won't be able to live to that age like this. I hate who I've become. I despise my life. I want out.

I slide the window open and climb out. I have to hurry, because if the guards catch me, I'm dead. I manage to hit the floor and take off running. It's not long until I'm running out of breath and growing weaker.

I glance down at the ever-growing bump and shiver in disgust. There's a baby growing inside of me, and I hate it. I despise that it's there. I wanted to get rid of it, not wanting a child that's the product of rape, but the moment I mentioned the word abortion, I was beaten and kept locked in shackles for a week. I think that was the straw that broke the camel's back for me. I have tried to ignore the kicks and movements. I have tried to pretend that it's not happening. But it is and there's nothing I can do about it.

I pull my jacket tighter around me, hoping to hide the hideous bump as I move further and further away from the house. I know that if I'm found, there's going to be hell to pay, but I'm praying that I make it out of the Bratva territory, and from there, I can fade into the darkness.

Terror fills me with every step that I take. I'm constantly looking behind my shoulder, wondering who's following me.

It's late. Darkness has settled over the city of Chicago and I'm very grateful that it has. It's easier to hide in the shadows. Being kept away from everyone, I've learned a hell of a lot. I'm able to watch and see everything. My intuition is never wrong, and I've found ways to make myself smaller than I actually am. I'm great at hiding, although, when I'm found, the punishment is always far more than what I would have gotten had I not hid.

The sound of a car has me darting behind a parked car. I stay in my crouching spot, watching and waiting to see who passes by. My heart sinks when I realize whose car it is. Artyom. The man is no longer the boy I knew. He's a monster, just as his father is. I've seen so much darkness and pain in my life that I always spot someone who's evil, and Artyom and his father, Sergei, are the vilest of all.

The car passes by but I daren't move. I stay crouched a little while longer, making sure it's really gone. I'm two blocks from the edge of Bratva territory and then I'm into the Irish territory. From what I've heard, the Gallaghers are cold-blooded killers, but they don't harm innocents. They don't rape their women and they don't beat them just because they can.

I start to move again once I'm sure Artyom is gone.

I'm a mess. An utter fucking mess. I knew that leaving was going to be hard, but this absolute fear that I'm feeling is pulling me down. It's as though I feel a breath on my neck, that someone's lurking in the shadows. My body is fighting against running. Every step I take is harder and harder as the fear eats away at me.

I'm running out of steam. Between the fear and the lack of energy, it's getting harder and harder to push forward. I'm

breathless, my lungs burning and my body sweating from the exertion.

I turn the corner and crash headfirst into the solid wall of a body. Hands reach out and grab a hold of me.

“No,” I breathe as I try to push away from them. “No, get off me,” I snarl, my hands batting at their own.

“Inessa,” I hear the deep voice say, and I freeze. How do they know me?

I step back, still trying to get his hands away from me. But it's no use. He tightens his grip on my shoulders, pulling me to a stop.

“Please,” I plead. I can't handle him touching me.

“Inessa,” he says much gentler than before. “Look at me,” he requests, releasing me.

I lift my head and stare up at a man with dark green eyes, worry etched on his face. “Who are you?” I ask, knowing that he doesn't belong to the Bratva. No one would show me the kindness he is.

“My name is Giacomo,” he tells me. “I am Niccolò's right-hand man.”

I release a harsh breath. “You are?”

He nods. “Inessa, what's going on? You're freezing. You look like a frightened Jackrabbit. What's happened?”

I shake my head. “I overheard them,” I whisper, my gaze glancing around. “They're all happy because they've put a hit out on Niccolò. They're going to kill him.”

His eyes narrow. “How do you know?” he growls.

“They’ve been celebrating. They want him dead. They’re going to all be after him.”

I watch as he shifts slightly, the light from the streetlamps illuminating the anger on his face, but I also see the worry that’s etched in his eyes. “Tell me everything,” he demands.

I don’t hesitate. I tell him what I have overheard the last few days; how they’re all going to have their shot at Niccolò and they don’t care who’ll get caught in the crossfire. All they want is him dead.

“Why now? Why are they coming for him?”

I swallow hard. “They know that he killed Abagor. I don’t know who told them, but they know, and they want revenge.”

His eyes are sharp as he watches me. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You need to keep Chiara safe. I don’t want her to be hurt when they come for him. Is there somewhere you can send her? Someplace she’ll be safe?” Just the thought of my best friend dying is enough for my breath to be knocked from my lungs.

“What?” he says, rocking back on his heels.

“I know that we haven’t spoken in months, but she’s my best friend. I don’t want anything to happen to her. Please,” I plead with him, tears falling from my eyes. “Giacomo, you have to protect her. She went through hell, but she fought her way back. Don’t let her get hurt in this war that’s coming.”

A sleek, dark car pulls up at the curb, and my heart is in my mouth as the door opens.

“Inessa,” Giacomo says, taking a step toward me. “You’ve gotta calm the fuck down, otherwise you’re going to pass out.”

I swallow hard and shake my head. “I need to go,” I whisper. “I need to be gone.”

I have to hurry. The longer I stay here, the more chance of the Bratva finding me.

“The fuck is going on?” I hear the deep, angry voice of Niccolò Caruso.

“Stay,” Giacomo says, like I’m a dog. I’m not surprised. I’ve been spoken to like I’m one for years. “You run, Inessa, I’m catching you. Stay fucking put,” he says through clenched teeth.

I incline my head and glance around. I need to make sure we’re in the clear. I need to know that no one is around. I can’t be caught. If I am, God only knows what’ll happen.

Giacomo walks over to Niccolò, and the two men have a conversation. They’re speaking low so that I can’t hear them. I turn from them, my gaze once again sweeping the streets, watching, waiting, ready to run if need be.

“The fuck are you playing at, Inessa?” I hear a deep, gravelly voice ask, his lips beside my ear and his hands sliding around my waist.

I gasp and spin around, completely shocked that he managed to sneak up behind me. How could I have let him get behind me like this? It is inexcusable for someone like me. Someone who’s lived in a life of fear and pain. I should have known not to take my eyes off them. Had I not, he wouldn’t have been able to get up behind me. God, I’m so stupid. I haven’t once looked behind me.

Stupid, stupid, Inessa.

“Mr. Caruso,” I say, my voice a lot stronger than it should be. “I need to get going,” I whisper, hoping and praying that

he'll let me go.

He leans in close, his eyes dark and his features filled with anger. "And where is it that you're going to?" he growls, his lips touching the shell of my ear.

I shiver at his touch, and my heart races, but not in fear like it does whenever Sergei or Aleksei touch me. No. In a way that makes my heart soar. He's so close, so damn close that his lips are mere inches from my own, his breath hot against my face.

I'm not sure what's going on, but I don't like it. I take a step backward, but Niccolò's hands on my waist tighten. "I have to go," I repeat once again and pull harder away from him. Thankfully this time, I'm able to get free of him and take a step backward.

"Mr. Caruso, please," I implore. "You need to go too. You don't understand—"

Niccolò's eyes darken. "That, *stronsa*, is something you're right about. What game are you playing?"

I shake my head, my brows knitted together. I don't understand. "I'm not playing a game. You have to protect her. They're going to kill you, Niccolò. Don't you see? They're all gunning for you and Chiara is going to be caught in the crossfire. You have to get her to safety." I swipe away at the tears that are freely flowing. I don't understand why they're just standing here watching me like I'm the devil. I'm trying to help them and yet they're doing nothing.

"Tell me, *stronsa*, why are you helping me?"

"Not you," I reply. "Her. She's my best friend. My only friend." I hear the sound of a car approaching, and I know that it's time to go. "Please," I implore to him. "Keep her safe."

I turn on my heel and start to walk away, needing to put some more distance between me and the Bratva territory. I can't stay here. I'll end up dying if I do.

"Inessa," he growls, stepping toward me. "You're not leaving."

"I have to," I whimper as his hands grip my wrists. "I need to."

My heart stutters when I see a very familiar Cadillac roll past us. I don't think, I just act. I push Niccolò to the side, just as the window of the car rolls down and the muzzle of a gun is pointed out. I let out a squeal as the gun is fired and a bullet whizzes past me.

I drop to the floor, the pregnancy making it harder for me to flee. I know I'm not getting away. I'm not going to escape. Artyom is here and he's just like his father. Ruthless and a piece of shit. He'll turn me over and make sure I pay the price for escaping.

I watch as both Giacomo and Niccolò return fire as they run toward the car. Both men are beyond angry and are determined to kill whoever's shooting at them. I pray to God that they manage to do so, but unfortunately, God doesn't answer my prayers. Artyom continues to fire shot after shot, bullets flying wildly around me, bouncing off car bumpers, lodging into walls, and yet, he continues to come toward me.

I curl up into a ball and pray with everything that I am that Chiara will be safe, that she'll survive this war that's coming. I need my best friend to be safe. She's the only person in this world who loved me. I need her to be okay.

Hands pull at me. "Get the fuck up, Inessa," Artyom growls. "The fuck do you think you're doing? Stupid fucking

whore,” he growls in Russian. “Christ, you should have been killed a long fucking time ago. I don’t care how golden your pussy is, it’s not worth this hassle.” He pulls me to my feet and practically drags me toward the car. “What the fuck did you say to him?” he growls.

“Nothing,” I hiss, trying to pull my arm away from him.

He raises his hand, the one still carrying the gun, and viciously backhands me. The butt of the gun connects with my temple and darkness seeps into my vision. I can’t keep my feet as I begin to sway. I try to protect my bump as I start to fall but the darkness takes me before I even hit the ground.

My very last thought is that my last bit of hope is gone. I’m forever going to be a prisoner for the Bratva.

NICCOLÒ

“Tell me that shit’s not real?” Giacomo growls as he drives toward my home. “Tell me that she’s playing us?”

“Of fucking course she is,” I snarl as I send a message to Rocco, telling him to meet me at my house. Inessa’s playing a fucking twisted game, pretending that Chiara’s alive. I have no fucking idea what she’s trying to achieve by doing so. All she’s done is further piss me off.

“But she’s right, there’s a fucking hit out on you. Why would she warn us if she’s playing us?”

“I don’t know, but she fucking went with that asshole, didn’t she?” We saw her get to her feet and leave with that bastard Artyom. “If she was in danger, she would have asked for help. No, the *stronsa* knew what was coming and wanted to leave before the bullets started to fly.”

Giacomo doesn’t say anything else. His hands are gripping the steering wheel. He’s never liked my plan to get back at Inessa. He’s always said that she’s Chiara’s friend, and that my daughter wouldn’t want her friend hurt. I call fucking bullshit on that. She’s so fucking far in this bullshit that she’s the only one who could have orchestrated it.

The anger at losing Chiara has been simmering on the edge for a long time. I'm going to need to unleash it at some stage, and after tonight, I know it's going to be that fucking asshole Artyom.

“When we arrive at the house, take Dario and go find that fucking cunt, Artyom,” I say to Gio. “That fucker is going to pay for shooting at us.”

Gio grins darkly. “That little shit is going to be in for a world of hurt.”

Oh, he definitely will be. That fucker has been pissing me off for a long fucking time. He's the Bratva's biggest dealer. He's the one who grew his business from selling to the kids at school. Elio's done a fuck of a lot of research since Chiara died, and he's uncovered the fucking bullshit within the Bratva, starting with the fuckers putting Artyom as the drug mule while at school. They've fucking let a child become their kingpin.

By the time we arrive at my home, Rocco is waiting for us along with his brothers, Elio and Dario.

“What do you need?” Rocco asks the moment I slide out of the car.

“Gio is going to pick up Artyom, and he's going to need help,” I say, my gaze moving to Dario.

The fucker smirks and rubs his hands together. “Let's go get him,” he says, and I know they're not going to come back unless they have him.

Rocco and Elio follow me into the house, and I catch them up on everything that happened this evening.

“You think she's lying?” Rocco asks, no emotion in his voice.

“I do. She wanted to leave. I think she knew they were coming and wanted to get as far away as possible.”

Elio crosses his arms over his chest. “What does she have to gain from this?”

I shrug. I don’t give a fuck. “She’s going down just as they all are.”

He nods. “I know that, Nic, but I’m wondering what does this woman have to gain from telling you that those assholes have put a hit out on you? I mean, we’d have found out anyway.”

I scrub a hand down my face. “She’s playing me,” I say through clenched teeth. “She acted as though Chiara was alive and well. Who the fuck does that?”

The brothers share a glance, and I see the anger on their faces. “She never turned up to the funeral. There’s no way she didn’t know,” Rocco says. “So that begs the question. What the fuck is she playing at?”

“How deep is she in with the Russians?” Elio asks.

A low growl rumbles in my chest. Christ. That bitch is playing everyone, and it’s angering me further that she’s getting away with it. When the time comes for her to die, I’m going to fucking smile as I kill her. “As deep as you can get. Everything that we’ve uncovered has shown us that she’s deep within the organization. The rumors swirl that she’s Aleksei’s daughter and that cunt Artyom is her best friend.”

He shakes his head. “Fucking Russians,” he bites out. “Christ, they truly are fucked up people. Letting their kids run their shit.”

Inessa and Artyom have been entwined in the Bratva ways for years. Five years ago, Artyom started selling drugs—hell,

before that. He was twelve, and the cunt has only grown as the years have gone on. He's one of the biggest drug kingpins in Chicago—hell the entire fucking US of A. As for Inessa, I'm wondering if she's inducted into the world. It wouldn't be the first time I've heard of a woman in the ranks. The Irish have done it with Makenna Gallagher, the Russians of New York with Yelena Alekseeva as their fucking assassin. Having her inducted would make sense as to why she's so close to them all.

Fuck.

I need to speak with Kirill and find out if she is. I need everything he has on her. The little we have is useless. We have no idea who her mother is, nor do we know where she's been for the past six months. It's time to find out, and the only person who can give me that information is Kirill.

There's something about Inessa that unsettles me. She's sixteen or seventeen, and I'm fucking unable to think of her as a child. She's beautiful, far more so than anyone I've seen before her. I keep the hatred at the forefront whenever she's around, because those piercing blue eyes of hers sear through me. They reach a place that no one ever has before. Even when Chiara was alive, there was always something about Inessa that had me protective of her.

Not anymore. That bitch is going to die.

“What's the plan?” Rocco asks. “What's next?”

“We're taking that shit out,” I snarl. That fucking bastard took shots at me. He's not going to live for doing so.

Rocco grins. “How about we kill two birds with one stone?”

I raise a brow. Now that's intriguing. “Go on.”

“We kill Artyom and Aleksei. We’ll make it look like a fucking shootout between the two. Hell, we’ll even have that cunt Aleksei’s right-hand man there so it looks as though Aleksei went to take the fucker out.”

My grin widens. Now that’s a fucking plan. “Then let’s go make it happen.”

Elio pulls out his cell. “I’ll call Dario and let him know the updated plan.”

“We’re taking a trip to Bratva territory.” Rocco smirks. “No one,” he says thickly, “is to find out what goes down tonight. Right now, we’re doing what we need to in order to stop this war. We’re not ready for one. We’ve got a fucking lot of recruiting to do, so we make sure those fucking Russians fight among themselves.”

I agree. As fucking fearless as our men are, we’re not equipped for a war. Not yet anyway. Our recruitment levels are rising and the men we’re getting are being trained and are stronger than ever. But to go against the Russians, we’re going to need to almost double our size. Those fuckers are everywhere.

“Let’s get this done,” I say as I exit the house.

Since Chiara died, I haven’t been home as much as I used to. Her death haunts me, taunting me, and it’s going to do so until I rid the world of the animals who killed her.



“Fucking sloppy,” Elio growls. “The fuck?” he says as we look around.

Not one fucking guard on Aleksei's house. For the man who's the boss of the Russian mafia, he should have at least six men on his house, and that's at the very least, but there's not even one. What the fuck is going on?

It's easy to creep into the house, fucking too easy. There's something in the back of my mind that's telling me this is a fucking set up, but right now, I don't care. Aleksei is going to die, as is that fucker Artyom.

"*Shlyukha.*" We hear groaned, and I shake my head. The fucker is getting his rocks off and is oblivious to what's going to happen.

"Christ, the man's calling the woman he's fucking a whore," Elio hisses. "No fucking tact. None whatsoever."

We continue through the house, following his fucking groans. And yet, still not a single man guarding him. All three of us have our guns raised and ready to fire if need be.

Rocco nods toward the back of the house. The groans are getting louder and more frequent. I guess the asshole's about to be finished. Rocco leads the way, and as we reach the door, he pushes it open with his foot. It's as though time stands still. Everything around us stops as we watch that cunt on the bed fucking an unconscious Inessa.

"Christ," Elio growls as he steps forward.

Seeing her lying on the bed, her beautiful face bloody and bruised, that pain encased around my heart intensifies. What the hell is going on? What the fuck happened to her and why the hell is her father fucking her?

"Get the fuck off her," I snarl, beyond pissed that he's touching her.

Aleksei pulls back, his eyes wide as he glances around. “The fuck are you doing here?” he snarls. “How did you get in?”

“Fucking a child,” Elio growls as he steps forward and pulls the asshole off the bed. “You’re going to die.”

No matter what the fuck Inessa has done to my child, she doesn’t deserve to be raped by the man who raised her. Fuck. Sick bastard.

“How long has this been going on?” I growl, getting closer. “How long have you been raping her?”

He scoffs. “Rape? No, she belongs to the Bratva. She’s ours to do with as we want. The *shlyukha* doesn’t get raped; she takes what I give her, just like your daughter did.”

Rocco’s hand clamps on my shoulder as I lurch forward, ready to end this cunt right here and now. “Don’t touch him, Nic. He’s not fucking worth it. He’s going to get what’s coming to him. He’s going to die, and he’s going to lose everything he’s worked hard for.”

I don’t give a fuck. That bastard touched my daughter. He deserves to pay.

“Not here,” Elio grunts. “When we get to the bar, you can do whatever the fuck you need to, but not here.”

He’s right. We’ve got a plan in place and I need to stick with it—for now at least. When we’re at the bar, all bets are off. He’s going to pay for what he’s done.

Elio drags Aleksei out of the room, probably so I can’t get to him.

“Christ,” Rocco says as he covers Inessa with the sheets. “It’s time to get out of here. I don’t know if she’s going to

make it through the night. She's been beaten within an inch of her life."

I grit my teeth and plant my feet, stopping myself from going near her. If I do, I'm not sure what the hell will happen. My chest is heavy once again as I step out of the room. I glance over my shoulder and see that she's unmoved, her bloody face so fucking battered it's painful to see. Rocco clasps my shoulder and steers me away from the room. "There's nothing we can do now," he says.

He's right. From the looks of things, Inessa's going to die, and it was painful. My focus needs to shift to the two assholes who are going to die tonight. That's what I should put all my energy into. Tomorrow, I'll contact Kirill and see if they've found her body.

"It makes sense as to why there were no men," Elio growls once we're in the car and driving toward the bar. It's one that belongs to the Bratva. It's opening up in a month, but by the time we're finished, that's not going to happen. Fuck no.

Rocco nods. "Fucking kiddie fucker," he spits. "Is she his kid?" he asks me.

I shrug. "I don't know. Everything about Inessa is hearsay. No one knows who her parents are, and the rumors have always swirled that she's Aleksei's illegitimate daughter."

I've seen some of the vilest shit in my life. Hell, I've done some myself. But never—I've never fucked a child, nor will I. It's the lowest of lows. The men and women who do that need to be hung and fucking brutalized. Bastards. My stomach rolls as the sight of that cunt raping Inessa filters through my mind.

I push it away, not wanting to see it. I need that anger and pain to remain. I can't and won't feel sorry for her. I won't

lose sight of who I'm doing this for. No one is more important than Chiara and the revenge that I so desperately seek.

NICCOLÒ

We arrive at the bar, and I see that the lights are on. I grin. Dario and Gio are here with that cunt Artyom. Elio goes to the trunk of the car, pulls out Aleksei, and drags him into the bar.

“Now it’s a party.” Dario grins as he sits on a stool, his gaze on us. “This fucker sure is talkative,” he says, pointing his thumb at Artyom. “Seems as though daddy dearest will be taking over the Bratva once the asshole here is dead.”

Now that doesn’t surprise me. Sergei Turgenev is a fucking monster. I’m surprised he isn’t already Pakhan. He’s stronger and has more of the men’s respect than Aleksei does—even if it is because of fear. He’ll be one of the strongest Pakhans the Bratva have ever had lead them, and I can guarantee it’s not going to be for fucking long. Sergei is on my hitlist, and I’m not stopping until every cunt on it is dead.

“Oh,” Rocco says with a raised brow. “Just what does the fucker have to say?”

Artyom starts shouting as he pulls against his bindings. “My father will kill you,” he hisses.

I merely smile. “He can fucking try, just like you did this evening.”

His eyes widen slightly. “You,” he growls. “You’re a dead man walking.”

I shake my head. “No, that would be you. Now, the question is, do you die, and it hurts, or do you die quietly?”

“I’m really fucking hoping it’ll be painful.” Elio grins. “Oh, and don’t worry, Oleg’s on his way. I sent a message from Aleksei’s cell. The bastard will be here in no time.”

My smile widens. Fuck. Elio’s got everything planned. Anyone who checks Aleksei’s or Oleg’s cells are going to see the message to come here and that’s going to prove the assholes killed each other.

“You bastards,” Artyom growls. “All for what? Hmm? You think this will save you?” he snarls at me. “You think killing me will save you from what’s coming? We know you killed Abs. We know you’re the reason he’s dead.”

I shrug. “I don’t give a fuck. The reason you’re dying is because you gave my daughter the drugs that killed her.”

He stops struggling against his bindings. “The drugs killed her. Not me.”

I move toward him. “Wrong,” I hiss. “So fucking wrong. You sold her the drugs. You’ll pay for it.”

He lurches forward, trying to get out of the ropes that are keeping him tied to the car. “Fuck you,” he hisses. “It’ll never work. My father’s not stupid.”

Dario laughs. “That’s debatable, but don’t worry, asshole, he’ll be joining you soon.”

His eyes widen. “You’re going after him?”

“Of course we are. No one orders a hit on my men and gets away with it,” Rocco snarls. “Tell me, Artyom, what would

you have done if the tables were reversed, and we put a hit out on your men?”

He grounds his teeth. “You’ll all be dead.”

“Exactly,” I breathe. My anger is finally coming to the forefront, ready to be unleashed. “Now, it’s time to start talking. Who set the fucker Abagor up to get close to me?”

He shakes his head. He’s not talking.

“Okay, next question. Who else fucking raped my daughter?” I snarl. I need to know who else touched her. Who else fucking hurt her.

“No one. Aleksei hates sharing. He’s a fucking maniac and would kill anyone who touches what belongs to him. It’s why I’m surprised he’s sharing Inessa.”

“Who’s he sharing her with?” Elio grunts, the disgust clear in his voice.

Once again, Artyom shakes his head.

“Who is Inessa?” Rocco questions. “Who does she belong to?”

“The Bratva,” he responds instantly. “The Bratva run a protection ring. Anyone in our territory pays for protection. No ifs, buts, or maybes. You don’t pay up, you pay the price. Well, Inessa’s parents couldn’t afford to pay. They were new to the area and started their own business. Between paying the rent on the building along with the protection fee, it was more than what they could afford. When they got pregnant with Inessa, they were planning on fleeing. Instead, when Inessa was three days old, Aleksei took their daughter from them for payment due and killed them.”

Christ. What a fucking sadistic bastard.

“When did he start raping her?” Elio demands.

Artyom shakes his head. “He’s not raping her,” he says, his words filled with disgust. “He’s taking what’s owed. They both are.”

“She’s fucking sixteen, asshole,” I growl as I smash my fist into his face.

The pain of the past six months comes flooding out of me like a monsoon, and I unleash it all, raining holy hell on his torso, every punch filled with power. And I don’t stop. I can’t. Everything I’ve bottled up over the past six months is coming out. It’s like a red haze has formed over me, and I don’t see anything but Chiara lying on that fucking bed. Lifeless and cold.

“Nic,” Rocco says a while later. “Enough. We haven’t finished with him.”

I step back, knowing that he’s right. We have so much more to ask, so fucking much more to uncover. I take a few calming breaths, but it’s useless. I’m panting, trying my hardest to beat back the anger that’s still coursing through my body.

I look at Artyom and see that he’s in a fucking lot of pain. He’s tilted to the side, almost as if it’s too much for him to straighten. Good. I hope that it’s hurting, that it’s killing him inside, and that he feels half of what I’m feeling.

“Now,” Rocco growls. “Tell me who else has been raping—yes, it’s fucking rape,” he growls when Artyom tries to speak over him. “She’s sixteen. She’s a fucking child.”

“Who else was involved in getting close to Niccolò?” Rocco continues.

“No one. It was Abs, and then when that didn’t work, they wanted to kill him.”

“Why?” Elio demands. “Why Niccolò? I mean, why not Aldo or Rocco? Why Nic in particular?”

He clenches his jaw. “His daughter was too close to Inessa. They didn’t want him uncovering the truth.”

“What fucking truth?” Rocco grunts as he steps forward.

“That she’s been beaten all her life. They thought if he found out, if Chiara found out, they would try and help Inessa. So they put a hit out instead.”

Fucking assholes. All of this for one fucking girl? Bullshit.

“Who believed that?”

He shakes his head, and it clicks. He’s given us everything about everyone except his father.

“Sergei,” I growl, the word reverberating in my chest. “That cunt is involved in everything. Every fucking thing that’s happened, your father has been at the bottom of it.”

Oh, it’s going to be fucking beautiful when I get my hands on that bastard. That day can’t come quick enough.

“You’re telling me,” Dario says, his words barely concealing his rage. “That for that girl’s entire life, she’s been beaten and now raped?”

Artyom nods. “I didn’t fucking do it. I tried to help her.”

Elio laughs. “Yeah, I’m fucking sure you did, just like your father. Christ. What happens now that Aleksei is going to die? Where does the girl go?”

He turns away. “She’s promised to my father. The day Inessa turns eighteen, they’ll be married.”

I glance at the men who are closer to me than anyone else and see the same disgust that I feel etched on their faces. But as horrid as what's happened to her is, I can't help but feel the anger at what's happened. She befriended Chiara. None of this shit would have happened had she just stayed the fuck away from her.

"You're a fucking bastard, Artyom. Always have been a little shit that didn't know his place in this world," Elio says with a grin. "I hope to fuck that you don't shit yourself when the bullet sinks in."

"How are you going to get away with this? You don't think that my father will know something happened?"

I shrug. "I couldn't give a fuck if he did, but we have that covered. See Aleksei here," I say, moving out of the way of the slumped figure behind me. "His gun is the one that's going to kill you. The scrapes on his knuckles from beating Inessa are going to show he's the one who worked you over. Your gun is going to shoot him, and you'll both be dead by the time his asshole right-hand man comes to find you both."

Artyom's eyes are wide as he looks at me. He knows that this is it. This is the end for him, and there's nothing he can do that'll change it.

I nod to Elio, who's already wearing gloves, and he sets the fucking animal Aleksei up at the table, reaching for the cunt's gun and wrapping his fingers around the butt and a finger on the trigger. He doesn't hesitate. He takes aim and squeezes Aleksei's finger. The bullet whizzes out of the barrel and sinks into Artyom's skull. Fucking A. Bullseye.

"We need to speed this up," Rocco comments, and I know that he's right. If we want to make it out of here unseen, it needs to be finished now.

Dario steps up, his hands covered in gloves too, and does the same thing with Artyom's gun, making sure the dead asshole is holding the gun when the trigger is pulled. This time, the bullet sinks into Aleksei's chest. He slumps over the table, the gun clattering to the floor.

Dead. They're both dead.

"Pack it up, let's go," Rocco says as he turns on his heel and exits the bar.

I smile as we move out of the bar. Two down and two fucking more to go. It's not long until I'll have my revenge for Chiara, and when I do, I can finally let my daughter rest in peace.

INESSA

ONE YEAR LATER

“**S**hut that fucking brat up,” Sergei growls, his fist smashing into my face. I’m so used to the force of the brutality that I sway on my feet but don’t go down. “I’m not going to tell you again. Make it stop.”

I scurry away, needing to get to Alya. My daughter is every bit of me. She’s perfect, beautiful, and very innocent. I hate that she was born into a life in which she’ll be nothing but someone the men abuse and use.

I reach into the crib and lift her into my arms. She’s eight months old, and I want to protect her from the world. Do something that my parents could never do. But it’s too late. She’s already been marked by the Bratva. Sergei has claimed her as his daughter.

A year ago, everything changed. Everything that I believed was broken and shattered. I thought I was in pain before, but nothing, absolutely nothing could compete with what I feel now. Artyom and Aleksei got into an altercation. No one has been able to uncover why. All we know is that they both went to the bar and something went wrong. None of them made it out alive.

That was the day Sergei stopped pretending that he had an ounce of humanity in him.

I woke up the next morning being jostled. I remember the pain my body was going through. I couldn't see out of my eye and my nose was bloodied. Thankfully, I wasn't blind, just my eye socket was broken and my eye was closed over.

I was moved out of Aleksei's home and into one for myself. It was weird. I've never lived alone before. I have a guard on me at all times. Kirill. He's not as mean as the others, but he does nothing to help when Sergei gets into his moods.

"Hey, sweet girl," I whisper as I rock her in my arms.

Never did I think I'd ever find someone so pure and good in my life. But that's exactly what Alya is. She's a piece of my soul that I thought I didn't have. Whenever I'm with her, the men leave me alone. They don't look for me, nor do they touch me. Sergei spends two nights a week here with me and the other time he's at his own house with God knows who. I'm not stupid. I know I'm not the only woman he has. It's awful that I pray that he'll prefer whoever else he has. I know what he's like, what he's capable of. I just pray with every inch of me that one day, I'll be able to get me and my daughter out of here.

I clean Alya's diaper, feed her, and then play with her. It's the only fun that I ever have. It's the best part of my day. My daughter is my shining light and I love her with every piece of me. But I still believe that she's better off without me, that this life isn't for her. I don't want her subjected to what I've been through. These men, they're the epitome of evil and I don't want Alya to ever know that evil exists.

"Kirill," I whisper. It's dark. Sergei is long gone and Alya is fast asleep. She's down for the night and it's only Kirill here with me.

"Inessa," he replies softly. "What's wrong?"

“How do I keep her safe?” I ask, wondering if he knows a way to keep her safe, keep her away from this life?

He shakes his head. “I do not know, Inessa. Women should be revered, protected, loved. And yet that doesn’t happen in this world.”

Pain laces through my heart. “I hate that she’s destined to become like me. There’s no escape from the pain, no way for me to run. If I do, I’ll be found and brought back. Sergei is determined that I be his wife and I do not know why.”

Kirill sighs as he takes a seat on the couch. “Inessa, you are beautiful. Beyond that. Every man would be lucky to have you as their wife. Sergei, he’s not like most. But he also is very vain. Having you as his wife, someone who’ll be on his arm, he’ll be the envy of everyone around him.”

“Why me? What did I do to be in this position?”

He shakes his head. “You were born, Inessa, that is all. Unfortunately, you were born to a life of brutality.”

“I wish he’d die,” I whisper. “I wish he died when Aleksei and Artyom did.”

“Look at me,” he demands, and I raise my gaze to his. “Keep fighting,” he tells me. “Fight for your daughter, fight for your life. You never know what can happen. Keep those dreams alive.”

I give him a small smile. I don’t want to let him know that dreams aren’t something that I have. My fight left me a long time ago. I barely exist. “Thank you,” I whisper and get to my feet. “Maybe one day, we’ll all be free.”

I walk into my bedroom and close the door. I strip out of my clothes and stand in front of the mirror. Once again, I’m bruised. There’s not a part of my body that isn’t covered in

black and blue spots thanks to Sergei. I'm just very grateful that he hasn't touched Alya in anger. I'm trying my hardest to keep her safe, and I know that it's not always going to be possible, and I dread the day he hurts her.

I reach for a ragged t-shirt and pull it over me. It's too big. I don't know who it belonged to, but it's all that I have to wear for nighttime. I climb onto the bed and get into position. My hand reaches into the drawer beside me, and I pull out the silver blade.

This has been the only thing that has helped me through it all. The only thing that I can count on to take the pain away for just a little while.

I slice along the top of my thighs. I release a groan, everything fades away. The hurt, the pain, the shame, everything vanishes with the swipe of the blade against my flesh. Blood flows from the wound, and I breathe through it. This is my only peace. The only thing I have. I'm not strong. I'm not capable of leaving. I'm scared all the damn time. But the only thing I have is this tiny bit of power. The tiny moment when everything's gone and I'm free.

I do another cut followed by another, and another. I'm not sure when I stopped at only one or two, but as the year passed, the pain grew intense, and my need for control grew. In that time, one cut turned to a dozen and then even more. I don't think I can ever stop. Not that I want to. Not now anyhow.

I lie on the bed and let the cool air from the window breeze over me. My eyes flutter closed as sleep starts to claim me. Maybe, just maybe, a new day will bring a new hope.



A hand covers my mouth and I struggle to breathe.

Oh God, he's back. He's back.

I don't fight against it. I know how much he hates it. I know that it'll only cause even more pain if I do. I keep my eyes closed and stop struggling. I lie here on the bed and wait for him to do whatever the hell he wants.

"Inessa," that deep, baritone voice has my eyes opening in shock. "Be quiet. Do not scream."

I swallow back my fear. I haven't seen this man in a year. I don't know what happened to him. The talk of killing him died down the day that I found out Artyom and Aleksei had been killed.

"What's going on?" I ask, my gaze moving around the room, making sure nothing's happened. My eyes land on the baby monitor, and I see that Alya is fast asleep and peaceful.

"I had a call. I was told to come to you. What's going on?"

I shake my head. No. I can't tell him. "Why are you here?"

He moves closer to me. "How long until you're eighteen?" he questions.

I glance away from him, hating that he already knows. Those dark eyes of his see too fucking much.

"Inessa, do not ignore me," he snarls.

"Two weeks," I snap back. "Two weeks, and there's twelve weeks until the wedding."

The day the wedding happens is the day I'm shackled to this life forever. It's drawing closer and closer each and every single day.

His hand reaches for my face, and I can't help but flinch back.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he promises me.

"I don't know anything but pain," I whisper, hating that I'm weak. Hating that the backbone I once had, died within me.

His touch is gentle as he caresses my cheek, the same one that Sergei punched only hours earlier. "You're scared," he says as though it's normal. "You've been hurt. How bad this time?"

My brows knit together at his words. How does he know about before? How does he know this isn't the first time?

"Leave it be," I tell him. "No good can come from dredging it up."

His hand reaches for my thigh, and I shrink back. No. Not him. I can't deal with him doing this to me too.

"Nessa," he breathes, and my heart races. Only one person has ever called me that. His daughter, Chiara. God, I miss her. "Let me take a look at you. You've been bleeding."

I shake my head, but he doesn't listen. He reaches for the hem of my t-shirt and raises it slightly. He's sure to keep my pussy covered as he looks at the cuts on my thigh.

"Christ," he says through clenched teeth.

"It's fine," I assure him as I bring the sheets up to cover me once again.

"No, it's not," that softness in his voice is unlike anything I've ever heard. "It's far from fine."

I shake my head. “You have no idea what goes on behind closed doors, Niccolò. Just go. Leave. There’s nothing you can do.”

He reaches for me, pulling me closer to him. His breath is hot against my face. “Trust me,” he says thickly. “There’s a lot that I can do. You just have to let me in.”

“Trust is earned, Niccolò. I don’t hand it out to anyone.” I can’t. The last person I trusted betrayed me.

He nods. “You’re correct,” he says, his hands gently caressing my face. “I’m going to prove that I can be trusted.”

I shake my head. I’m beyond confused at the moment. What the hell is going on? “Why now?”

“I don’t know,” he says, and for some reason, that’s the first thing he’s said that I truly believe.

“There’s no helping me. I’m stuck in this life.”

“Not forever,” he whispers. “Stay strong, Nessa. Stay strong. You’ve not long left,” he says, pressing a kiss against the corner of my lips. “Don’t give in now. You can make it through this. Don’t let it break you; you’re so close to the end.” He presses another kiss to my lips, but harder this time.

“Nic,” I whisper, unsure as to what to say. My breathing is ragged as electricity flows between us. I can’t tear my gaze from his.

He leans forward, pressing his lips to my mouth, then forces them open with his own. The shock of the kiss blazes through me like lightning, and I struggle for air.

Just as quick as the kiss happens, it’s finished. He pulls away, his eyes blazing with darkness.

My heart races as I watch Nic's eyes flicker with a dangerous intensity. I know it's wrong to want him, but I can't help it. His touch sends shivers down my spine, and I ache for more. I've never felt so alive and wanted before.

"Nessa, I need you to trust me," he says, his voice low and seductive. "I can help you through this. You don't have to suffer alone."

I nod, unable to speak right now, but we both know I'm just placating him. I'm so lost in his gaze. I want him. And I'm so fucking scared. I've never wanted anyone before, but this man, he's making my body react in ways I've never known.

He gets to his feet. "Stay strong, Nessa," he says one last time before exiting my bedroom.

I stare at the closed door for a while after, trying to regain my composure and breath. I still have no idea what the hell just happened. But what scares me more than anything is that I want him to kiss me again. Niccolò Caruso is by far the most gorgeous man I have ever seen.

I have a feeling that he's going to flip my world upside down.

Whether that's a good or a bad thing is yet to be known.

I just hope that whatever game he's playing, Alya doesn't get caught in the crossfire.

NICCOLÒ

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Niccolò,” Kirill says.

My eyes narrow. “I’m not playing a game.”

He glowers at me. “You’re not?” he asks incredulously. “That girl is fucking broken, Niccolò, broken. The past three nights you’ve spoken with her. We both know the game you’re playing. You’re going to destroy her.”

Jealousy runs through me at the protective way he talks about her. The anger in his voice as he spits out his words. “What I do, Kirill, is my business. Are you forgetting the deal we made?”

He turns his head away, his jaw clenched. “No, I haven’t forgotten. But I’m cautioning you, Niccolò, hoping that the man I know you are will realize that punishing a broken girl, one that’s so badly damaged, isn’t the way to go.”

“I killed Aleksei,” I hiss at him. “I got rid of Artyom,” I tell him as a reminder. “And I’m going to take out Sergei. All of that is what you have wanted. What you have been too afraid to do. You do not sit there and judge anything that I do.”

His hands ball into fists. “She’s a child,” he implores.

“You care for her.” It’s a statement.

He inclines his head. “I have come to care for the girl. I have seen the horrors that she has had to endure. I have learned a lot in the past year, Niccolò, and if you knew them too, you would come to realize that she is not the enemy.”

“Bullshit,” I hiss. “Utter fucking bullshit. She is so deep in this fucking world we live in, Kirill, that she bleeds it. What woman sleeps with the fucking monster? Hmm? She willingly goes to him.”

He closes his eyes, and it looks as though he is in pain. “Nothing I can say to you will ever have you changing your mind. You are playing judge, jury, and executioner. You ever think about what your daughter would want?”

Rage bellows within me, like molten lava ready to erupt. “You do not,” I snap, “talk about my daughter. Not fucking ever.”

He raises his hands. “I know that you feel the pain of her death deeply. But you can’t live in the past.”

“Until you know the feeling of the death of a child, Kirill, do not speak to me on the matter. Now, is Sergei going to be at the house tonight?”

It’s something that angers me more than anything. She’s sleeping with the monster. I’ve witnessed their interactions. She wants to be around him. She wants to fuck him. But I have a plan, one that’s going to change everything. It will make the timeline of the war accelerate, but it’ll be fucking worth it.

“I apologize,” he says sincerely. “No, he won’t be. He believes that you Italians are after him.”

I grin. “Oh, we fucking are. That asshole is going to pay for his sins. He ordered the hit for one of our men, Raul. That’s not something we’ll forget.”

Kirill nods. “I heard about your man dying. My condolences. From what I have uncovered, your man and Sergei got into an altercation and Sergei wanted him to pay for the disrespect.”

I clench my jaw. Fucking bastard. “Thank you,” I say. I appreciate Kirill for everything he has done to help not only me but the Famiglia. Sure, the fucker is Russian, but he’s doing what he needs to survive and to keep his wife safe.

“He’s letting the title of Pakhan go to his head. He’s killed fifteen of our men who he believed doubted him. Fifteen good men, Niccolò.” He shakes his head. “Fucker is ridding the organization of anyone who he deems to be a threat.”

I chuckle. “He’s scared that someone will overpower him. He’s taking out the competition. He needs to not worry about inside the organization but what’s coming for him on the outside. He’s fucked up massively. He’s not only got the Famiglia after him, but the Irish too.”

Kirill chuckles. “That’s what happens when you’re a fucking prick.”

I grin as I get to my feet. “That’s the motherfucking truth. I’ll see you this evening.”

I make it out of the bar and into my car. I need to call Rocco and update him on what my meeting with Kirill has come up with.

The Gallos have had a fucking lot to deal with recently. Only those closest to the brothers know what’s going on. Elio’s wife, Teagan, has been dealing with some things. She was suffering and didn’t get the help she needed. She tried to kill herself. Elio found her just in time and everything has been put on hold as he helps his wife.

When I first found out that everything was held off, I was angry. I couldn't understand why they were putting a woman before the family. But then I saw how he was with his wife, and I realized that he loved her. Something that I have never felt. I've never known what it's like. I'm thirty-nine and never felt even an ounce of what he does for Teagan. My marriage to Maria was a fucking sham and love was never part of it. We coincided for our daughter and that was it. Sure, she was a great lay, but that's all. She was boring as hell and would just sit and watch TV.

“Nic, tell me you fucking have something?” Rocco asks. He's now the boss. He took over from his useless father and has grown the Famiglia to become bigger and better than before. He's the true boss and the men respect him. They know that he deserves the title because we have all worked with him, have seen him in action, and know that he'll always have our backs.

In becoming the boss, Rocco promoted me from Captain to the Underboss of Chicago. An honor that I never expected but one that I'm truly grateful for. Rocco has always been a man that I respect, and I would lay my life on the line for him and his wife. To be rewarded with the Underboss title was just something I never expected.

I chuckle. “I do. Kirill told me the asshole had an altercation with Raul and felt disrespected.”

“Cunt,” he growls. “Fucking cunt. You've done well. I know it's not been easy going back to the Bratva, or even delving into that world again.”

Little does Rocco know that I've never left. My revenge is still on the forefront. A year passed because I have allowed it. I wanted Sergei to get comfortable, to feel as though he is safe.

It's always good to get the fuckers when they're least expecting it, and for Sergei, that's coming soon.

I'm plotting, have been for the past two nights. Inessa told me that she's getting married in three months. I'm going to ensure that she doesn't marry that asshole Sergei. I'm going to have her fall for me, and then I'm going to ruin her fucking life.

"How are you holding up?" he questions, and I grit my teeth. Chiara is never a discussion that the men bring up. They all pushed it aside and have given me a wide berth since it happened. Most of them are afraid of what will happen if they do speak about her. They're afraid I'll kill them.

"Fine," I say through gritted teeth.

"We're going to get them, Nic. We're going to get them for what they've done to Chiara and Raul."

"I know. It's taking longer than I had planned, but I do know they're going to pay for my daughter's death." I always knew it would take some time. Sergei's death is coming soon, and then, and only then, can I start to let go of my daughter. Inessa's death is going to take years. If Kirill thinks she's broken now, he's not seen anything. I'm going to make her fall for me, I'm going to make her world revolve around me, and then when I have what I want, I'm going to enjoy watching everything around her crumble to ashes.

"Okay, I need you to go to Andrea, find out where the fuck he is. This is the second day that I haven't been able to contact him. Find him, Nic." He pauses for a moment. "I have a bad feeling about this."

My blood runs cold. If the boss has a bad feeling, then that could only mean one thing: he believes that Andrea is dead. If

that's the case, I need to find out where the fuck he is.

"On it," I assure him.

"Be careful, Nic. The last time I spoke with him, he was acting strange. He was beyond pissed that he was being left out of the loop with things regarding my family."

"You think he's turned rat?" I ask, surprised. That's not something I'd have expected from Andrea.

"I don't know, but something isn't right. Find out what the fuck is going on. Find him."

I hear the underlying threat: find out what he's doing and end him if he's a traitor. I'll bring him in if he is. I know the men will want to have a hand in his death—Elio especially. He's still got a lot of pent up rage from how things went down with Teagan.

I drive toward Andrea's house, my mind clear of everything Bratva as I go over every interaction that I have had with Andrea recently. I come to realize that since we were both promoted from captains—me to Underboss and Andrea to Consigliere—I haven't seen him half as much as I used to. Where the fuck has he been in the past year?

I arrive at his home and see that his flashy as fuck white car is parked out front. He never goes anywhere without it, so he must be home. I walk up to the front door and see that it's slightly ajar. Using my foot, I kick it open further while reaching for my gun.

I move through the house without making a sound. Rocco was right, there's definitely something that's happened. As I make my way up the stairs, there's a metallic scent to the air. I know what it is. It's a smell everyone in our world knows. Blood.

I push open the door to Andrea's room and come to a halt when I see the bed, where he and his wife lay. The sheets are around their waists, both of them have their throats slit, and his wife, Angelica, has her breasts mutilated. Christ. What the fuck was he into?

I reach for my cell and call Rocco, knowing he's going to lose his shit when he finds out.

"What's happened?" he answers immediately.

"Boss," I say as I walk toward his kids' rooms. I already know what I'm going to find, but fuck, I need to know if they're all dead. "Someone's slit his and Angelica's throats. They took their time with Angelica. Fucking bastards," I spit as I push open the door. I close my eyes when I see the two boys lying in their beds, just as their parents, both throats slit. Christ. "They got their boys too," I say, my voice heavy with anger.

They're fucking kids. How the hell does anyone kill children?

"Christ," he says, the word filled with anger and pain. "All three boys?" he asks.

"I haven't checked the other room yet," I tell him and move quickly. I know Rocco has hope that one is still alive, but the truth is, even if he is, having your entire family slaughtered is going to live with you for the rest of your life. It's not going to be fucking plain sailing. You'll be marked by it your entire life.

"The youngest is two months," he says, and I shake my head. Christ. This is beyond fucked up.

I push open the door and see the crib set up against the wall. The baby is lying in it, unmoving. Fuck. But as I edge

closer, I see his foot twitch. “Shit, boss,” I hiss as I quicken my steps. I hover over the crib and see the gummy smile of the little boy who’s watching me. “He’s alive.”

“I’m on my way. Christ. What the fuck happened, Niccolò?”

“It makes no sense. Who slaughters a family but leaves one child alone?” I put my gun into my holster and reach for the kid. He’s happy as I pull him to me. “Fuck, he needs changing.”

“We’ll be there in fifteen,” he assures me. “Christ, this is a fucking disaster.” He ends the call and I’m left holding the baby. I look down at his deep brown eyes and I know that he’s lucky he’s only a baby. He won’t have to live with the memory of what happened.

But I can guarantee that whoever the fuck did this is going to pay.

I make a call to Kirill. I need him to find out if that cunt Sergei had anything to do with it. We don’t have a lot of enemies. We’ve wiped the majority of them out. The only one we do have is that Russian bastard.

“This isn’t a great time,” he replies as he answers.

“Noted, but Kirill, I need you to do some digging. I want to know who slaughtered Andrea’s family last night.”

“You already know the answer,” he replies cryptically. “He’s lost the fucking plot, Nic. He’s ready to kill anyone who gets in his way today.”

I fucking knew that bastard had something to do with this sadistic shit. No one in their fucking right mind would kill innocent kids. Cunt.

“What’s going on?” I demand to know.

“Oleg fucked up on the hit. He left someone alive.”

Now we have a fucking name. Oleg Oborin. The fucker is going to pay for killing Andrea and his kids.

“Yeah, a two-month-old,” I snarl. “He took out the older kids. One couldn’t have been older than six. Fuck, Kirill, this shit is whacked.”

He releases a heavy sigh. “And it’s only going to get worse. By the looks of things, plans have changed. He’s going to Inessa tonight. I’ll let you know when the coast is clear.” I hear talking in the background and I know that he’s got to go. “Talk later,” he says and ends the call.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

How the hell am I supposed to get her to fall for me if that cunt is there?

It’s time to let Sergei know just how fucking close we can get to him.

Oleg is going to die, and he’s going to be dumped on that fucker’s doorstep.

NICCOLÒ

“**Y**ou ready for this?” Elio asks, slapping my back. He looks brighter than he did the last time I saw him.

“To kill someone?” I ask with a raised brow. “I’m always ready for that. How is Teagan?”

He keeps his expression neutral. “Better. Where’s the boy?”

I grin. “He’s okay. Time will tell if he has any lasting effects. Your sister-in-law has taken him under her wing.”

His brows knit together, and I hear Dario chuckle. “Jade’s taking care of him until we’re able to contact his family,” he tells him. “Although, the way Roc’s looking at her, I’m sure we’ll be uncles again in no time.”

Their sister, Adelina, is married to the Irish Mafia Boss of Indiana, who’s also the brother of Rocco’s wife, Jade. Adelina gave birth to her daughter a few months ago.

“How about we get this over and done with?” I ask with a raised brow. These fuckers are non-stop talking. They can catch up on their own time.

Elio grins darkly. “Yes, lets,” he says wickedly. “Don’t screw this up. We get in, slit the fucker’s throat, and then get his body out of there.”

“What about his wife and kids?” Dario questions.

I tilt my head from side to side, trying to get the crick out of it. “His wife can die. His children aren’t here,” I tell him. I did my research. I made sure that I knew what we would be walking into. His children spend the weekend at their grandparents’, and they left this afternoon and won’t be back until Sunday evening. This gives us the perfect opportunity to do what we need to, and we won’t be interrupted.

Dario chuckles. “Of course you’d know that.”

I flip him off as I move toward the house. Fucking Russians. They should know better. The men in the Bratva are savages. The shit they do to kids—fucking bastards—yet they don’t have any guards on them. They think they’re untouchable. It’s why we were able to kill Aleksei and Artyom without any backlash. They never thought we’d be the ones to do it. They never thought we’d kill them. To this day, they still believe that Artyom killed Aleksei after he tortured him, and in return, Aleksei put a bullet between his eyes.

Opening the door is easier than it should be. The lock was shit and took me less than thirty seconds to pick. Christ, if any member of the Famiglia had security on their houses like this, they’d be in for a world of hurt. We protect our men, women, and children—we let Andrea and his family down. They are family and we ensure that they are safe. When the war comes, the reins on our families will increase tenfold. No one will be able to breach our territory without us knowing, and if they manage it, they’ll die for doing so.

The moment we enter the house, we’re greeted by deep snores, no doubt coming from Oleg Oborin. We’re silent as we move through the mansion. We’re trained so that we can be undetected, move through anywhere without making a sound.

I take the lead as we enter the room, Dario takes the rear, with Elio behind me. I move to Oleg, knowing I'll be the only one to end this man. Fucking bastard brutalized Andrea's wife. He killed the fucking kids. I reach for my knife, the hilt cold against my hand, but I don't stop. Elio's already standing over Oleg's wife.

Slicing someone's throat is a hell of a lot easier than it looks. It takes mere seconds for my blade to slice along his skin and carotid artery. His eyes open wide as he gasps for breaths, the blood pumping from his neck as the oxygen leaves him. It's a matter of seconds before life leaves his eyes and he's dead.

It's fast revenge, not entirely satisfying, but it's enough to quench the thirst for a while. It's all we can do. Right now, we have other things that are needed to be done with Oleg. It's part of the bigger picture.

If I had my way, I'd rid the world of the Bratva. I'd take them down one by one. But it would prolong the war, not to mention, it would have other branches of the Bratva coming for us. Our organization still hasn't grown to full strength. We're growing rapidly, but some men are still green. They haven't fully seen the horrors of what happens in the Famiglia. They don't know the full extent of our loyalty, nor do they have a clue of the extent of what it means to become a made man. They will soon. This war is coming, and everyone can feel it.

That's when we'll find out which of the new recruits are going to make it. They want the money and the status, but can they withstand the true test of being a member of the Famiglia?

“It’s time to go,” Dario says, his gaze on his watch. “The fucker’s dead. He’s lost a fuck load of blood. It’s time to show that cunt Sergei that the Famiglia aren’t to be messed with. You come after us, we’ll come back at you, just bigger and fucking better.”

I grin, shaking my head. He’s grown up a lot since his father died—Aldo took a bullet to the head, one that he put there. The bastard’s secret came out. People found out that he was hurting his kids, and instead of facing it like a man and owning up to his actions, he took a gun and put it to his head. Dario no longer makes stupid mistakes. He listens to the boss, he does what he needs to, and has the respect of the men. Sometimes, he lets the jokester in him out.

I reach for the dead fucker, haul him onto my shoulder, and carry him out of the room and down the stairs. “Christ,” I groan at the weight of him as I edge down the stairs. “Fucker really liked his food.”

Dario chuckles. “Old man, you need to work out more.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Who you calling old man?”

He grins at me over his shoulder. “You’re pushing forty. You’re old as fuck.”

Elio laughs. “Everyone over the age of thirty is old to Dario.”

I glare at the two of them. Old my fucking ass. Bastards.

I make it down the stairs, my shirt starting to stick a little to my body. Fuck, I do need to start working out more. Fucking Dario. Little shit was right. Thankfully, I manage to get the body outside without stopping and unceremoniously drop the bastard into the trunk.

This was the easy part of the plan. Now we have to drop the cunt outside of Sergei's house. I have a feeling he's going to have protection around his house, making it harder to get in and out undetected, but it's not impossible.

Elio drives us toward Sergei's house. My mind wanders to Inessa. It's been a few days since I've seen her, and I fucking hate that I want to see her again. I don't know what the hell is going on. I'm drawn to the woman. It's the fucking furthest thing I want. I need to keep a clear head, remind myself why I'm going after her. Why I want my revenge. But there's something about her that screams at me. It pulls at my protective instincts and has me doubting myself and my plan. But I'll be damned if I let my daughter down once again. I failed her once. It'll never happen twice.

I think back to the last time I saw Inessa. She was fast asleep, and she looked beyond beautiful and peaceful. I couldn't help reaching out and touching her. It pissed me the fuck off to do it, but the need outweighed the anger, and I caressed her beautiful face. Seeing her wake up in a fright had my heart clenching. Her eyes wide, her breathing erratic. She went from peaceful to beyond scared within the space of seconds. But as easily as the fear came, it evaporated as she realized it was me.

"You good?" Elio asks, pulling me from my thoughts of the Russian temptress.

"Fine," I reply, hating that this is a frequent question.

Since Chiara died, the men are keeping a close eye on me, watching me. It's as though they're waiting for me to go off the deep end. They shouldn't worry, I've got everything worked out. They have no idea about my plan for Inessa. They do know I plan on taking everyone out—her included—but not

how I want to break her. If they found out, I'm sure there would be a fucking load of questions and talks about treating women like that.

It's why I'm keeping them in the dark. The plans I have are exactly that. My plans. And no one is going to take my revenge from me.

Elio slowly brings the car to an almost crawl as we come to Sergei's home. Just as I thought, there are men guarding the gate, but I have Kirill, and he's given me the code to the side gate that is unguarded and used by the maids who clean the house. It always pays to have people within other organizations. At one point, we would have had informants within the Irish Mafia, but since the Famiglia have such close ties to them, we don't. We know anything we need, we'll be given, and vice versa. It's still weird to me how close the Italians and Irish have become, but fuck, having them on our side means we've had the chance to expand, and that's never a bad thing.

"Continue around and we'll go through the side gate," I say to Elio, my gaze on the guards who are currently talking to one another. It may not look as though they're paying attention to the car, but they are. Sergei has good men guarding him. But they're not good enough. They'll never see us coming. Elio keeps his speed as he passes by them and turns left, and we're out of sight.

Sergei's house is surrounded by hedges and trees. It's a great place to hide men to keep guard and something that I'll be making note of for my own home. When I have my plan for Inessa in place, I'll need men to ensure that she doesn't escape. I have a feeling she's got some fire inside of her and will fight against everything.

Dario releases a low whistle. “Fuck, I thought the Irish were flashy, but Christ, the Russians have them beat. All they’re missing is the gold fence.”

With it being after two o’clock in the morning, there’s hardly anyone around. Dario helps me carry Oleg from the car to Sergei’s front door. We stay in the darkness and hang to the shadows. The fucker is heavy, and even Dario’s feeling it. The fucker will now think twice about telling me I need to work out more. Ass.

“Thank fuck,” Dario grunts as we dump Oleg’s body on Sergei’s doorstep. We move quickly, sprinting back the way we came, continuing to stay to the shadows. Elio’s waiting for us, the car idling at the curb, a grin on his face as he watches us run toward him.

“It’s time to get the fuck out of here. I’ll call Rocco once I’m home,” he tells us.

I nod. I’m still internally battling whether I should go to Inessa or not.

Fuck.

The woman is driving me crazy, and I’m not sure what the hell I’m going to do about it.

I wish this was as easy as I had originally thought, but Inessa’s with that asshole Sergei, and if I don’t play this the right way, it’s all going to blow up in my face.

I take a deep breath.

Chiara. This is all for her.

I will go to Hell and back to get the vengeance I crave for her.

INESSA

“Inessa,” Kirill says, moving quickly toward me and Alya. “You need to listen to me.”

My blood runs cold. Over the past year, Kirill and I have grown closer. For the first time in my life, I have someone that I respect and consider family. He and his wife, Czarina, have been a huge help to me, offering me support and love, but also offering it to Alya. They’re the only ones I trust with my daughter. Czarina is unlike the other women within the Bratva. She doesn’t conform to the normal standards of pretending that I don’t exist. No, she sits with me, she gives me hugs, and she makes sure that I’m taken care of whenever Sergei has taken his anger out on me.

“What’s going on, Kirill?” I whisper, my heart racing.

“He’s coming,” he says softly. “He’s in a rage. He’ll be here soon. I’ve never seen him this angry.”

I swallow hard. “Is Czarina home?” I ask, my voice a little wobbly.

He nods. “She is. But if I do this, Inessa. If I take her to Czarina, I won’t be here to protect you.”

I don’t hesitate. “Take Alya to Czarina. She’ll take care of her for me. Please, Kirill. Don’t worry about me. I need you to

protect Alya.”

“You know that we will, but what about you?” he implores, and the fear in his eyes has my heart racing. “He’s enraged, Inessa. He’s going to be a fucking animal.”

I carelessly raise my shoulders. “When is he not?” I ask. “We’ve had this discussion before, Kirill. Alya is the most important person in my life. I need you to take her and protect her. Please, please do that for me?”

His jaw locks and he nods. “Fuck. Okay. I’ll take her now, but I’ll be back.”

I smile at him. “Thank you,” I whisper.

I turn on my heel and run toward my daughter’s room where she’s currently still sleeping. I hate that I’m waking her up, but I know this is the only time we have to get her out of here. If Sergei’s already on his way, we don’t have a lot of time.

I manage to scoop her into my arms without waking her. I press a kiss to her head and inhale deeply, loving the smell of her. There’s nothing sweeter than her. I hate that we’re going to be apart, but I know it’s the only way that I can assure that she’s safe.

Kirill takes her from me, keeping his arms tight around her small body, but also managing to ensure that she doesn’t wake. He’s already got her to-go bag, one that I keep ready if Czarina takes her out for me as I’m not allowed to leave. I still let my daughter out, so she can experience everything. My heart is heavy as he walks out of the house with her in his arms.

I have managed to protect my daughter from the anger that Sergei has. I know that when she cries or if she’s even around whenever he is and he’s angry, he starts to shout and throw shit

around. I grew up with this anger. I've known brutality since a very young age. I'll be damned if I let my daughter be subjected to the same. I may have had a hard time coming to terms with the pregnancy. I had thought about having an abortion on more than a few occasions. But I love my daughter. I will fight tooth and nail to ensure that she doesn't end up like me. I want the best for her, and that's why I know when the time comes, I'm going to need Czarina to take her. She's the only one I trust to raise Alya and let her know about me.

The thought alone breaks my heart, but being a mom means putting your child's welfare above all else, and if Sergei's temper continues to increase, things are only going to get worse, and I won't allow my daughter to become a statistic for violence.

My anxiety is through the roof as I wait for Sergei to come. The man doesn't have a decent bone in his body. If he's enraged, there's no way in hell he's going to be gentle. Fuck, gentle is not something I have ever felt.

The front door opens and my body tenses. He's here. I flinch when the door slams shut. My stomach flips, and not in a good way, like it does whenever I think of Niccolò, the man who has become important to me. In the past week or so, he's all I think about, all that I see when I'm asleep. I know that him coming to me is dangerous. If anyone found out, there would be hell to pay. He'll die if Sergei ever finds him near me. In the eyes of the Bratva, I belong to the Pakhan and no one else.

"Inessa," Sergei growls as he storms through the house. The tone of his voice has my body trembling. God, Kirill was

right. He's angry. Beyond that. I don't think I've ever seen him so crazed, not even when Artyom died.

"What's happened?" I whisper, trying my hardest not to show my fear. He thrives off it.

"Those fucking Italians," he snarls. "They killed Oleg and his wife and left Oleg's body on my doorstep."

I blink, surprised at his words. He never usually tells me anything. "What?" I breathe. Holy shit. The Famiglia have some balls. No one has gone up against Sergei before and the man is going for payback. At the thought of that, my heart sinks. Niccolò, he's going to go after Niccolò. The man has always been on his radar, and he'll put the hit back out on him again.

"Those fucking Italians," he snarls, edging closer to me. "They snuck onto our territory, broke into Oleg's house, slit his throat, along with his wife's, then proceeded to gain entry to my home and drop my man's body on my fucking doorstep. Tell me, *shlyukha*, what did you not understand about that? Hmm?" He continues to move forward until he's right in front of me. His height towering over me. "I'm going to fuck you now, Inessa, and the way I'm feeling, you do not want to disobey me."

Relief washes through me. I can deal with him taking me, but not when he hurts me. When he fucks me, I'm numb. I'm able to drift away and pretend to be elsewhere. Anywhere but in the moment and watching him fuck away his anger. I'm able to imagine a life where Alya and I are happy, loved, and free. It's the only time I allow myself to go to that place. But when he's using me as a punching bag, that pain is horrendous. My mind is tired, it's emotionally drained, and I'm unable to take the pain of the beating as well as trying to pretend it's not

happening. The beatings take so much out of me, not to mention they take so long for me to recover from. It's hard to even pick Alya up and play with her.

His hand slides into my hair and he pulls me toward him, his fingers tight against the strands as he slams his lips down against my own, the anger still lingering on him with every movement he makes. His other hand slides to my ass and he pulls me against him. "Go into the bedroom, *pizda*, and strip," he snarls as his fingers curl around my ass cheek, biting into the skin.

I take a step backward the moment he releases me, inwardly cringing at him calling me a cunt. He's one to talk. I've never met a bigger one than him. I despise the word. Absolutely hate it. But for Sergei, it fits.

I do as instructed and walk into the bedroom—not the one that I sleep in at night. The one furthest from the front. It's set up just as his basement is. He's going to do whatever he wants, and there's no one who'll ever stop him. I'm his to use and do with as he pleases. I enter the room and take a deep breath. It takes so much energy from me to muster up the courage to not fight.

I hate that I've become this girl. The one who will take everything that's done to her and do it all with a smile. I'm not sure when I lost my backbone, or the will to fight, but somewhere along the way it happened, and I sometimes mourn the girl I used to be.

I strip out of my clothing and kneel on the floor at the end of the bed, awaiting instruction from Sergei. I'm ultra focused as I try to listen for his footsteps. But it's no use, this room has been soundproofed. No one can hear anything that goes on in here and we won't be able to hear a sound from outside.

The door opens and I keep my head bowed. I know better than to lift it and look at him. If I do, I'll only be punched and spat at.

The moment he begins to touch me, I close my eyes and hold my breath, wondering what's going to happen. Is he going to be brutal and beat me as he fucks me? But when he lifts me into the air and lays me on the bed, I know that I'm safe... for now.

There's never any finesse about what happens between us. He pulls my thighs apart and thrusts into me. I bite back a cry as pain laces through me. God, it always hurts. It's always going to.

I close my eyes and drift off. This time, my thoughts turn to one man who's somehow managed to make me want hope and want him. Niccolò. I'm so fucking depraved that I start to think about what it would be like if it were him who was fucking me. Would it be different?

Niccolò's face is hovering above mine. His cock withdraws slightly, and then he pushes it into me, feeding it inch by inch. There's a little pain of him stretching me, but the pleasure by far outweighs that.

"So fucking tight," he snarls, thrusting deep inside of me. "All mine, Inessa. All fucking mine," he snarls, his teeth bared as he continues to fuck me.

"Yours," I reply on a gasp as he picks up his pace. God, I've never felt this way before. Never had a man take me like this, as though he's cherishing me.

"Nic," I breathe as his fingers tighten on my hips, biting into the flesh. I'm getting used to it, to him. I grind down on him, meeting him thrust for thrust.

“That’s it, Nessa, take all of me. Every inch of me.” That deep voice of his sets my body alight.

I swallow hard. God, what is he doing to me?

“I can feel your pussy, baby. I can feel that you’re close. Are you going to be my good girl and come?” He nips at my lip, his eyes darkening with need.

I release a whimper. God, please. I nod, unable to say the words.

His eyes darken even more than normal. “Then be a good girl and fucking come,” he snarls as he rotates his hips and thrusts harder and harder, my body climbing higher and higher. “That’s it, let it come.”

I pull in a ragged breath, my heart racing as my body tenses. I can feel the pleasure about ready to burst.

“Fuck,” I hear snarled, and I pull back from my vivid daydream just in time to see Sergei gritting his teeth and thrusting like a man possessed as he tries to reach his climax. “Keep it up, *pizda*. Work that pussy on my cock,” he says thickly.

Bile crawls up my throat. No. God no. Never have I ever liked what he’s done to me nor what Aleksei did, but he thinks I am. He thinks that I’m enjoying this.

His fingers slide up my body, his touch hot against my skin, his thrusts painful. I close my eyes as he winds his fingers around my throat and squeezes tightly, restricting my airway. He pushes his cock further into me with a relentless determination.

I start to fight against him, unable to breathe.

“Fucking stop,” he growls. “Stop fucking moving.” He squeezes my neck harder and fucks me faster, his cock hammering away inside me. “Fuck yes,” he groans.

The bile that’s been sitting in my gut is making its way up my esophagus. It’s only a matter of time before I end up throwing up. But Sergei’s fingers are cutting off the air to my body. Darkness seeps in, and I know that if he doesn’t let go, I’m going to pass out. Again. The man fucking loves to fuck me when I’m passed out or unconscious.

“Your pussy is fucking golden,” he growls, his thrusts becoming frantic. “So fucking good. If my men got a hold of you, *pizda*, I’d have a fucking riot on my hands. No one touches you but me.”

My body starts to float as the darkness settles in. I feel his cock thickening inside of me as he tightens his fingers even more around my neck. The warmth of his cum fills my pussy just as the darkness takes over me. My last thought is that I’m so fucking glad Alya isn’t here, and she’s safe.

INESSA

I feel a tender touch caress my face, pulling me from my sleep. I blink a few times, trying not to be blinded by the sunlight that is streaming into the window.

“Finally,” I hear the deep baritone of Niccolò.

I become very aware of the fact that I’m completely naked and he’s on the bed beside me, his hand on my thigh while the other is caressing my face.

“What time is it?” I ask, my voice hoarse and very unlike my own.

His eyes narrow as he watches me. “It’s a little after noon. I came here to find you passed out with finger marks on your neck. What the fuck, Inessa?”

I gingerly pull myself into a sitting position, reaching for the sheets and pulling them up over my body. “Sometimes Sergei likes it rough,” I say, hoping that he’ll leave it at that.

His gorgeous brown eyes darken. “You like it when he’s rough?” he asks, his voice thick with anger.

I shiver at the tone. “No,” I hiss, horrified that anyone would ever think that. “I’ve never wanted that animal to touch me.”

I watch as his eyes widen a fraction, but the surprise he had goes quickly and he masks his expression. “So why the fuck are you with him?”

How the hell do I go about explaining my situation? How the hell would anyone understand just how alone I truly am? “Everything isn’t as it seems. I can’t run,” I whisper. I would never leave Alya. As young as I am, my daughter is the only light in my life. I would suffer everything as long as she was safe and healthy.

“Why?” he asks, that anger in his voice still there.

I shake my head. “I can’t,” I say once again.

I don’t trust Niccolò. I don’t trust anyone but Kirill and Czarina. They have earned my trust. Niccolò hasn’t.

“*Sposa*,” he murmurs thickly, and I frown. It’s not something I have heard before. “Do you want to be married to Sergei?”

I can’t hold back the disgust on my face. “I’d rather die,” I tell him vehemently. “God, there’s nothing worse, but I don’t have a choice, Niccolò. I’ve never had a choice.”

His brows knit together. “Was Aleksei your father?”

I laugh bitterly. “No. He was an animal just like Sergei. I’m not sure which one is worse. They’re both monsters.” I sigh heavily. “What are you doing here, Nico? Hmm? Sergei is on the warpath. He knows the Italians killed Oleg, and he’s gunning for revenge.”

The smile on Niccolò’s face is sinister. It’s filled with determination and cockiness. “Let him. We’ll be waiting. But that’s what happens when you come for the Famiglia’s Consigliere and slaughter his entire family—children included.”

I swallow hard. “There’s a war coming,” I whisper. It’s been brewing for years. Aleksei was never strong enough to lead the Bratva to it, but Sergei? He’s the one who would get everyone killed to ensure it’s fought.

“There is, and it’s coming soon, *Sposa*. It’s ready to explode at any moment.”

“Chiara,” I say softly. God, I miss my friend. It’s been so long since I’ve seen her, since I’ve spoken to her. “She’ll be safe.”

He inclines his head. “She won’t be caught in this war,” he promises me.

For the first time in a while, I’m able to breathe a little better. “Thank you,” I whisper.

He glances at his watch. “I’m going to have to leave,” he says as he gets to his feet, his gaze moving along my body as I sit up straighter. The sheet drops from my breasts and falls to my waist. He’s seen it before; the man had been ogling me for a while before I woke up. “I’ll be back tonight.”

I shake my head. “Don’t,” I whisper. “You’ll be caught.”

“I’ll be here,” he promises me as he lowers his lips to mine. It’s soft at first, and I’m hesitant to reciprocate, but when he presses his mouth harder against my own. I feel my resolve melt away. His tongue finds its way between my lips to play with my own, and the passion begins to build inside me.

As his lips move with increasing urgency, I feel myself being pulled in deeper. I feel his fingers in my hair, pulling it gently. The tension builds inside until it’s almost unbearable.

When he finally pulls away, I’m left breathless and wanting more. He looks into my eyes, and I can see the same

desire reflected back at me.

“Tonight, Nessa,” he promises me.

I swallow hard. “Please,” I whisper as he starts to move away from the bed. He stops at my plea, turning his beautiful face to look at me. “Please don’t hurt me, Nico. I can’t bear anymore hurt.”

I couldn’t survive if he hurt me too. Kirill and Czarina have given me support, and I trust them, but sometimes I feel as though there’s an ulterior motive, like maybe, just maybe, they know that one day my number will be up and Sergei will have enough just as he did with his ex-wife, and Alya will need parents. But with Niccolò, I’m sinking. God, I’m sinking so damn fast that I can’t breathe. If he were to hurt me, I have a feeling that it would ruin me. It would devastate me.

“I won’t,” he assures me, his voice clear and determined. “Tonight,” he reiterates once again.

I smile. “Tonight,” I say back, my voice a lot clearer than it has been. “Be safe,” I whisper, hoping and praying that he won’t be caught. If he is, he’s going to die, and it will be extremely painful. They’ll have no mercy.

“*Sposa*,” he says with that cocky grin. “It’s going to be fine. Get some sleep,” he tells me as he leaves my bedroom, closing the door behind him.

I lie back down against the pillow and close my eyes. What on earth is going on? I’m struggling to understand what he wants and what’s going to happen. I can’t allow anything to jeopardize my life, my daughter’s life. I need to focus everything on her.

Whatever Niccolò wants, it can’t happen.

We're playing with danger already. There's no way this can continue.

But Christ, I want him. I want him so much. I don't think I've ever felt this way before. I've never had this need that he brings out in me. But I'm Sergei's and going against what he wants is suicidal.

Is one night with Niccolò worth it? Would it make up for the life of pain and suffering?

I'm so damn screwed.

NICCOLÒ

I bring the glass of whiskey to my lips and drink. Fuck. I've fucked up. So fucking badly. It's been two weeks since I last saw Inessa and I can't stop thinking about her. I couldn't return that night. I knew if I did, I wouldn't have been able to control myself. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a kiddie fucker, and that's exactly what I would have become had I returned that night.

"What's going on, Nic?" Gio questions as he takes a seat opposite me. "I know you. I've known you a long time now, brother. You're torn up, so what gives?"

"I want her," I admit. Fuck, I shouldn't want the temptress. I should have left her alone a long time ago. But I can't. I fucking can't stop thinking about her.

I don't have to explain who I mean to Gio. He knows me too well for me to do that, and I'm not going to lie about it either. It wouldn't do any good. Gio's a nosey bastard and would call me out instantly.

"You've changed," he notes. "The past few weeks, you've become angrier. It makes sense now. You want the girl, so why not fuck her out of your system and then get back to your plan?"

I raise a brow. “You really think that’s going to work?” I ask. “You think one fuck and the bitch will be forgotten?”

He lifts his shoulders and shrugs. “Do you have a better plan?”

No. I fucking don’t. “I fuck her, Gio, I’m going to break her.”

He grins. “Isn’t that the point?”

I grit my teeth. Christ. What the fuck is going on? “She said she doesn’t want to marry the bastard.”

“Who fucking would? No woman would want to be married to that sadistic fucker. If the rumors are true, he killed his first wife. From what I’ve heard, he’s had a thing for Inessa for years.”

“She was a child,” I hiss. That bastard fucked her when she was a child.

“We do not fuck children, Nic, but the Bratva make no concessions. It is who they are and what they do.”

I sigh heavily. “You’ve changed your tune,” I say as I down the rest of the whiskey. “You wanted me to think about what I had planned. You didn’t want me to go after her. She’s Chiara’s friend.”

He inclines his head. “I did say that, but, Nic, she set us up. She made it so that we were shot at. That’s not an innocent person. She had time to run if she wanted out, but she didn’t. No, she’s deep in that organization, Niccolò. So fucking deep that she’s marrying the Pakhan.” He looks at me, his gaze focused as he watches me. “You fuck her, Nic, you get this out of your system, and then you remember what she has done. Then you get the revenge that Chiara needs.”

I get to my feet. “You’re right.” I need to ensure that my goal stays at the forefront of my mind. Chiara’s death could have been avoided had she not been led by her so-called best friend to take the drugs. Everything Inessa is wrapped up in is Bratva. Her innocent act the last time I saw her was just that, an act, and now I’m finally seeing clearly once again. “It’s time to ramp this shit up a notch. I also need you to do something for me,” I say with a wicked grin.

He sits forward in his chair. “Do tell,” he says eagerly.

“Find me a priest, one that’ll marry me and the bratva *stronsa*.”

His brows almost hit his hairline. “Marry her?”

“Yes. Inessa is in for a fucking shock. In ten weeks, there will be a wedding,” I say with a grin. “But not Sergei’s.”

He rubs his hands together in glee. “Fuck, I love your wicked sense of humor. But you know that when you do this, the war will break out.”

“That shit has been bubbling for years. Me marrying the *stronsa* isn’t going to change that. It’s just going to make it happen quicker. It’ll be on our terms rather than theirs.” I’m sick of those bastards getting ahead of us. They’ve killed two of our men and tried to muscle in on our territory for the drug trade. That’s not going to happen.

He shakes his head. “You’re a sick bastard, Nic, but I’ve always known that. Don’t worry, I know a guy who’ll do it. He owes me a favor.”

“Make it happen, Gio. I’ll call you later with the details.” I grab my keys off the counter and exit the house. It’s time to see Inessa.

The drive to her house is easy. It's something I've done countless times before. But tonight, I'm ratcheting things up. I'm going to mess with her emotions and make her confused as to what she wants. By the time the wedding comes, she'll be so in love with me that she won't even think twice about marrying me.

I enter the house and see Kirill sitting on the couch, a baby in his arms as he feeds it with a bottle. "She's in the shower," he tells me, not looking up from the kid. "What are you doing here, Niccolò? She doesn't want to see you."

"Take the kid and leave," I snap, pissed that he's telling me this. I can't have her turn me away. I don't have long left until the wedding day arrives, and I need the next ten weeks to get her on side, to get her to fall in love with me.

"Niccolò," he says, his eyes wide. "Alya—"

I cut him off. "I don't give a fuck. Go. Your wife will be happy to see you."

He gets to his feet and starts to walk toward the back door. I don't wait to see him leave, I stalk toward the bedroom, my cock thickening at the thought of her luscious body wet and ripe for me to take. I take off my jacket and hang it on the door handle and take a seat at the foot of the bed as I wait for her to come to me.

I hear the water turning off, and I know that the moment I've been wanting for the past two weeks is going to happen any moment.

"You're here?" she asks as she steps into the bedroom. "You also kicked Kirill and the baby out of my home."

I stare at her, at the fluffy white towel wrapped around her glistening body. "I did. He shouldn't be bringing his child to

work. You need protecting, not to become a babysitter.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Once again, you know nothing. Now, what are you doing here, Niccolò?”

I get to my feet and stalk toward her. “That’s not what you call me, *sposa*. Do you know how fucking hard it’s been to keep away from you? How fucking much I’ve fought against everything in me to keep my distance?”

Her lips part and her eyes widen. “What?”

I step closer. “You were a kid, *sposa*, a fucking child. If I had come to you that night, I would have done something I couldn’t control.”

She knows what my words mean. She pulls in a ragged breath. “Oh,” she whispers.

“Oh is right. Now,” I say, edging into her personal space, “you’re all legal, and I’m going to make you mine. Happy birthday, Nessa.”

Her eyes widen even more, and tears form in them. “Thank you,” she breathes.

Christ, my cock is thick. If I don’t get some relief soon, I’m going to lose my mind.

“It’s time to celebrate. Climb onto the bed, *sposa*,” I instruct.

She doesn’t hesitate. She does what I say, and I smirk. She’s good at taking direction. I have a feeling this is going to be a fucking good night.

I strip the towel from her body, and I see her creamy porcelain skin. So smooth, and she’s completely bare. Her nipples are erect, and her pretty pink pussy is puffy and ready

for me. My cock twitches at the sight. Fuck, I want to bury my cock deep inside of her and fuck her until she passes out.

“You want me?” I ask thickly.

“Yes,” she whimpers.

“Show me your pussy, Nessa. I want to see it.”

Her thighs open, and I see the glistening puffy lips. “Lie back and enjoy,” I say to her as I get into position, my nose pressed against her pussy. Fuck, I’m going to lose myself in her for tonight only. I need to get her out of my system. I need to fuck this want out of me.

I run my tongue along her pink, glistening folds, and I love the wispy gasp that escapes her as her body arches up off the bed. I savor the flavor of her, tantalizingly sweet and exotic. With each stroke of my tongue, I feel her tremble beneath me, her hips pressing against my face, trying to get more, to reach the pleasure that’s no doubt within reach. She’s addictive. I’m already unable to keep my distance from her, and now it’s going to be even fucking harder.

I push my finger deep inside Inessa’s tight, wet channel, fucking loving the feel her body quivering with pleasure. She gasps as I sink deeper into her. Her desperate moans fill the air. Her movements become frenzied and wild as I add a second digit, curling within her walls and sending shocks of pleasure throughout her body.

“Please, Nico,” she hums. “I need you.”

I fucking love and hate that she calls me Nico. She’s the only person to ever call me that.

“Not yet, *sposa*. Not yet.”

It's not long until her pussy clenches around my fingers and she's screaming out my name as her orgasm rockets through her body.

My gaze meets hers, and I see the heat swirling in those dusky eyes, desire radiating from her every pore. Clenching my jaw against the urge to thrust my cock into her, I take a deep breath and pull my fingers out of her pussy. They're covered in her juices. Christ, she's fucking soaked. "Open your mouth" I command, and the tip of my tongue peeks out to moisten my lips as I push my fingers into her mouth. She sucks, her tongue swirling around them. Fuck, she's a minx.

She's breathtakingly beautiful. Those usually pale cheeks are flushed with pleasure, her eyes smoldering with an untamable desire. Seeing her lying here, ready and willing to take whatever I want to give her, makes me about ready to lose the last thread of my control. Inessa's driving me crazy, and I haven't even sunk my cock inside of her yet.

"I'm nowhere near finished with you tonight, Nessa. I'm going to enjoy every inch of your delectable body." The look in her eyes is one of both trepidation and need as she weakly nods in acceptance.

A feral growl rumbles from my throat as I kneel down before her. There's no more gentleness, only raw hunger as I plunge my tongue into her depths. My fingers grip her hips firmly, pushing her against me as I lap and swirl circles around her clit. Her moans turn into loud, unintelligible screams.

It's not long until her body is wound tightly. She's ready to come again. It only takes one final flick of my tongue against her clit and she's screaming out my name as wave after wave of pleasure crashes through her body.

I unsnap my buttons and free my cock. It's thick and heavy. I quickly cover my length with a condom, and while Inessa's coming down from her pleasure, I position myself over her.

I slide into her tight, wet channel, loving how snug her pussy is around my cock.

“Fuck! Inessa! You're so tight!” I groan loudly. I can't hold back. There's no fucking gentleness about this. I'm unable to stay in control, especially when Inessa arches her back, thrusting her hips upwards to meet mine.

I slam into her over and over again, watching her as she writhes beneath me. Her pussy is clenching around me, milking me as once again, an orgasm tears through her.

She wraps her legs tighter around my waist, pulling me deeper into her as I pound into her weak and trembling body.

I can't hold back. My spine tingles and my balls tighten. Fuck, I'm going to come. I fuck her with abandonment as I reach the heights of ecstasy. I thrust once—twice—thrice, before I bury myself to the hilt and come harder than I have ever done before. Fuck. I capture her lips and kiss her, hard, fast, and filled with anger and passion.

Christ, I'm so fucking fucked. I want her again. I shouldn't, but I do.

What the fuck am I going to do now?

INESSA

“Sweet dreams, baby girl,” I whisper softly as I place a kiss on Alya’s head. My little girl is fast asleep and is so damn cute. I gently place her into her crib, and she doesn’t stir. She’s a great sleeper and I’m damn lucky that she is.

I tiptoe out of her room, leaving the door ajar slightly so that if she cries, I’ll be able to hear her. Sergei wouldn’t allow me to purchase a baby monitor. He said that it wasn’t necessary and that as a mother, I should know when my child needs me.

I begin to clean the house. It’s a mess from bath time, dinner, and general play. I hadn’t realized that Sergei was coming over. Had I known, the house would have been spotless and Alya in bed. Instead, he surprised me. He entered the house and made a beeline for Alya. My heart stopped beating as I bit my lip, wondering what he had planned. Thankfully, he placed her into the playpen and pulled me into my room.

“She down?” Kirill asks me as he enters through the back door, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Yeah,” I reply softly as I continue to clean the kitchen. “She went out like a light.”

“Inessa, look at me,” he says. There’s a command in his voice, something he doesn’t use with me at all.

I turn to face him. His eyes narrow as he takes me in. “What’s going on?”

I shake my head. “Nothing, why?” I lie. It’s something that I have gotten great at doing. I learned the art of it at a young age. I’m good at pretending nothing affects me too.

“You’ve never lied to me before, Inessa. Why are you doing so now?”

I fake shock and outrage, my brows pulling together. “What?” I whisper, sounding horrified. “I’m not lying. Why would you even think that?”

He pauses for a moment, his gaze assessing as he watches me. “Are you sure?”

I nod. “Yeah, I’m just tired. I’ve had a busy week.”

Every night Niccolò visits. I’m so grateful that Sergei is occupied elsewhere and hasn’t fucked me in days. I’m hoping that he’s found someone new. Today, he took his anger out on me. My stomach is sore because he let his anger out there, telling me that he needs to keep my face clean for the wedding. I guess I should be thankful for small mercies.

“You need sleep.”

I laugh. “You think?”

“Leave that until morning. Go and get some sleep,” he instructs, but I shake my head. I’d rather not have another impromptu visit from Sergei and feel the pain of his displeasure. “You need the rest.”

I smile at him. He’s always worried about me these days. “I will once I’ve finished. Have you eaten?”

He nods. “Czarina fed me. She’s cooking dinners for you to freeze.”

I throw the rag into the sink. “She really doesn’t have to do that.” I adore his wife. She’s been such a huge help since I had Alya, always making sure that we have enough food, diapers, and anything else that we may need. She’s been a Godsend, and I know it’s all because of Kirill. She wouldn’t be doing it if it weren’t for her husband.

“She likes to be useful.”

I smile. “Well, I appreciate you and her so very much, and she’s always got impeccable timing as ever. I used the last of the meals she made this evening.” He grins and I shake my head. “You told her that I was down to my last one, didn’t you?”

He chuckles. “She’d have killed me if I hadn’t.”

I can’t keep the smile from my face. “Well, thank you,” I say softly. “It means a lot.”

He pulls me into his arms, and I bite back a wince. God, my stomach is painful, and having him pull me made it pull in a weird way. “Go to bed and get some rest.”

I pull back and salute him. “Yes, sir.”

“Have a shower, unwind, and get a good night’s sleep,” he instructs. “If Alya wakes, I’ll take care of her.”

My heart fills with love and gratitude. “Thank you.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t thank me, Nessa. You’re family. Now go.”

I do as he says, so beyond thankful for his help. I say goodnight and head for the shower. I’m ready to wash this day away and get some sleep.



I'm awoken by a hand sliding along my thigh. I stir against the warmth of the body behind me. I turn and snuggle against them, my eyes fluttering open. I inhale deeply, loving the scent of sandalwood with a hint of iciness to it. "Hey, Nico," I whisper.

His hand slides up my back and he pulls me close. "Tired?" he asks softly.

I nod against his body. "Yeah, I've not been getting much sleep. Someone's been keeping me awake."

He chuckles deeply, his chest rising as he does. I smile against him, loving that he's keeping me close. I'm not sure if I've ever had someone cuddle me before, but I love it. Niccolò has made me feel as though I'm a person, someone who's worth something more than being used and abused. My heart swells when he presses a kiss against my forehead. "I'm not going to apologize for that."

I lift my head and look at him. The light from the moon shines into the room and illuminates his face. "I wouldn't want you to."

"Have a good day?" he asks, still speaking softly.

"It was okay. What about you?"

"It's better now," he growls as he slams his lips against mine. It's hard, chaste, and so fucking amazing. I love when he kisses me. It feels like I'm floating, as if I'm in Dreamland. This was never supposed to happen. But somehow, Niccolò has weaved his way into my life and heart.

“How’s Chiara?” I ask. It’s been so long since I’ve seen her.

“She’s with her mom,” he replies. There’s something a little off about his tone, but I’m not sure what it is.

I nod. “They’re getting along better?” I ask hopefully. I know how hard Chiara wanted to be getting along with her, but Maria was never the maternal type, especially in Chiara’s teenage years.

“They’re both at peace now,” he says as he tucks my hair behind my ear. “What about you? Have you spoken to your parents? You’ve been here a while and have never spoken about them. What gives?”

“My parents gave me up when I was a baby,” I semi-lie. I don’t want to go into detail about how and why that happened, and I certainly don’t want him to know that I was sold and am now the Bratva whore.

“Shit,” he says thickly. “I’m sorry.”

I shake my head. “Don’t be. You didn’t know. They did the only thing they could have done back then.”

He runs his hand along my cheek. “Do you hate them for it?” This is new—us talking like this. Sure, we speak, but it’s usually just surface level. We don’t delve into personal shit.

“Yes,” I reply honestly. “I’ve tried to make peace with it, but I can’t. I hate that they gave me to Aleksei.”

He pulls me tighter against him, and I go willingly. I fucking love that he’s offering me support. It’s been such a long time since I’ve had it. Now, I have two men in my life who are amazing. Niccolò and Kirill.

“Sometimes, *Sposa*,” he says low, “we cannot forgive. Even if we love them. The pain they have inflicted is too much for us to forgive.”

I nod. “You’re right. I don’t think I could ever forgive them. What they did destroyed my life, and it’s not something I can forget.”

“Then don’t,” he says emphatically. “You do whatever you need to do in order to survive.”

I swallow hard. “How do you do it?” I ask as I look up at him once again. His brows knit together, and he glances down at me. “How do you survive with the horrors that you have witnessed or done? How do you live with the knowledge that you’ve killed someone?” I take a deep breath. “I’ve dreamed about killing, and if I was given the chance, I’d do it in a heartbeat, but I don’t think I’d ever be able to forgive myself for it.”

“I was born a monster, Inessa. It’s something that comes naturally to me. I’m able to hurt people without batting an eye. I can kill people with a smile on my face. It doesn’t affect me. It never has and never will. People are wired differently. But if push came to shove and it was your life or theirs, you’d be able to forgive yourself.”

If it was between them or Alya, I would kill without hesitation. But that guilt would always lay heavily on my heart. I don’t think I have it in me.

“How are you single?” I ask with a laugh. “I mean, you’re hot, you’re sweet, but you’re fiercely protective of those you care about.”

He chuckles. “Trust me, *sposa*, I’m not an easy man to get along with. I’m beyond protective.”

I shrug. “I find it sweet. You just want to look after those you care about.”

“What about you, Nessa? What would you do for those you care for?”

“Everything,” I reply without hesitation. I know that I would do whatever it took to make them happy, to protect them, to love them. I know what it’s like to live without any of that, and I would never make anyone feel as I have.

“That’s something we have in common, then.”

I nod and release a yawn. “Are you staying or do you have to go?”

He pulls me back into his arms, my head lying on his chest. “Sleep, *sposa*, you need the rest.”

I press a kiss against his chest, hating that he’s fully dressed, but also very happy that he’s willing to just hold me rather than having sex. I feel wanted and special that he’s cuddling and spending time with me.

“Goodnight, Nico. Sweet dreams,” I say, repeating what I said to Alya earlier this evening.

I’ve fallen so fucking hard for him. I don’t think there’s any way to stop it. He’s become someone important to me. I just pray that he doesn’t hurt me. I don’t think I’ll be able to survive that if he does.

I can’t be betrayed anymore. I’ve already had enough to last me a lifetime.

INESSA

TEN WEEKS LATER

I pace the living room floor. “Are you sure she’s going to be okay?”

My fear is palpable. Tomorrow is D-day, and whether I like it or not, I’m going to become Sergei’s wife. I’m scared of what’s to come. I’ve no idea why Sergei is marrying me. He gets what he wants whenever he wants it. Why make it official? The men and women of the Bratva already view me as a whore. They, too, are wondering why the Pakhan is marrying me.

“Alya is going to be fine. I promise you, Inessa, Czarina is taking her to a house she has leased. Everyone already believes she has gone to visit her mother who has taken ill. Your daughter is safe, and when you’re back, Czarina will return with Alya.”

I take a deep breath and look into his eyes. I see the honesty swirling within them. “Promise me,” I say softly. “If something happens, Czarina won’t return with her.”

We’ve had this conversation so many times over the past three months. I’ve made my feelings on the matter known. I need to know that if something goes wrong, Czarina will take care of her, that she’ll love her and protect her.

Kirill pulls me into his arms and holds me tight. “No matter what happens, Inessa, Alya will be safe. She’ll be loved and cherished, and she’ll know who her mom is.

I take a deep breath, relief washing through me. I hate that we’re having this conversation but it’s one that has been needed. “Thank you. Did you give her the money?”

He grins. “Where did you get it?”

Pride fills my chest. “I may be tied to the asshole, but I’m not exactly useless. Since the age of seven, I’ve been taking money from both Sergei and Aleksei when he was alive.” I knew that if I ever did manage to be free, I’d need money to get away and start a new life.

“So what you’re saying is that you’re a little thief,” he says through his laughter. “Czarina has set up a bank account. She has a card for you to use whenever you’re ready. The moment you get free, you’re going to run, Inessa. You’re going to get as far as you can.”

I shake my head. “That’s never going to happen, Kirill. We both know that. We’re tied to the Bratva until our dying breath. There’s no way in hell Sergei is ever going to let me leave. He’ll kill me if I ever tried.”

He steps closer to me, his voice lowering almost as if he’s afraid someone will overhear what we’re saying. “Listen, *devochka*, there’s going to come a time, and hopefully soon, when Sergei isn’t going to be around, and when that happens, you’ll have a window to escape. You take it and you get Alya and you flee, never looking back.”

I look up at him, my heart pounding wildly. “Kirill,” I whisper. “You can’t.” If he kills Sergei, it’s certain death for him. He’ll never survive it.

“*Devochka*,” he says softly.

He’s been calling me *devochka* for the past three months. It’s his way of letting me know that he views me as a child—his child. I think it’s sweet, and I adore that he does, but there’s just something that’s holding me back.

“Trust me, okay?” he asks me.

I nod. I do trust him to a certain extent. But there’s a difference between having him and his wife protect my child—a baby they have watched grow, one they’d take in a heartbeat—to trusting him with my life. That’s just something that I don’t think I’d ever trust someone with. I’ve been betrayed by someone I trusted before, and I’ll never open my heart to let someone do it again.

“Do you have everything ready for tomorrow?” he asks, and I nod. “Good. You do not want to do anything to anger him. Give him a reason and he’ll take you out tomorrow. You’ve done well, *devochka*. You’ve managed to keep him on side, no matter how much you hate him. You’ve done well.”

I scoff. “I hate him with every fiber of my being. If I had the courage, I’d be the one to take him out, Kirill. I’d be the one who would slit his throat as he watched on. But I don’t have that strength. I don’t have that power. Aleksei and Sergei have stripped me of it. They have taken every last piece of hope and power that I had.”

He glances away. We’ve never had this heart-to-heart, never spoken so candidly about things before. “Is that why you cut?”

I pull in a ragged breath. I didn’t realize anyone had found that out. “What?”

“I’ve known for a long time that you cut yourself.”

My cheeks flame at him uncovering my secret. “It’s you who’s been taking the blades from the house.”

He nods. “But you somehow always manage to bring more in. How is that?”

“Sergei,” I confess. The man likes me to be completely shaven, and I lied to him, telling him that I preferred to have the basic metal blades as they got a closer shave. He never thought twice about my words and made sure that his maids purchased what I needed.

“Why?” he asks, his eyes filled with wetness. I hate that he’s hurting.

I can’t help but laugh. “How long do you have?”

He takes a seat on the armchair and waves for me to take a seat on the couch. “We have all night, *devochka*. You can tell me anything. I’ll listen.”

“Do you know that you were the only man who never touched me?” I say, and watch his eyes widen. “I was seven when Oleg started with pats to my ass, telling me I was pretty. From then on, anytime I walked past a man, they’d touch me. Whether it be my ass, my tits; hell, some even cupped my vagina. You were the only one who didn’t touch me, nor did you look at me like you wanted to.”

He shakes his head. “Christ, Inessa.”

“You see, for my entire life, I’ve been treated like I was a whore, someone men will use. No one has ever made me feel wanted or loved.” Except for Niccolò. God, that man makes me want things I have no right wanting. I’ve fallen so fucking hard for him. Every night he’s here, talking to me, touching me, loving me. I’ve never felt special until him.

“I’m so sorry,” Kirill says.

“It’s not your fault. You never hurt me. The men were surprised when I hit puberty and I wasn’t put to work at The Backroom. They had been waiting patiently for that time. They had been wanting to be the one to deflower me. But it didn’t matter. They were never going to. Sergei and Aleksei had made a pact years ago. I was always going to belong to Sergei.”

“Alya—she’s his?” he asks, and there’s no pity or sorrow in his voice.

I lift my shoulders and shrug. “He believes so, but I don’t know.”

His brows knit together. “Why?”

“The pact they made was that one would take my ass and the other my pussy,” I say honestly, and he flinches. “But Aleksei hated being told what to do, and whenever Sergei wasn’t around, Aleksei would do whatever the hell he wanted with me. There was no way I could ever tell Sergei, so I kept it to myself.”

“You were young. Way too young for them to touch you.”

I nod. We’re both in agreement on that. “The sex doesn’t affect me.” It used to. God, I used to have night terrors after they first raped me, but soon, they disappeared and now I’m used to it. “I can’t deal with the beatings. My body can’t cope with it any longer.”

“You cut to block the trauma?” he says as though he’s figured it all out.

“Kind of. It started before they would rape me. The beatings have taken their toll. The first time I remember Aleksei beating me, I was five. He knocked my two front teeth

out because I bumped into the woman he was cheating on his wife with and he wanted to make sure I didn't talk."

I remember that day as clearly as ever. It was the first time I truly felt as though I was alone. It was painful and I was scared, but he laughed at me. He told me to stay in my room and not to come out unless called. I curled up on the bed crying until I fell asleep.

"I couldn't cry. I couldn't scream. I couldn't do anything but take what they were doing to me. The pain and anger started in a ball in the pit of my stomach, and it continued to grow. It wouldn't stop. No matter how hard I repressed it, it was always there. Cutting myself was my escape. For just a few brief moments, I was able to let it out. As the blood flowed from me, so did that pain and anger. I was finally able to be numb. I still find solace as the blood flows. I can't stop. Don't you see, it's never going to stop. I'm always going to feel this way."

He buries his head in his hands, and I glance at the window, letting the time pass us by. We both need the reprieve and the quiet isn't so bad. It used to be the one thing I'd crave. If there was silence, I knew that I'd be okay.

"You know that not everyone is like Aleksei and Sergei, right?"

"No, I don't. You've never hurt me. You're the only one, Kirill. The other men may not have raped me, but they sure as hell beat me. My life has been filled with pain and brutality. There's no escape. Everywhere I look I see it all. It's why I wanted an abortion. I didn't think I could cope with looking at my child knowing how she was made. I didn't want her to have the life I did. But yet again, it wasn't my choice. I had to do what I was told and not what I wanted."

“Do you regret having her?”

“Never,” I say vehemently. “Not ever. Alya is the purest, most beautiful, precious gift I could have ever been given. But I’m scared. Every second of every day, I’m scared that she’s going to cry and Sergei’s going to be pissed and he’ll hurt her.”

“What can I do to help?” he asks. “I fucking hate that you’re stuck here and have to marry that bastard. What can I do to help?”

I shake my head. “There’s nothing, Kirill. Nothing anyone can do can save me. I’ve been destined for this life since I was three days old, and no matter what, it’s not going to change.”

He scrubs his hands down his face. “You’re killing me, *devochka*. You’re fucking killing me.”

I give him a wry smile. “The only thing I need is Alya to be safe. I need Sergei to never have access to her. That’s all I ask.” I know it’s a big request. Going against the Bratva is a huge no-no, and I’m asking not only Kirill but Czarina to risk their lives for me and for my daughter.

“It’ll be done,” he promises me. “No matter what, Inessa, Alya is going to be safe. But I hate that you’re facing this shit alone.”

“You’ll be here,” I say. “Won’t you?”

“I hope so. But I don’t know what Sergei has planned once you’re married. Will you remain here or will you live at his house?”

I shiver in repulsion. I fucking hate his house. I despise it. There’s something about it that sets me off. There’s a creepy vibe to it, and it’s the place where he killed his first wife. I

really don't want to live there once the marriage is done. "He hasn't said."

He nods. "If you stay here, I'll probably remain as before. But if you move into his home, he has guards that he keeps there, so I'll be reassigned."

Fuck. I hate that I could be losing someone that I talk to. Someone I can lean on if things get tough with Alya.

"No matter what you think, Inessa, you're strong. You've proven that every day of your life. You've been dealt the worst hand in life and you're surviving. That makes you strong. Don't doubt yourself. You've survived this; you're going to survive everything else that comes your way."

I let his words sink in and realize that he's right. I have survived this shit life I've been handed. I can survive everything that's thrown at me. I have a reason to live, and that little girl is my everything.

"Thank you," I tell him with a smile. "You've helped me more than you'll ever realize."

He never judged me, nor has he hated me. He's been the only one to actually help and show me support. I'm not sure how far I'd have come without him.

"Tomorrow is just another day, *devochka*, That's all it is."

I really hope that he's right. But I have a feeling everything is going to change once I say I do.

NICCOLÒ

“**Y**ou ready for this?” Giacomo asks, his smile tight as we walk toward the car.

I crack my knuckles. “More than ready.” I’ve been waiting for this day for a while. It’s been a long fucking time coming. Today, Inessa is going to be mine, and when she is, she’s in for a hell of a surprise. “Let’s go,” I instruct him. “Are the men in position?”

He nods as he starts the engine. “Yes, we have thirty men surrounding the church. There are also snipers on the roof. Don’t worry, Nic, this is going to go ahead smoothly.”

There’s so much cockiness in his words that it pisses me off. We can’t guarantee that it will go smoothly. But we can hope.

“You sure that she’ll come with you?” he asks as he pulls out of the drive. His gaze is on the road, but I know he’s also watching me. He’s wanting to see how fucking deep I’m sunk. Little does he know that I’m beyond fucking drowning. I fucked up by fucking her. That one time wasn’t enough. It never was going to be. I’ve fucked her every day since then. She’s so fucking sweet, and the innocent act she has makes me harder than stone.

“I’m sure,” I respond. I know that she’s fallen for me. The past three months are testament to that. It was a lot easier than I had thought. The one thing I hadn’t planned on was falling for her too. But the difference between Inessa and I is that I can turn off my emotions. No one will ever know that the blonde temptress got to me, that she’s dug her way into my heart. Fuck that. I may be weak in that department, but I’m not stupid. No one and nothing is more important to me than Chiara was, and there’s no way in hell that I’d ever be with Inessa. Not after what she’s done.

The rest of the car ride is quiet, and I’m pleased that he’s not asking any more questions. I have a feeling Gio knows a lot more than he’s letting on. After all, he can see straight through me and my bullshit. He’s always been able to. He’s there for me to keep my head on straight.

Gio’s cell rings as we get closer to the church. “Yeah?” Gio answers. “You’re on speaker with the boss.”

“Boss,” Nathaniel says. He’s one of the best snipers we have. “The Russian asshole has arrived. Everyone’s here except for the bride.”

“Good. Keep your positions. We’ll be there within minutes. We should arrive before her.”

I got the low down of the plans for today from Kirill. Everything has been timed to perfection for Inessa to arrive. She’s going to be riding with Sergei’s closest advisor, Igor. Kirill won’t be at the wedding, which means there’s no chance of him getting caught in the inevitable crossfire, meaning I’ll still have my inside man of the Bratva.

We park a little up the street from the church, and I slide out of the car and move into the shadows of the buildings, while Gio keeps the car idling. The minute I have Inessa,

we're getting the fuck out of here. Anyone who tries to come after us will be picked off by the snipers or the men we have on the ground. The Bratva are going to be hit today, and they're going to lose a fuck of a lot of men. Which means, we'll be closer to taking those fuckers out once and for all.

A black Rolls Royce creeps up the street. The car's barely going over thirty, but that's okay. It gives me time to keep moving toward the church. I reach for my gun, the silencer on, and I'm ready. The second the doors open, I'll be in action.

Igor's door opens first, and he steps out, fixing his jacket straight before he reaches for the back passenger's door where Inessa is currently sitting. I don't hesitate, I raise my gun and fire. I never miss. Not fucking ever. The bullet hits Igor in the back of his head, tearing through his brain. He's dead before he even hits the ground.

"We don't have long," I say gruffly as I reach for Inessa's hand. Her eyes are wide, her lips parted. "*Sposa*, start moving, now."

She doesn't ask questions. She's out of the car and gripping a hold of my hand for dear life. We take off, but she can run fast in the heels she's wearing. It's only a matter of time before someone comes out to find out what the fuck is taking them so long. Inessa hasn't said a word since we started running.

A crack fills the air, and I know it's begun. Our snipers have taken out the first person. We reach Gio's car, and I open the door for Inessa to climb in. She does so without complaint or hesitation. Another shot is fired and is followed by another.

"It's time to go," I snap as I slide into the car beside Inessa. "Gio, put your foot down. Let's get the fuck out of here."

Gunfire breaks out, letting me know more men from the wedding have come out and are attacking my men. Everything in me wants Gio to turn this car around and go help them, but I have something that needs to be done. I have a plan in place, and I have every faith in my men. They'll get the job done.

"What's going on?" Inessa asks once we're away from the church.

"You didn't want to marry him, correct?" I ask, my voice hard.

She nods. "I didn't."

"Then be glad you're away from there. Sit tight, *sposa*, we're going to make sure he can't get to you." I catch Gio's eyes in the rearview mirror and see the wariness in them. He's worried about the fallout of this. But it's done, and whatever happens, happens. We'll be ready for it.

"The boss is going to be pissed," Gio comments a little while later.

He's right, Rocco's going to be angry that I never told him what I had planned, but I know that if I had included him on what I was going to do, he'd have tried to talk me out of it, and that's not something I would ever let happen. Right now, he's on vacation with his wife, Dario, Elio and Elio's wife, Teagan. They'll be home in a few days, and I'm left in charge.

I turn to look at the woman who's been driving me fucking wild and see that she's watching the city pass by her as she gazes out of the window. She's not made a sound since asking what's going on.

Gio pulls up outside another church on the opposite side of the city from where her wedding was taking place, and I get

out of the car and move around the vehicle to the passenger's side. I open it and hold out my hand for Inessa to take.

“What's going on?”

“We're getting married,” I tell her, and watch as she pulls in a ragged breath. “This way, that cunt Sergei can't get to you. Are you ready?” I ask.

Those beautiful dusky blue eyes of hers are wide but so fearful. She takes my hand, and we step out of the car. “Why are you doing this?” she asks softly, her words filled with confusion and fear. “I don't understand.”

“You told me before that you didn't want to marry him. What did you expect me to do, Inessa?” I ask with a raised brow. “Leave you to him?”

Her tongue swipes across her bottom lip. “I don't want him. I never did. Sergei Turgenev takes whatever he wants, regardless of what you want. But Nico, why are you doing this? You've started a war.”

We walk into the church, Gio right behind us. He's listening to everything we're saying. “The war is inevitable, Inessa. It was always going to happen. Do you not want to get married?”

She sighs. “I don't want you to get hurt,” she confesses, her eyes glancing around the church. It's a small, intimate one. It's on the rougher side of the city and it's in much need of repair. With the money I'm paying the priest, he'll be able to fix it up.

“Don't tell me you care about me,” I say with a smirk.

She shakes her head. “I do. I've fallen for you, Nico, and I don't want anyone to be caught in the crossfire.”

I knew it. I fucking knew she had. That's what's going to make this plan even sweeter. She's never going to see it coming.

"Then let him do this for you," Gio says gruffly. "He wants to protect you. Let him do it."

Her laughter is forced and cold. "I don't know how to let anyone do that. No one has ever done it before."

I share a look with Gio. His brow raises in question. Is she telling the truth? I have no fucking idea. We know what Aleksei did to her. We know that she's been hurt before. But I can't help but feel as though she's keeping shit from us, something important, which makes us believe she's lying and playing us.

"Just follow his lead," Gio says, this time a little softer. "He's going to take care of you."

"Okay," Inessa says as she squares her shoulders and stands up taller. She looks so fucking gorgeous. I've never seen her look as beautiful as she does now. Hell, no one can even compare to her beauty. Her hair is soft and loose and runs down her back, her make up is subtle yet classy, and her dress is white and fitted to her body, perfectly fit around her breasts and cinched at her waist. She's so fucking sexy and she has no idea just how fucking much I want her.

The priest smiles at us as we approach the altar. He doesn't hesitate in starting the ceremony. As much as I try to keep my mind off Inessa and focus on what I need to, it's impossible. I can't take my eyes off her. She's a fucking temptress, and the more time I'm around her, the more I want her.

The ceremony continues, and Gio's cell is non-stop buzzing. No doubt the men calling with an update of what

happened once we left the other church.

The priest doesn't take too long to go through the sermon. He has us repeat the vows after him, and within twenty minutes, we're saying our I do's. My cock is pressed against my zipper as Inessa looks at me with that sweet as fuck soft look on her face. She's still got that scared look in her eyes, but it's not as present as it had been when we arrived here. Maybe she's relaxing, letting herself get adjusted to what's going to happen.

She shouldn't though. I'm not the man she thinks I am, and she's only going to get hurt if she continues to fall for me.

"You may now kiss the bride," the priest tells me.

"About fucking time," Gio mutters,

I pull Inessa into my body, until she's flush against my thickening cock. It's a shame I have to wait until we're home to take her. But fuck, I need to get her home and find out what the fuck happened to our men. The kiss I give her is chaste, so fucking chaste that she blinks twice before I see the disappointment flash in her eyes. She takes a step backward and plasters a smile on her face.

"Gio," I say as I reach out my hand. He places his cell in my palm. "Sort out the priest," I say as I take Inessa's hand and practically drag her out of the church, while searching for Nathaniel's number and hitting call on it.

"Boss," he says as he answers.

"Tell me what happened." I demand.

"It went exactly as you said. They sent one man out first. He was taken care of quickly, then they sent another two. Both were taken down as soon as they stepped out of the church. They seemed to realize pretty quickly that something was

wrong, so they started to come out of the church with their guns raised. It turned into a shootout within minutes of you leaving.”

“Did we lose any men?” I ask, fucking hoping that we didn’t.

“No, though we came close a few times. Nero and Jacob were the worst; the bullets managed to miss anything major but did enough damage to make them bleed like pigs. They’re fine. They’re patched up and will be back to work in a week or so.”

I smile as I open the car door for Inessa to get in. “Tell me that cunt Sergei got killed.”

Silence descends between us. Inessa looks up at me with big, hopeful eyes.

“No, boss,” Nathaniel answers. “He didn’t come out the front of the church. When the Russians left, we went into the church to find him, and we discovered he was gone. He and his closest men left out the back. We had all our resources at the front.”

“Fuck,” I snarl. I shake my head and watch as my new bride’s expression falls. The hope she had dies instantly. I jog around the vehicle and slide in beside her. “How many of their men did you kill?”

“At least twenty, maybe more. We lost count after a while, and we were focused on making sure our men stayed alive.”

“You did good, Nathaniel,” I praise him. The man will be a good Captain when Rocco promotes him. He’s got the loyalty of the men and he’s someone we trust. I know Rocco has been looking into promoting him and it’s only a matter of time before it happens.

“Thank you, boss.” He pauses for a second. “I just want you to know, Simione called Rocco. The boss knows you took the Russian girl.”

Fuck. I fucking knew some bastard would tell him. I didn’t expect it from Simione. “I’ll be expecting his call,” I say dryly. “Thanks, Nathaniel.” I end the call and turn to Inessa.

“He’s not dead,” she says matter-of-factly.

“He’s not. The fucker escaped out the back while his men were fighting out front.”

She rests her head against the headrest. “That sounds about right. Sergei doesn’t get his hands dirty unless he has to. He’ll have his men slaughtered instead of fighting alongside them.” She glances out of the window and watches Gio exit the church. “What happens now?”

Oh, that’s a fucking loaded question if there ever was one.

I give her my cocky as fuck grin. “Now, we go home, and I take my wife.”

INESSA

My stomach is flipping as the car nears Niccolò's house. My nerves are completely shot. I spent all last night not being able to sleep as I worried about what this day would bring. I was terrified that Sergei would move me out of my home, the one where I was safe—as safe as someone like me could be. I knew that today would bring change, but never did I expect it to be that I would end up marrying Niccolò Caruso.

“You're tense,” he says, his voice harder than it's been before. Hell, since he pulled me from the car outside of the church where I was to marry Sergei, he's been different. More abrupt, angrier than usual, and I don't like it. I'm wondering if it's due to the situation. He's just started a war. Stealing the bride of the Pakhan is unforgivable. He'll have the entire Chicago Bratva after him. He has no idea how ruthless those bastards are.

“I am,” I reply. “I'm just worried about what's going to happen next.”

I'm so happy that Alya is with Czarina and they're nowhere near the Bratva. If she was, I dread to think what would happen to her. I'm not sure what's going to happen next, but right now, I need my daughter safe, and the safest place for her is with Czarina.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” he says dismissively. “You’re my wife now, Inessa. That means you’re under our protection.”

He has no idea why I’m worried. It’s not for myself. It’s never for myself. I hate to think of anyone I care about being caught up in this war, him included. But I know that no matter what happens, my daughter is safe with Czarina.

We arrive at his house, and he takes a hold of my hand as he helps me out of the car. I pull in a sharp breath when I take it in. It’s huge, and so different to what I had expected. It’s stunning, and well taken care of. Then again, everything about Niccolò is pristine. From his clothes to his stubble, it’s kept clean and neat. I shouldn’t have expected anything less for his house.

He continues to hold my hand as he leads me into the house. The moment I step inside, a cold seeps into my body. I shiver as I try to ward it off, but it’s no use. There’s something off about this house and I’m not sure what it is.

“I’ll show you around quickly,” he says impatiently. “Gio, check in with Nathaniel and see if he needs help with anything.”

“Yes, boss,” he replies instantly as he turns on his heel and walks out of the house, closing the front door behind him as he does.

Niccolò leads me around the house, and it finally clicks as to what’s wrong with the place. It’s the lack of warmth. It doesn’t feel like a home. It doesn’t even seem as though anyone lives in it.

“Where’s Chiara?” I ask as he shows me the bedrooms, all of which are clean and bare of items.

His eyes flash with a hate that's cold and icy as he reaches for me. The look in his eyes makes me step backward. "She's dead," he snarls, bringing me forward. His hand snaps around my neck and he pulls me toward him.

"What?" I whisper, horrified. "She's dead?"

It feels like someone has stabbed me in the heart. It feels like it is shattering into a million pieces. My stomach clenches painfully, and I can't breathe under the weight of what he is saying. I'm gasping, trying to pull air into my lungs, but there isn't any. There are only tears now, and they tumble down my cheeks and burn like acid as they trail along my skin.

"How?" I ask, reaching for something to hold on to so that I won't completely fall apart in front of this man who hates me. He's changed, there's so much anger and hatred in his eyes that it feels as though I'm suffocating with it all. I can barely breathe, what did I do to this man to despise me so much?

"Almost two years ago," he growls, his fingers tightening around my throat.

My knees buckle from the pain that radiates from the center of my soul as another sob wracks through me at the thought of being torn away from her forever. I never got to say goodbye. She'll never get to meet my little girl. She'll never know how much I loved her and how grateful I was to have her in my life.

My sobs wrack through my body as I cry harder than I ever have before. God, why did he never tell me? Why did he make me believe she was still alive? Who does that? God, why would he do that?

“Hurts?” he growls as he bends down so that his face is inches from mine.

I nod. “So much,” I whimper. “Why did you lie?”

His eyes are burning with anger. They’re so dark that I shrink back in fear. I never thought Niccolò would be this brutal, but lying to me about my best friend is the worst thing anyone’s ever done. I can’t breathe properly as the sobs continue to wrack through me.

“You’re a good actress,” he snarls. “You’ve always been good at playing people. You played Chiara. You made her trust you, and for what? Just to make her die.”

“I didn’t,” I cry. “I loved her. She was my best friend.”

“She was my daughter,” he snarls. “My fucking daughter, and I found her dead. All because of you and that fucking family of yours.” He throws me to the ground. “Get cleaned up. I’ll be back once I’ve finished my call. Make sure you’re ready.”

Bile rises within me. God, he’s just as bad as Sergei. He’s going to take me whether I want it or not. I scramble to my feet as he starts to walk away. How was I so naive? Why did I believe he was different? He’s an asshole. He says I played him? He’s wrong. The only person who was played was me. He got to me. He wormed his way in and made me fall for him, only to get me to do what he wanted so that he could hurt me.

I stumble into the bathroom and reach for the toilet just in time to sink to my knees before puking. I heave until there is nothing left but bile, which burns my throat as it comes up. Tears run down my face and splash onto my wedding dress. Before I have time to regroup, throw water on my face or

clean up the mess, more pain grips me and I vomit once again. This time it's bile. When it's finally over, I am a crying mess on the floor.

I can't wrap my head around this. The last time I saw Chiara, she was doing better. She was clean, and she was on the mend.

But now she's gone, and I didn't even get to say goodbye. I crawl over to the sink, turning on the faucet and splashing water onto my face. I look up and into my own eyes in the mirror.

I hate what I see. A broken, pathetic woman who has lost everything. I hate that I let Niccolò get to me, that I let him in and believed his lies. I hate that I wasn't there for Chiara when she needed me most. I hate myself for being so weak.

A blade flashes in the corner of my eyes, and I turn to see shiny steel. It's not what I usually use, but right now, for this pain I'm in, it's the only thing I have. My heart beats wildly as I reach for it, its shine catching my eye as tears stream down my face. I've never been in so much pain, never felt so much sorrow. I pull my wedding dress up to my hips and take a deep breath before I slice along my skin. The blade cuts a little deeper than I usually do, but not so deep that it'll do any real damage. I sigh with relief as the blood starts to flow.

Out of everything I've been through in my life, today has to be the most horrific. To have Niccolò use me in the way he has for the past three months, only to shatter everything within the blink of an eye...

I push the blade against my skin once again and let the blood flow. The relief obliterates the pain for just a moment. The freedom I feel is something brief, but it's all that I can do

to stop myself from breaking under the agony of finding out that Niccolò played me and my best friend is dead.

I sob as I continue to cut. Today, the relief from the wounds isn't enough. I'm too crushed by the revelations to revel in the reprieve that harming myself usually brings.

I'm in a trance, unable to come out, wanting the pain to ebb away with the crimson liquid that's flowing from my thigh. It's the best place to hide the scars. It's the only way that I don't have people ask me questions. The only ones to see the scars are men who don't give a fuck about me and only want one thing. It's been so easy to hide it from everyone, and I'll continue to do so. It's my only way of having freedom; my only chance of relieving the pain, and yet it's not working.

"The fuck?" I hear the deep growl but I'm so far in my trance, trying to get the pain away, that I can't stop. "Inessa." The softness of that voice hits me hard, and my body buckles as my sobs hit me full force again. "Shit, shit. Fuck. Niccolò," he bellows.

"No," I cry as his hands touch me. "Don't," I snarl, trying to shake him loose. I haven't gotten rid of the pain. I need it to go. I can't handle it. It's too much.

"Give me the razor, Inessa, please."

I open my eyes and blink furiously, my tears still streaming down my face, but I manage to make out Giacomo's ashen face. "No, please," I plead with him. "Just go. Leave me be."

I hear footsteps, and I know Niccolò's on his way. Thankfully, Giacomo steps away from me. I take a steadying breath as everything hits me. I glance down and see that my once beautiful wedding dress is now soaked with blood. I cut

deeper than I should have, and I'm bleeding harder than I'm used to.

"Christ," I hear the low growl of Niccolò. "Nessa," he says softly, his hands reaching for my face. It's so gentle, so soft. Unlike how he was not even thirty minutes ago. "*Sposa*, please, put the blade down."

I shake my head. "I can't," I whisper. They don't understand. I need to continue cutting. I need to get this pain out of me. It's too much.

"Please," he says softly, reminding me of the man I spent the past three months getting to know. But it was all a lie. All of it. Every fucking thing he said to me was a lie.

"You got what you wanted," I hiss at him. "I'm here. Don't you dare tell me how to deal with it. Go. Get out and leave me alone."

I need peace. I need time alone. I need to be able to breathe and do what I need to. If I don't, this pain that's taken over me is going to get worse, and I can't deal with it. My entire life I've suppressed the feelings that have caused me pain. I've managed to keep them buried until I could let them out. But this, what I'm feeling right now? It's too much. It'll break me.

"That's not going to happen," he says, reaching for the blade. "Please, *sposa*, give me the blade."

"It's not gone," I whimper. "It's not gone. I can't. I have to get rid of it."

"Rid of what?" he asks, his words soft and careful, almost as if he's talking to a caged animal. "What do you need to get rid of, Inessa?"

"The pain," I whimper. "It won't go. No matter how many cuts, it just won't go."

“What’s hurting you?”

I raise my head and look into his dark eyes, the ones that I’ve fallen so in love with. “You,” I reply honestly. “I can’t do this. I can’t. Please, just go and let me have the blade.”

He swallows hard. “Is this because of Chiara?” he asks, and I hear the pain laced in his words.

“She was my best friend,” I whimper. “She was like a sister to me. I loved her more than anything. She was all that I had.”

“Fuck,” he snarls. “Inessa, please, we’ll get the pain to go away, but you have to give me the blade.”

I shake my head. No. I can’t. He doesn’t understand. He never will.

“Nic, the doc’s here. He’s got a sedative. He thinks it’s the only way to make her stop.”

I pull away from him and curl up into the corner. “No, please,” I plead, my body bucking as the sobs wrack through it once again. It’s painful. Every time my breath hitches, my chest hurts. My throat is raw from the vomit and cries. It’s just all too much for me.

I see the doctor make his way into the bathroom, his warm green eyes focused solely on me. He doesn’t stop until he’s crouched down in front of me. “This will help take the pain away,” he says, his voice gentle and caring. “Try it. If it doesn’t work, we’ll find something else.”

“I’m tired,” I tell him. I’m exhausted.

He nods. “I know, but this is going to help. Just let us try.”

Niccolò reaches for me and pulls me into his arms. He keeps his thick arm banded around me as the doctor reaches

for my bicep and pushes the needle into my skin. The liquid that goes into me burns, and it feels as though it's spreading throughout my arm and body. I'm floating, my head is light, and my eyes are droopy.

“Sleep, *cara mia*. It'll be okay,” Niccolò whispers against my ear.

The floaty feeling I have soon turns to numbness, and within seconds, the darkness takes me.

NICCOLÒ

Seeing the blood soaking her white dress has my stomach churning. What the fuck is going on?

She's like a scared kid. The pleading and sorrow in her eyes is killing me. I never expected this. Inessa has always shown me that she's strong and resilient. She's never spoken about what Aleksei did to her. She carried on with her life and has acted as though it never affected her. But seeing her now, so broken, makes me realize that she's buried it deep.

"I'll carry her to the bed," I tell the doctor. I don't give a fuck if I'm getting blood over me. She's so fucking light in my arms. She shouldn't be this skinny. Does she not eat? Is she not taking care of herself? Is this the only time she's done this or is this a frequent thing? I've got so many questions and I know that I won't get answers.

I lay her on the bed and cut the bottom half of her wedding dress from her body so that the doctor can get to work.

"What the fuck happened?" Gio asks me as I step back to the doorway, letting the doc tend to her.

"I don't know," I say through clenched teeth. I have no fucking idea what the hell happened.

"Nic, talk to me. What the fuck was said?"

I close my eyes and take a deep breath before I snap at my best friend. “I told her that Chiara’s dead.”

I hear his sharp intake of breath. “Fuck,” he whispers. “Do we have it wrong?”

That’s something we’re going to have to find out. Everything I have known up to this point has led me to believe she’s been playing me, but this right here, this isn’t playing around. This isn’t her deceiving me. This is pain, and so fucking much of it. Inessa’s hiding something and I’m going to find out what the fuck it is.

We wait quietly as the doctor continues to patch her up. The cuts on her thighs weren’t severe but they were deep and will take a while to heal.

“How long have you known your wife, Mr. Caruso?” the doctor asks as he comes to stand beside Gio and I.

“She was Chiara’s friend,” I respond, wondering where the fuck he’s going with this.

He nods. “Your wife is dealing with trauma, Mr. Caruso. I do not know the full extent of what she’s been through, but I can tell you that this isn’t the first time she’s self-harmed. The scars she has on her thighs are old, maybe years old.”

Christ. How the hell did I not know that?

“She’s also got scars on her body that aren’t from self-harming but from something else. If I were to hazard a guess, I would say that Mrs. Caruso has been abused from a young age. I can’t tell you the full extent of what she’s been through without an examination.”

“Do it,” I snarl, needing to know what the fuck she’s been through. “Do the exam and find out everything.”

He blinks. “But—”

I shake my head. “No buts, doc. Find out what the fuck you can. You saw her. She’s not in any position to talk.” I also know that the ground I had made up with her was shattered when I told her about Chiara’s death.

He sighs heavily. “She needs to come to the hospital. I can’t do it here. The machinery I need is there.”

I turn to Gio and nod. Right now, I have someone who I have to call back. “She does not leave your sight,” I warn him.

“On it, boss,” Gio replies with a solemn vow, and I know that he won’t let anything happen to her.

I need Gio to take her, right now. I’m close to the edge. The darkness is swirling under my skin, ready to explode. Inessa is making me lose my fucking mind. One minute, I’m beyond angry, ready to fucking kill her. The next, I want to protect her, want to ensure that she’s safe and out of harm’s way. It’s driving me crazy. I need to put distance between us and regroup. The only person that I trust to take care of her is Gio.

With Gio’s help, we’re able to change Inessa from her wedding dress and into something else. I had a woman from La Mode—the boutique store that caters to the rich and famous—fill Inessa’s wardrobe with new clothes. I gave her Inessa’s description, and she chose a wardrobe full of clothes for her. Once we’re done, I carry my wife out to the car and place her on the back seat. Gio gives her a tender look before he climbs into the front seat and starts the engine. The doc’s in his car right behind them. Within minutes, they’re both gone.

I reach for my cell and hit dial on the number I hung up on not that long ago.

“What’s happened?” Rocco asks. He’s currently on his way home from his vacation. He’s beyond pissed, but I’m gathering that he’s saving his speech for when he’s here and face to face.

“Inessa had an accident,” I say, not wanting to tell him the truth about what went down. Not yet anyway. I need answers.

“Is she okay?” he queries.

“She’s on her way to the hospital. Gio’s with her.”

“What went down today, Niccolò?”

I take a seat on the couch and recount everything that happened. I also tell him what the doctor said about Inessa; how she’s been abused before coming to my home. I manage to do so without explaining about her self harm. That’s something that I don’t want her to have to worry about when she wakes up.

“Tell me, Niccolò, is this woman to blame for your daughter’s death?”

I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose. “I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

“Then you keep her safe until we do. Your actions aren’t going to go unpunished. The Bratva aren’t going to take this lying down. You’ve put the entire Famiglia at risk.”

“I know, but Chiara was family. Andrea was family. Raul was family. They deserve justice. And this war has been brimming for years, Roc. It was only a matter of time before it happened. What went down today, it killed over twenty of their men. We’ve taken out a good chunk of the Bratva’s higher ups.”

“I know,” he says, and I hear the anger wearing off. “It was a well-executed plan, Nic. I know you wouldn’t have gone into something unless it was meticulously planned. However, it was not given the go ahead by me.”

“You were on vacation. This was a very last-minute thing,” I say, knowing if he found out the truth, he’d be livid. The man hates to be left out of things and he’s probably more angry about the fact he wasn’t here and part of the shootout.

“Fuck, you have an answer for everything,” he comments.

If it were any other day, I’d smile, but I can’t. I know that once I have this call over with, I have a bathroom that needs to be cleaned. The tiles are stained with my wife’s blood, and I need them cleaned.

I hear chatter over the line and know that he’s not alone. No doubt Dario’s on his way back with him and his wife. Maybe even Elio and his wife too. “We’re on our way home. There will be a meeting first thing tomorrow morning. I expect you to be present. Gio can stay and watch your bride.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll talk to you then. Anything else happens, call me.”

“Yes, boss, see you then.” I end the call and throw my cell onto the coffee table. My anger is rolling through my body, and I only have myself to be pissed at. She was supposed to fall for me, something that I’ve worked hard at getting her to do, but instead, she’s hurting herself. Fuck.

I roll up my sleeves and get to work. Inessa’s blood is bright red against the white tiles of the bathroom floor. There’s so much blood and yet she didn’t want to stop. She couldn’t bring herself to stop. Christ. It was one of the most harrowing scenes I’ve ever witnessed.

I just hope that this is the last time this will happen. Whatever she needs to get through this, I'll ensure she gets. But if I find out that my first instincts about her were true and she was behind everything or had a hand in it, there's nowhere on this fucking earth that she can hide from me.



“Nic,” Gio says as he enters my office. It’s been three hours since he left with Inessa and the doctor, and I haven’t heard a fucking word since then. Relief washes through me now that they’re back.

In the time that they’ve been gone, I managed to clean the bathroom floor. There’s no trace of anything that happened there today. I washed it all away. Had I not been able to, I was going to have a new floor put down.

“What did the doc say?” I ask, wondering why he’s staring at me with a vacant expression.

“The doc’s waiting to speak with you.”

I move out of my office and into the living room, where the doctor is sitting with a file in his hands. “Give it to me, doc,” I demand as I stand against the door.

“Mrs. Caruso has been abused. She’s had multiple broken bones, some of which were never set properly. From what we counted, she’s had her right wrist broken four times and her left wrist twice. She’s had six broken ribs, a broken leg, all of her toes broken, and her nose has been broken at least twice.”

Christ. She’s fucking eighteen. “How long has it been going on?”

“Some of the breaks are at least a decade old, if not older.”

Fuck.

“Mr. Caruso, did you know that your wife has given birth?”

I blink, completely surprised by his words. “What?”

He nods. “Your wife has been through childbirth. I didn’t want to do an internal examination on her. The woman has been through enough. But from what we have found out, she’s given birth once, roughly about a year ago, maybe less.”

I shake my head. “No, I didn’t know. Christ. What else is she hiding?”

He gets to his feet and leaves the file on the coffee table. “I’ll leave this for you. I must admit, it’s not easy reading, especially given her age and who she is to you.” He takes a step toward the door. “Mr. Caruso, I hope that you find whoever did this to that woman and make them hurt for doing so.”

I nod. “Don’t worry, doc. They’re going to pay.”

Gio hasn’t said a word, and the second he hears the front door close, he explodes. “The fuck, Nic? Who the hell does that to a child? She would have been eight when they hurt her. Fucking eight. I always knew they were animals, but this?” He shakes his head. “What are we going to do?”

I glance down at the file on the table. “I need to speak to my wife, and then we’re going after that fucking bastard, Sergei.”

Once Inessa’s awake, there’s going to be a lot of questions that need to be answered. A fucking lot of them. But first, I need to find someone else. Someone who has a lot of explaining to do.

Kirill.

NICCOLÒ

“Are you sure about bringing him here?” Gio questions. He’s beyond pissed. I don’t think I’ve seen him so angry before. Then again, seeing someone so broken does that to you.

“I need answers and Inessa is fast asleep and recovering. Kirill has been her personal guard for years, so he’s going to answer everything I have to ask.”

He nods. “Do you think he knows about the abuse and the baby?”

“Yes,” I say through clenched teeth. “I have a feeling Kirill knows absolutely everything, and he’s just chosen not to tell me.”

“Why? What the fuck does he gain from not speaking up?”

“Us to do his dirty work. The fucker knows that he’d never be able to take out Sergei, just like he couldn’t take out Aleksei, so he’s not told us about everything so that we take that cunt out and he’s free to do whatever the fuck he has planned.” I should have fucking known. I should have realized the fucker had an ulterior motive when letting me know the ins and outs of what’s been going on inside the Bratva. It all makes fucking sense now.

“I’m staying,” Gio tells me, and I raise a brow. Christ, he’s pushing it today, but I get it. He wants the answers too.

Hearing him yell my name, the anguish in his voice had me ending the call with Rocco and running toward the bathroom. Never. Not in a million fucking years did I expect to see what I did. It’s an image that I’ll never be able to get rid of, and the same goes for Gio. Just as Chiara lying in that bed dead is in my dreams, seeing Inessa soaked in blood, crying to let me let her finish is going to haunt me for the rest of my life.

There’s a knock at the door and Gio tenses. “Bring him into my office,” I instruct, not wanting to be overheard if Inessa were to wake up.

He gives me a grim grin. “Will do.”

I move toward my office, and every step I take has anger coursing through my veins. Christ, I need an outlet. I need some way of getting it out. I shake my head. That’s what Inessa meant. What she wanted. She needed an outlet and harming herself was the only way to do so. Fuck.

“Niccolò,” Kirill says as he inclines his head. “I got here as fast as I could. Do you know what you’ve done?”

I raise a brow at his ignorance. He forgets who the fuck he’s talking to.

“Fuck,” he sighs as he scrubs his hand down his face. “Sorry. Is she okay?”

“No,” I answer simply. “Far fucking from it. Why did you never tell me the shit she’s been through?”

He stands tall and doesn’t answer me. He’s got a lot of balls to stand there and look me in the eyes without making a sound.

“Did you know that he’s been raping her?”

“Yes,” he says.

“How long?” Gio barks, making Kirill jump.

“Answer him. How long has it been going on?”

He glances away. “I’m not sure. When she was fifteen or sixteen. It was made clear that Sergei was going to take her whenever he wanted. That he was to wed her. I don’t know when the rape started. I just knew that a sixteen-year-old girl shouldn’t be having sex with a fucking man.”

The anger in his voice makes me tense. There’s an air of possessiveness to it. “Did you?”

He steps back, horrified, his eyes wide and his lips curled in disgust. “I’ve never hurt her. I never will. She’s like my daughter, Niccolò. I care about her. I’ve tried my hardest to protect her.”

“Why did you never help her?” I ask, wanting to know how he stood back and allowed this shit to happen.

“Do you know what will happen to anyone who gets between Sergei and what he owns? He’ll kill you. If I’m dead, who’s going to protect her? Who’s going to help her?”

“What about her child?” I ask, and his eyes widen in shock. “What?”

“She told you about Alya?”

“No, the doctor did,” I say, and watch the confusion form on his face. I open the file that’s in front of me and start to list off all the injuries Inessa has suffered in her lifetime. “She gave birth. Where is the child now?”

“My wife has her,” he tells us, and he’s got fucking tears in his eyes. “Inessa loves her daughter. She’ll do whatever it takes to protect Alya, including sending her away while she was to marry that fucking animal. She was scared that when she returned, something would happen, and she wouldn’t be able to protect her daughter. So my wife has taken her somewhere safe.”

“You and your wife are close to my wife, aren’t you, Kirill?” I say, not liking that one bit. Not at fucking all.

“Yes, we are. She’s the daughter we never had.”

“What about Alya? Your wife is caring for her now. What happens when Inessa wants her child back? Will you give it to her? Or will you and your wife finally have what you’ve always wanted—a child?”

He rocks back on his heels. “Never. I would never take Alya from her mom. Inessa is an amazing mother, and her daughter loves her more than anything. Czarina and I are only helping her while she needs it. Inessa’s going to be free of that fucker, and when she is, she’ll be able to live without fear with her daughter.”

“She’s my wife, Kirill. Mine. She’s without fear here. I want your wife to return her child. I want Alya to be with her mother now.”

“You must understand, Niccolò, that until I hear that from Inessa herself, I won’t be making that call.”

“Are you trying to say that I’ll harm the baby?” I say through clenched teeth. Never. Not fucking ever would I harm an innocent child. For him to imply that pisses me the fuck off.

“I don’t know what you’ll do. You’re so hell bent on revenge that you forced her to marry you without a second

thought.”

I rise to my feet. “You’ve known for years what I have wanted, Kirill. Do not stand there and act as though you are innocent in this. You have your own agenda. You want that bastard dead just as much as the rest of us.”

“But not at the expense of Inessa. She doesn’t deserve any more pain.”

“You’re right. She doesn’t. She’s safe here. I won’t harm a hair on her head.” That’s my vow. I won’t hurt her. But until I know that she’s innocent, she won’t feel anything that resembles warmth.

“I warned you, Niccolò. I told you that I had learned a lot about Inessa, and if you knew them too, you would come to realize that she is not the enemy.”

I grit my teeth. “Don’t act as though you care. Had you, you’d have tried to protect her and her daughter.”

“She’s going to be worried about Alya,” he says, changing the subject. I won’t forget that he’s allowed my wife to be abused for years.

I see the shadow in the doorway, and I know that Inessa’s awake. “She’ll call your wife and ensure that her daughter is safe and cared for. If your wife doesn’t answer, you’ll deal with me.”

“I want my daughter with me,” Inessa snaps. “I want her with me.”

Kirill spins on his feet and faces her. “Inessa,” he says softly, his words filled with care.

“Don’t. I heard everything. You knew what Niccolò wanted to do, and you gave him the access to do it,” she

hisses. Her face is paler than usual, she's unsteady on her feet. She needs to be back in bed and resting.

“*Devochka*, please.”

She raises her hand and stops him. “When can Alya be here?” she questions.

“By the weekend,” he answers. He turns to me, his eyes pleading. “Can I talk to her alone?”

I glance at Gio and nod. “You have five minutes. The door stays open, and if you upset her, you’ll be leaving this house in a body bag.”

He nods. “Thank you,” he says, his voice filled with emotion. “I won’t be long.”

Gio and I leave the room and let the two of them talk. “Do you believe him?” he asks.

“I do. It’s fucking shit, but yeah, I do. He’s scared for his wife’s life so he’s been doing whatever he can to ensure her safety, hence why she’s not in the city while this shit goes down.”

“He still let the girl get hurt because he’s a coward.”

“Yeah, and he’s going to have to live with that for the rest of his life. It’s probably why he’s determined to protect Alya. It’s his way of making it up to Inessa.”

“Still fucked up, Nic. Never—we would never allow a child to be fucking hurt.”

He’s right. It’s beyond fucked up that Kirill has stood back and let her be abused for so long. “Gio, find out everything you can about Kirill’s wife. I want to know where she is, and I want eyes on her at all times.”

I don't trust that she won't run with the baby, that she won't flee the moment word gets back to her that Inessa wants her daughter back.

Gio nods. "On it," he says as he pulls out his cell and moves away from my office door. I know he'll do everything he can to get that information, and he'll put the men he trusts most on this.

Kirill steps out of the office. "Niccolò," he says. The man's fucking heartbroken. You can see the devastation in his eyes and in the way his shoulders are slumped. "I'll leave you and Inessa to talk. I'll be waiting for your call."

I nod, still beyond pissed that he sat back and allowed her to be used and abused. Once he's out of the house, I re-enter my office and see Inessa sitting at the desk, reading over the file that the doctor gave me outlining every injury she's had.

"You've been busy," she says, her voice low and filled with anger.

This I can handle. Rage is something I'm used to. I can deal with it. That pain and heartache... I can't.

"I have. I needed to know what happened to you."

She releases a cold laugh. "Why? You knew something had, and you knew it wasn't pretty. You did fucking know. So why do you care now when you never did before?"

I step forward, planting my hands on the desk and getting into her face. "I don't give a fuck what you're going through, Inessa, you don't disrespect me in my own home."

She pushes to her feet, her beautiful face flushed with anger, her dusky eyes wild. I fucking love that untameable look in them. "You are not my boss, Niccolò. You don't own me. I'm not going to be your fucking toy to play with. You

don't want me to talk back to you, then you should have married a doll."

"You have grit. I like that. Where has it been hiding?" I ask, wondering why she was never like this before. She was so compliant, so sweet, so soft. Now, it's as though she's broken free from the chains that had her tethered.

"As much of an asshole as you are, Niccolò, you're not going to torture me the way Sergei and Aleksei did. I know that if I do something that you deem disrespectful or as a slight, you will kill me. You'll give me that mercy. Not rape and beat me."

My lips twitch at the indignation in her eyes. "What you're saying is that you're free."

She scoffs, her nose scrunching and her eyes rolling. "Free? Let me see. I'm married to a man I believed truly cared for me, only to find out he's an asshole who wants revenge for something I didn't do. Something he's got twisted in his head. No, I'm not fucking free, Nico. That's something I'll never be."

Anger whips through me. "Something I have twisted?" I snarl. "My fucking daughter died, Inessa. She's fucking dead, and it's because of you and that fucking Bratva."

She rears back in horror, her eyes wide, and her face pales instantly. "Me?"

"You. You introduced her to that bastard, Abs. You were friends with that maniac Artyom. And you were so deep within the Bratva, you've bled for them."

I'm so fucking angry that I'm not watching my words. I can't.

Pain slashes through her face and she doesn't hide it. "What happened to Chiara?" she asks, her voice vibrating with emotion.

"She took an overdose."

She closes her eyes and swallows hard. "Let me get this straight," she says. Her words are low, but fuck, I can hear the anger and pain in them. "You kill the man she loves, and she witnesses it. She can't sleep for days because every time she closes her eyes, all she can see is her boyfriend dead with a bullet in his head, and you're blaming me?"

I rock back on my heels. Chiara told her what happened. "You brought those cunts to our door."

She shakes her head. "Wrong. I didn't introduce Abs or Art to Chiara. We all went to the same school. She knew who they were. Your daughter was a social butterfly. She knew who everyone was. I didn't do shit." She walks over to me, her face filled with rage. "You're the reason your daughter is dead. You want to know why she started doing drugs?"

I raise a brow, my jaw clenched tight. Fuck. "Enlighten me."

"Because of you. Because she couldn't get over you killing her boyfriend. She hated you, Niccolò, for doing it. She was devastated. She took those drugs to help her sleep without nightmares. She needed them to survive."

"Fuck you," I hiss. "You know nothing."

Her laughter chills me to the bone. "I know everything. Your daughter needed help, but you and that fucking ex-wife of yours were so caught up in your own lives that she was alone. I was all she had."

“Why didn’t you help her?” I shout at her. It’s taking everything in me not to reach for her and hurt her. Fuck.

“I tried. I fucking tried. I urged her to get clean, to seek help. She was clean. So fucking clean. She was doing better. I was fucking proud of her. I was so fucking proud of how strong she was to overcome that and get back on the straight and narrow.” Her nostrils flare as she glares at me. “How did she get those drugs?” she cries, tears streaming down her face. “You were meant to protect her, so how the fuck did she die?”

“I did protect her. I got her clean.” It took me a fucking long time, but I managed it. I sat with her every night. I held my daughter through the withdrawal. I listened to her cries as she begged me to get her drugs.

“So how the fuck is she dead?” she screams at me.

“She got drugs. She fucking managed to get them from that cunt, Artyom.”

She rocks back once again, her eyes wide. “You,” she breathes. “You killed Artyom and Aleksei.”

I grin. “Yes. It was me. Aleksei deserved what he got. He raped my daughter and paid her with drugs.”

Inessa’s eyes close and she shakes her head. “I’m so sorry,” she sobs. “I didn’t know.” Her body buckles as sobs rip through her. “I would have stopped it.”

“You couldn’t have,” I snarl, beyond pissed right now. “You have no idea how deep Chiara was in with the Bratva. Not as deep as you, though.”

She lifts her head, and I see betrayal and pain slash through her eyes. “What?”

“You’ve never ran away. You’ve never once gotten away from them. You’ve stayed with them.”

She pushes past me and rushes toward the door. She stops and turns to face me, her chest heaving, her face red and blotchy as her tears continue to fall. “The day I warned you about the hit on you was the day I ran away. I had gotten far enough that if I hadn’t run into you, I would have been free. Instead, I took the time to explain about the hit. Had I not, I could have been free.”

She looks me up and down, looking at me as though I’m nothing but shit beneath her shoes. “You’re not the man I believed you to be. You’re not a fucking man at all. You’re just as bad as the others. At least Aleksei and Sergei let me know they hated me from the get-go.”

Ice runs through my veins. The fuck? “I’m nothing like those bastards. I do not rape women.”

“You might not, but you sure as do fucking hurt us though. Not physically, but emotionally and mentally. God, Niccolò, you have no idea just how fucking evil you truly are.” With that parting shot, she storms out of my office and slams the door behind her.

I reach for the paperweight, a stupid gift I got from Maria for Christmas our first year married. I pull my arm back and let it fly, throwing it across the room with so much power that when it makes contact, it smashes to pieces and leaves a dent in the wall.

“Fuck,” I snarl.

I sink into my chair and put my head in my hands. That fucking woman. She’s going to be the death of me. How fucking dare she blame me for the death of my daughter. I was

the only one who cared about Chiara. I helped her through her withdrawal. I loved my child. I would have burned down the world to protect her.

The anger that I feel is beyond consuming.

Fucking Inessa.

The woman is pushing me to the edge, and she won't like the outcome if she continues.

INESSA

I tiptoe through the house, knowing that this is my only chance to escape. As much as I feel for Niccolò and feel sorrow for what he's been through, I'm not willing to be hurt any longer, and I know, deep down I know, that Niccolò won't hurt me when he finds out that I'm gone. Leaving is the only path to freedom.

When Niccolò left his office so that Kirill and I could speak alone, we came up with a plan. He's waiting for me at the end of the road. He's waiting to whisk me to where my baby girl is and he's going to help me get a head start. Once I have Alya, I'm getting on a plane and fleeing the country. I've always dreamed about going to Europe. Right now, my only thought is getting out of this house and taking it one part at a time.

My heart is racing, my palms are sweaty, and I'm trying my hardest not to breathe too loudly. I open the front door and step out of the house. I'm shocked at how quiet it is around here. I thought being this close to the city, we'd hear a lot more noise, but we don't. It's quite peaceful. If things were different, I may have even liked being here. But I can't do that to myself, to Alya. I've lived in fear and have been put down my entire life. I will not let Niccolò do it to me too.

I'm broken hearted. I fell so hard for him. It's stupid. I shouldn't have been so naïve. I should have known that he was using me. But he was so good at playing the game, so damn good at showing me what he wanted me to see that I didn't stand a chance. I wonder how many nights he laughed when he left me, knowing that I was his and that I was willing to do anything to have him. I feel so stupid. So damn stupid.

I hurry down the drive, trying my hardest not to alert any of the men that are here at the house. From what I saw earlier on, most of them are situated around the back of the house as there's a higher chance of escaping there. But I'm taking my chance through the front.

The gate is ajar, and I know it's my time to go. I saw one of the men leave just minutes ago. He was on his cell and smoking a cigar, so it's the perfect time. I sneak out of the gate and turn left, my heart wildly jumping as I push close to the shadows.

I've learned a lot by sitting back and watching everyone. I know the way they move, the way they think. Keep to the shadows and make yourself as small as you can so that you have more chance of hiding.

I get closer to the end of the road and start to run my gaze along the parked vehicles, trying to see if I can see Kirill's, but I don't. Fuck. Where the hell is he? Has he already left? We hadn't agreed on a time. We said that he'd wait and I'd come.

Headlights flash up ahead and I still. Why would he be flashing? That would draw attention. There's no way. Footsteps sound behind me, and I pull in a shaky breath as I try and think of what to do next. I need to hurry. Those footsteps are getting closer and closer as each moment passes.

I panic and take off running. I need to get away. There's no way Kirill would flash his lights, especially so close to Niccolò's home and men guarding it. That would instantly draw their attention. No, that's not Kirill. I push my legs harder, knowing I need to get away.

A hand clamps around my mouth, pulling me into a solid wall. I fight against the hold but it's no use. They're too strong. Their other hand bands around my stomach and they lift me off the ground.

I use every bit of strength I have to fight against him. Kicking, scratching, biting. But none of it's any use. He's not letting me go. I continue to fight him, knowing that it's futile, but also not wanting to go down without a fight.

A dark figure appears, and the next thing I know, a fist connects with my temple and the darkness takes me.



“Wakey, wakey,” I hear the deep, baritone voice of Sergei Turgenev. My heart sinks as I blink at the harsh light and see the man who has been my soul crushing nightmare stand before me, a dark, sinister grin on his face. “Finally, you’re awake. Igor went a little hard with that punch, but he had to take necessary action when you kept fighting.”

“Where am I?” I ask, glancing around. There are boxes upon boxes scattered around the huge area. It’s not a room, it’s more like a container or warehouse.

“You don’t need to worry about that, Inessa. You just need to answer the questions that I have for you.”

I blink hard, my head pounding and the darkness creeping in once again.

“You betrayed me,” Sergei hisses. “You married that fucking Italian bastard, Niccolò Caruso. How?”

I shake my head, instantly regretting it. “I don’t know,” I whisper, bile creeping up my throat. I don’t feel too good.

“Bullshit,” he hisses. “Fucking bullshit.”

“No, it’s not. I didn’t know what was going to happen.”

His eyes flash with cold rage, and his lips pull back into a snarl. “Lie to me again, Inessa, and you’re going to be in for a world of hurt.”

I don’t answer him. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say. I genuinely didn’t know what Niccolò had planned.

“How did you find me?” I wonder out loud.

His laughter is cold, and I shiver in fear. “You still have the tracker on you, Inessa. We know exactly where you are every minute of the day.” I frown. What tracker? When did they do that? “Oh look, she had no idea. Every whore for the Bratva has one. That tattoo you have on the back of your neck?” he says, and I nod. I’ve always had it. It’s been a part of me for as long as I can remember. “It’s where the tracker is embedded.”

I stare at him in surprise. How the hell did I not know that?

“Now, let’s try this again, Inessa. How did Niccolò know that our wedding was today?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

His eyes narrow. “Where has my docile girl gone?” he asks as he steps closer to me. “Where is she, hmm? Where the fuck is the woman that I have broken in over the years?”

I swallow hard. I don't know what he wants. I have no clue as to how to answer that question. I've never gone away. My backbone has always been here, it's just been suppressed.

How the hell did everything turn to shit? Today has been a whirlwind of emotions. I was elated that I was marrying the man I thought I loved. So happy to finally be free of the shackles of the Bratva. Then I find out that the man I thought cared for me was only using me in a bid for revenge, shattering my heart and the hope that I had fought for. Then only hours ago, I thought I could be free. I believed that me and my daughter would have a life without pain and heartache, but once again, my hopes were dashed and I'm right back to square one with this animal.

Sergei's fingers curl into my hair and he tugs hard on the roots, pulling me toward him. "Answer me," he snarls. "What have you been doing?"

"Nothing," I cry as his fingers tighten even more in my hair. "I haven't done anything."

"Lies," he growls. "Do not lie to me, Inessa."

I shake my head. No matter what I say, he's not going to listen. He wants an answer and it's not one that I can give him.

He keeps his hand in my hair and holds me up. I look at him, and I see the anger and the menace shining back in those evil eyes of his. He doesn't care about me. I've always been a toy for him to use, someone for him to carve into what he wanted. He's never been the type of man who will show love and affection—not that I would ever want it from him. He's the man who will break you and beat you until you're a shell of yourself, and then break you even more until you can't take it any longer. When he's finished with you, he'll kill you and move on to his next target.

I brace myself for impact as he pulls his other arm backward. I know what's coming. I always know what's going to happen next. He's predictable. He deals with things with his fists. The blow to my stomach winds me, but he's not finished. He rains blow after blow over my body. The impact of each punch is enough to make me fall to my knees, but he's got my hair in such a tight grip that I'm not going to fall.

"You fucking bitch," he snarls as he continues to hurt me. "You went behind my back and have been with that Italian bastard. How long has this been going on? How long have you been betraying the Bratva?"

I can't speak. I'm gasping for air. There's nothing that I could ever say to him that'll make him stop what he's doing. So I don't answer him at all. I keep my eyes on him and just let him do whatever the fuck he needs to.

I just pray that Kirill and Czarina keep Alya safe. I need them to protect her now more than ever. Once Sergei has finished with me, he's going to want my daughter, and I'll never give her up. Not fucking ever. I'll die before I ever speak about her.

I say a silent prayer, hoping that this is the one time my prayer comes true.

Please God, please keep my baby safe and out of the arms of the Bratva.

Sergei's fist connects with my temple, and I cry out. The darkness once again seeps into my eyes, and I know it's only a matter of time before I pass out again. Punch after punch he lands on my face, alternating between my nose, cheek, and temple. The pain somehow doesn't reach me. I'm floating again as the darkness starts to pull me under.

I love you, baby girl.

NICCOLÒ

“Gio,” I snarl as I curl my fingers tighter around my cell. “Fucking find out how she escaped. I want to know how my men allowed my fucking wife to leave.”

I woke up an hour ago and have searched this house from top to bottom over and over again. Inessa’s gone. I fucking should have dragged her to bed with me when I went last night, but I decided against it knowing that one, she’d be pissed, and two, she needed to know I wouldn’t hurt her and having her wake up in my bed wouldn’t be the way to go.

“I’m on it, boss. I’m on my way back to the house. I have Alya with me.”

Well, that’s some good news at least. He’s been searching since yesterday for the girl and he’s managed to find her. I didn’t expect it so quickly, but knowing that she’ll be here and far from those fucking Russians is a huge fucking relief.

A banging on my front door has my patience wearing thin. I don’t have fucking time for visitors. I need to find out where the fuck my wife is.

“Boss, are you ready to admit what I’ve known all along?” he says, and I can hear the laughter in his voice.

“What?” I hiss.

“That you’re in love with her. I know you’ve fallen for her over the past three months. That woman has a pull on you that no one else has ever had. The sooner you realize that, the better.”

I move toward the door. “What the fuck are you talking about? We’ve fucking been over this.” I’ve had enough of the bullshit. After yesterday and Inessa blaming me for the death of my daughter, I’m beyond pissed. I know that Inessa was part of this, that she was the reason as to why my daughter went so deep within the Bratva.

“Boss,” he says warily.

“I don’t want to fucking hear it, Gio,” I snap.

“Boss, just listen, okay?” he responds. “You fucked up. Don’t let her go without making it up. She loves you. I’m not sure why because you’re an ugly bastard, but she does. That woman is sweet as fuck, but Christ, she’s got some fight in her. I know you, Nic. You’ll do whatever the fuck you can to get her back.”

He’s right. I fucking have fallen for her, but that doesn’t negate the fact that I also have hatred for her. Something I’ll never be able to let go of. Inessa should know what I’m feeling. What would she do if the tables were turned, and it was Alya in Chiara’s place?

I open the front door, and I’m shocked to find Dario, Rocco, and his wife, Jade, along with Elio and his wife, Teagan. “Gio, I’ve got to call you back.”

“No,” Roc says. “He’s going to need to hear this too. Put him on speaker.”

I do as the boss instructs and hit the speaker and wait for Rocco to tell me what the fuck has happened.

“Twenty minutes ago, I received an email. I have my men on it to trace where it came from, but fuck, Nic, it’s from Sergei. He’s got Inessa. There’s a video.”

Mind-numbing rage washes over me. “Show me,” I snarl. “Roc, show me it.”

“Niccolò,” Jade says softly. “I don’t think you should. He’s beating her.”

“I appreciate you wanting to shield me from it, Jade, but I need to see what is happening to her.” I want to know what that fucking bastard is doing to her.

“I’m ten minutes out,” Gio says, his voice thick with anger. “I’ll be there soon.”

I end the call and turn to Rocco, a man I trust and one that I call a friend. “Show me the video.”

Rocco walks into my office, and Jade, Dario, Elio, and I follow behind him. “We’re going to find her,” Roc promises me.

“Yeah? I’m so fucking glad you think so, but in what condition? Hmm?” I snarl. I’m beyond angry, but more than that, I’m fearful. I’m terrified about what’s going to happen to her. I know the things that animal has done to her before. I know that she’s been subjected to his abuse for years. Being married to me was to end that. Instead, she’s now in his arms and he’s hurting her once again.

Rocco goes to my computer and starts to load up the video. “Nic,” he says low. “I need you to understand that what you’re about to see is going to be—”

“Awful,” Jade says with anger. “We’ll understand if you don’t want to watch it.”

“Show me,” I say through clenched teeth, not wanting to listen to this bullshit. “Fucking show me.”

Rocco hits play, and I stand rooted to the spot as the live stream shows Inessa beaten and bloody. She’s standing strong. I can see the determination in her eyes. She’s tied to a fucking pipe, her hands behind her back. Her beautiful blonde hair is tinged with red, no doubt from the blood that’s everywhere.

“Where is he?” Sergei demands.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know,” she replies, her voice croaky and filled with pain.

Sergei pulls his fist back and lets it fly. “Try that again, *shlyukha*. Where is Niccolò Caruso?”

Once again, she stands tall. “I don’t know.”

Fuck.

Sergei lets out a growl and pushes into her space. My wife is like a fucking statue. She doesn’t move as he begins to rain punches over her body. I clench my fists. All I want to do is find that cunt and put a bullet in his head. Kill the bastard for touching what is mine.

“Inessa, do not fucking test my patience,” he snarls. “Where the fuck is he?”

She stares at him in the eyes, not flinching, and not backing down. “I don’t know.”

“I’m not sure how much longer she can last,” Jade comments.

“She’s used to it,” Dario says from his position beside me. He’s not moved since we entered my office. I’m not sure if it’s because he wants to keep me locked down if need be or not,

but he'd better think against it. No one is keeping me from finding her.

“What the fuck?” Rocco asks.

“The file in front of you,” I say, not taking my gaze off the screen. “Read it.”

He picks it up. With Elio and Jade flanking him, they read over the file while Dario and I continue to watch that fucking cunt touch my wife.

“Jesus Christ,” Jade says, horrified. “What the fuck have they done to her?”

“She has a baby?” Elio asks.

“That's who Gio has. He'll be here any second. Can you turn that up?” I ask as Sergei gets close to her again. He's just cleaned his hands, which means he's going to try another route to see if he can get her to talk.

“We'll try another way,” he says with a smirk. “That whore of a friend of yours, the Italian bitch?”

Inessa's eyes narrow. “What about Chiara?”

“Did you know that Aleksei wanted you, not her?” he gloats. “That fucker wanted to take you first, but we had a deal. You were mine, not his.”

“What did he do to Chiara?” she asks, and the anger in her voice is just as it was yesterday when she was in this office squaring off against me. She's pissed.

“The bitch wanted drugs and didn't want to spend her father's money. So Aleksei got creative.”

“He raped her,” she snarls, spitting blood at him. “Fucking animals. Why? Why would you touch her? She was a child.”

“So were you,” Sergei fires back. “We take whatever the fuck we want, Inessa. No one gave a fuck that the Italian bitch was hooked on drugs except for you.”

My back straightens at his words.

“You think we didn’t know that you tried to make her go clean, and that you tried to stop her from taking the drugs? You couldn’t. She was too far gone by the time you could help her.”

Tears fall from Inessa’s eyes. She’s devastated by the loss of my daughter. I see that now. Fuck. “Why?”

“Because of that Italian fucking bastard, Niccolò. We know that he killed Abs. We know that he shot him for trying to gain information on the Famiglia. He deserved to die for what he did, but the fucker is too slick, too fucking good at hiding behind everyone. So we went with the next best thing. His daughter.”

“She was clean,” Inessa cries. “She was fucking clean. Why would you give her more?”

He smirks. “It wasn’t me. It was Artyom. He’s the one she went to for the drugs. It’s not our fault that she overdosed on them.”

She shakes her head. “You’re a monster, and I’m so glad that they killed Artyom and Aleksei.”

Sergei freezes at her words. “No, they got into an argument and killed each other.”

Her laughter is sarcastic and filled with pain. “That’s what they wanted you to believe, and you did. Because you’re so blinded by power that you truly believe no one can get close to you. But you’re wrong. You’re an asshole, Sergei. The day you die will be a day everyone celebrates.”

“Fucking find her,” I snarl as Sergei begins to beat her again. “I want her found now,” I shout.

This is too fucking much. Way too fucking much for me to deal with right now. I need my wife home and away from that bastard.

“Where is my daughter?” Sergei growls as he punches her stomach.

“Go to hell,” she shouts back.

“Where is she?” he asks again, punching her over and over again.

“I’ll never tell you,” she grunts as she takes the beating he’s giving her.

“Rocco, I need you to fucking find her.”

“I may be able to help,” I hear from the doorway, and turn to see Kirill standing there with his wife, Czarina, along with Gio and a little girl who is the image of her mom. Alya.

“Who the fuck are you?” Rocco snarls.

“Kirill,” I answer. “My contact within the Bratva.”

Jade glares at him as Kirill moves toward us. “Did he know what she’s been through?” she asks, her voice filled with anger. “Judging by the fact that he has Inessa’s daughter, I’m going to say yes.”

Kirill doesn’t answer. Instead, he watches the screen, flinching when he sees her being beaten. “They’re at the warehouse,” he tells me. “It’s on I-65.”

I turn on my heel and move through the office. “Let’s go.”

I hear the commotion behind me but don’t stop. “Teagan,” I say as I pass her. “Can you watch Alya for me?” I don’t trust

Kirill and Czarina to do so.

“Of course,” she replies instantly. “I have to leave, but I can bring her with me.”

“Thank you,” I say, knowing the baby is going to be safe and when we get home, Inessa will have her child with her.

Rocco catches up to me and places his hand on my shoulder. “She’s going to stay with Ade and Hayden’s men. Hayden’s going to be coming with us.”

I nod, glad that Teagan and Adelina are going to be surrounded by men, which means Alya will be too. Adelina is Rocco, Elio, and Dario’s sister; she’s married to Jade’s brother, Hayden. Their entire family is tight knit and Alya will be safe with them.

NICCOLÒ

I slide into the car, Dario and Gio getting in with me. I'm shocked that he hasn't gone with his brother. "Whatever happens, Nic, we've got your back. Don't fucking doubt that."

I nod. "Good. That fucking cunt, Sergei, is going to die, and it's going to be painful." I'm going to take great pleasure in killing that bastard. I've watched that cunt beat my wife. I've seen the strength that she has, seen the way she stands up to him, fighting to protect those she cares for.

"You've finally seen the light," Gio comments.

My hands tighten around the steering wheel. "Yes," I say through clenched teeth.

"About what?" Dario asks. "What's happened?"

Gio launches into telling him everything that's happened and what I had planned.

"Christ," he says. It's low, and it's filled with worry. "Do you know what went down with Teagan?"

I nod. I do know some of it, but it's not my place to ask about things that happen in others' lives. I'll always be there for my brothers, for my men if they need me, but I won't ever insert myself into their lives.

“Teagan was the daughter of that fucking biker, Mitchell. Elio forced Teagan to marry him to seek revenge against her father. I, along with my brother, believed that getting back at Teagan would be what was needed to seek revenge against what that fucker did to Elio.”

I understand the need for their revenge. Elio was burnt with cigarette butts while strapped in a car that had crashed. He passed out from the pain, and when he woke up in hospital, he found out that those biker bastards had set his chest alight with lighter fluid. He needed surgeries to help him. He needed to have skin grafts. It was a fucking long process to get through it.

“My brother broke Teagan with how he treated her. He pushed her too far. She was already broken, she had nothing, and the only way out she could find was to try and kill herself. I’ve never seen my brother look as devastated as he did the day he found Teagan with her wrists slit.”

I knew that she had tried to kill herself. I had no idea as to why, but fuck... That’s some pretty heavy shit that they went through. Christ.

“From what you’ve just said and from what I’ve seen, your wife is a fucking fighter, Nic, but she’s also broken. She’s been broken for a long time. You’ve hurt her more than I think you’ve realized. Don’t do what Elio did and continue to punish her for something she had nothing to do with.”

I’m silent because he’s right. I have no answer because he’s right. I punished her. I was cruel to a woman I have fallen for because I believed she had something to do with my daughter’s death. How the fuck do I go on from here?

“I think Nic has realized how majorly he’s got to grovel when we manage to get Inessa back from those Russian

bastards,” Gio says. “Did you manage to find out who the fuck let her out of the gate?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. Right now, we’re focusing on getting my wife back. Once I do, then I’ll investigate who’s to blame for her being snatched.” When I do find out, they’re going to be in for a world of hurt. Fucking bastards.

“The baby,” Dario says as we continue our drive toward the warehouse. “It’s Inessa’s?”

I nod. “Yes, I don’t know how old she is or when she was born, but I can fucking tell you it was before she was eighteen.”

Dario’s lips pull into a snarl. “I fucking hate assholes that rape women. But that Sergei...” He shakes his head. “He thinks it’s normal to do what he’s doing. It’s utter fucking bullshit. He’s going to pay for what he’s done.”

I know the grin I’m wearing is a little feral, but I don’t give a fuck. “He will. He’s going to be in a fucking lot of pain when I’m finished with him. That bastard, he’s going to regret the day he fucked with me and those I love.”

That includes Inessa. I’m done fucking pushing what I feel aside. No more. That woman means something to me, and I’m going to make sure she knows it.

“When we get her home, I’ll ask Elio for the doctor that Teagan spoke to after she hit rock bottom. The doctor helped her a lot, and maybe she can help Inessa too. That’s a lot of fucking trauma for one woman to have before the age of eighteen.”

I nod, grateful that he’s thinking ahead, because right now I can’t. All I want to do is get to my woman and kill the cunt who’s put hands on her.

I glance in the rearview mirror and see Gio typing away on his cell. “Everything okay?”

He grins. “Yeah. Just letting the men know to set up one of the rooms in the house for Alya. When Inessa comes home, she’s going to need to rest, and having a room for Alya, someplace that she knows her daughter is safe, is going to help her.”

Once again, I’m fucking relieved that someone else has the foresight to think ahead. I just don’t have it in me right now. I can’t. I’m too fucking angry. It’s as though I’ve got bloodlust and the only way to think clearly is to relieve it. That’s going to happen sooner rather than later.

We pull up to the warehouse, and the second we do, bullets start to fly. Those fucking Russians have the warehouse surrounded, which means that cunt is going to know we’re here. He got smarter. He realized that we’re going to come for him, and he’s made sure he’s ready for us. Fucker.

The way that I’m feeling, I’m going to take all those bastards out. I’m not leaving her until every fucking Russian is dead. “You ready?” I ask Dario and Gio.

“Born fucking ready,” Dario responds, pulling out his gun and sliding out of the car, his finger on the trigger as he takes out two Russians already.

I follow behind him, my gun drawn. There’s absolutely no fucking hesitation in me firing round after round, every bullet sinking into flesh. Anyone who’s not dead as the bullet sinks into them is on the ground groaning in pain, and I know they’ll be taken care of by someone else. Knowing Elio, he’ll be putting a bullet in their heads as he steps over them.

I hear footsteps behind me. They're heavier, almost as though someone's running. I turn and see Hayden Gallagher approaching. "Everyone here is either dead or soon to be," he says. "Let's go and get this cunt."

The four of us keep our guns drawn as we move into the warehouse, putting bullets into anyone who's in our way.

"Oh, Niccolò," Sergei sings. "You want the whore, then put down the fucking gun."

I walk toward the prick. The asshole has his gun pressed against Inessa's head. I don't stop moving. He's kept her alive all these years for a reason. He wants something from her. There's no way he's going to kill her now. No, the fucker is going to turn his gun on me if I stop.

"That's not going to happen, Sergei. Inessa's not going to die tonight. That'll be you. You're the one who's going to be in a fucking lot of pain for what you've done to my wife."

"Your wife?" he snarls.

I grin. "My wife," I repeat. "Inessa and I are married, so take that fucking gun away from her head, otherwise you're going to get a bullet between your eyes." I hold my gun steady, ready to shoot if the fucker even thinks about getting close to the trigger.

"What the fuck have you done?" he snarls at her, pulling his gun away from her head before pistol whipping Inessa across the face. My finger squeezes the trigger. The bullet sinks into his hand, and he drops the gun. Bastard.

I needed to incapacitate him so he wouldn't hurt her again, but I'm not ready to kill him yet. Oh fuck, no. That asshole is in for a fucking world of pain, and I can't wait until I dish it out. First, I need to ensure that Inessa is okay.

“I’ve got him,” Hayden says as he reaches for Sergei with the help of Dario.

I move to Inessa and gently reach for her. “Hey, *cara mia*, are you okay?”

She shakes her head. “I’m in so much pain,” she whispers. “My stomach is cramping. It hurts so much.”

I glance down at her stomach, looking at the gray pants she’s wearing, and see blood staining them. Fuck. What the fuck did that cunt do to her? “Gio, get the doc. Tell him he’s needed. Explain to him what she said and then let me know what the plan of action is.”

I turn back to Inessa and caress her poor battered face. “I’m so sorry, baby,” I whisper. “This should have never happened.”

“Nico,” she breathes. “I want Alya.”

I nod. “I have her, *cara mia*. I have her. She’s with Teagan and Adelina. They’re taking care of her until I get you home, where she’ll be joining us.”

“Please tell me he’ll never get to touch her.”

I press a kiss against her lips, not giving a fuck about the blood that’s pouring from her nose and the cuts on her face. “I’m going to kill him, baby. He’s going to be in a fucking lot of pain before he takes his last breath. But before that, I need to get you better.”

She swallows hard, grimacing as she does. “I’m sorry,” she cries.

“Baby, what are you apologizing for?”

“For blaming you for Chiara’s death. I’m sorry. You didn’t kill her. I’m so sorry.” Her sobs wrack through her body as she

cries. “I shouldn’t have said it. It was mean. I was just so angry.”

Christ, this woman is killing me.

“I know,” I whisper. “I know you’re not to blame for her death. I was so blinded by rage and grief that I wasn’t thinking straight. I’m the one who should be apologizing. I’m sorry, baby. You didn’t deserve my hate.”

She shakes her head. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Nico. I loved Chiara. She was my best friend.”

Christ, she’s fucking gutting me.

“Nic,” Gio says from behind me. “The doc says to take Inessa to the hospital.”

“The ambulance is on its way,” Jade tells us. “Hey, Inessa, I’m Jade. I’m married to Rocco,” she says as she squats down in front of Inessa. “How are you feeling? Are you hurting anywhere?”

Inessa tells Jade the same thing she told me, that she’s cramping and in pain. Jade glances at Rocco, and I see something pass between them.

“Baby,” I whisper. “I’m going to check to see where the ambulance is. Jade and Elio are going to untie your hands, okay?”

She doesn’t say anything, and I know she’s scared. But right now, I need to find out what the fuck is going on. I press a kiss to her head and move toward Rocco. “What is it?” I demand.

He scrubs his hand down his face and turns his back to his wife and mine. “The symptoms that Inessa’s going through,

the cramps, the pain, the blood between her legs... They're signs of a miscarriage, Nic."

"What?" I hiss, feeling disbelief at his words. "She was pregnant?"

"We won't know until we get to the hospital, but it could be, yes."

"Fuck." I swallow hard. "How do you know?"

He glances at his wife and back to me. "Jade had one last month."

"Fuck, Roc, I'm so fucking sorry."

I had no idea. Christ, we've all been dealing with shit that none of us even knew. Then again, with how private Jade and Rocco are, I doubt they would have told us.

"The ambulance is here," Dario shouts as he re-enters the warehouse.

"Don't tell anyone," Rocco says darkly. "We haven't told our families, and until Jade's ready, we won't be."

"I won't say a fucking word." Christ, I'd never say that shit. That's Roc and Jade's personal business.

He nods. "Let's get your wife to the hospital and get a doctor to take care of her."

I move back to Inessa, who's now no longer tied to the pole. She's stoic as she sits on the floor while Jade attempts to clean her face for her.

"I saw your daughter. She's beautiful," I hear Jade say. "She must take after you."

Inessa smiles. "She's amazing," she whispers. "I'm so happy she's safe."

“She’s in the safest place she could ever be. She’s at my dad’s house with my sister-in laws.”

I raise a brow at Hayden, who comes to stand beside me. He grins. “You think this shit’s going down, and I’m not sending my wife and child to my family?” He shakes his head. “They’re safe there, Niccolò. No doubt when you and Inessa return home, you’ll have Ma claiming Alya as her grandchild.”

I’d laugh at any other time. Edwina Gallagher adores her children, along with any children. No doubt she’ll adopt whoever is around her. It’s just who she is, and I know once Inessa’s feeling up to it, she’ll be welcomed into the Gallagher fold, seeing as Jade’s already taking her under her wing.

“Cara mia, the ambulance is here,” I say, and she reaches out for me. “I’m staying with you,” I assure her as I grip a hold of her hand. “I’m not leaving you.”

The distrust in her eyes tells me I’ve got a lot to make up for, and I’m not going to stop until I have regained her trust and her love.

INESSA

The pain that rips through my stomach is unbearable, but then again, my entire body is one big ball of pain. Niccolò holds my hand tightly, pressing his lips against it as we ride in the back of the ambulance. Since he found me, he's acted differently, almost as though he cares about me. It's weird, because he showed me the hatred he had for me, and now he's showing me a different side to him yet again. I'm getting whiplash from it all.

“*Cara mia*,” he says gently. “Talk to me, baby. I need you to talk to me.”

“I'm too sore,” I reply, hating the way my throat feels when I swallow. It's as though there's a million knives cutting along it.

“I know, baby. I know. But I need you to stay awake and I need you to talk to me. Can you do that?”

“Why?” I ask, wondering when he changed his tune. Not even twenty-four hours ago he was telling me that he hated me, that he wanted me to pay for being involved with the Bratva, something I had never done. He hurt me. He really hurt me. I thought I found love. I believed I'd found a man who wasn't like the others, who wasn't using me for something, but I was wrong. So fucking wrong. Niccolò was

worse because he hid behind love and devotion, pretending that we were building something when in fact, he was playing me.

It fucking stings to know that everything I fell for was a lie.

“Because I want you to stay alive. I’m worried about you. I don’t know if he’s done too much damage. So please,” he says, his voice breaking. “Stay awake for me, baby,” he rasps.

Hearing his voice so raw with so much pain in it has tears forming in my eyes. “What’s going to happen?”

“I told you, Nessa, that fucker is going to pay for what he’s done to you.” He presses a kiss to my hands once again. “He should never have touched you. He’ll pay for doing so.”

Everything is just so messed up. I’m confused, and I’m sore. I just need to make this pain go away. “Help me,” I whisper. “I need the pain to go.”

He grabs my face between his hands. Those dark eyes of his, so beautiful, are filled with pain. “Baby, listen to me. We’re going to get you help. We’re going to help you find a way to deal with the pain in a healthier way. Okay?”

There is no other way. I’ve tried everything I can think of. I’ve never been able to get rid of it. Never been able to let it out. It’s just there, in the pit of my stomach, growing bigger and bigger until I’m ready to break. I have to let it out.

“We’re here,” he tells me, and I hear the relief in his voice.

Soon, I’m in a room with different people around me, all poking and prodding me. They’re asking me questions, and I’m trying to answer them, but I’m just too sore, too tired.

“Ms. Koskava, can you tell me when your last period was?” the doctor asks me.

I shake my head. I don't know. They've never been regular, always out of whack. Sometimes I go months without one, other times I have them more frequently.

More and more questions are asked, and I try my hardest to answer them the best that I can, but my mind is fuzzy and the darkness is seeping in. I'm not going to be able to stay awake much longer. No, I'm falling into the abyss. I don't fight it. I need to let it take me. I need to not feel the pain any longer.



“Fuck,” I hear Niccolò growl. “Doc, how far along was she?”

I still, not daring to open my eyes as I try to remember what the hell happened. It doesn't take long until everything comes flooding back, and I bite my lip to stop a sob from spilling out.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts when I hear someone else speak. “She was in the early stages of the pregnancy. I'm really sorry, but the pregnancy is no longer viable. Ms. Koskava had a miscarriage.”

Wait, what? I'm pregnant? But how? When? How didn't I know? Pain slices through my heart as I realize the woman's words. The baby's gone. A numbness settles over me as the heartache hits me. God, why do I always have the pain? Why do all these things happen to me? I've never done anything bad to anyone. I've never hurt anyone. I've tried my hardest to be good, and yet it doesn't matter. My life has been touched by so much evil that I no longer see hope. My one bright light is

my daughter. Alya. I could have been gifted another brightness, but that was taken from me, just as everything else has been.

“Was it caused by the trauma of the beating?” Niccolò asks, his voice laced with anger.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Caruso, there’s no telling why Ms. Koskava lost the baby.”

“But it could have been?” Niccolò continues.

“Yes, there’s a good chance the trauma that Ms. Koskava suffered during her attack caused the miscarriage.” There’s a pause. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks, doc,” he responds with that angry tone.

I hear the door closing and Niccolò’s feet moving closer to me. “I know you’re awake, *cara mia*. Please open your eyes.”

I swallow, grateful that there’s no pain and wondering how that’s happened. I open my eyes and see Niccolò standing by the bed and lingering over me. “Hey, baby. How are you feeling?”

“Numb,” I answer honestly.

“I’m so fucking sorry. I wish I had gotten to you sooner. Fuck,” he says. “I wish I hadn’t fucking snapped and made you run.”

I shake my head. “They would have always found me.”

His brows knit together. “How?”

“The tattoo I have on my neck. It’s got a tracker in it. They’ve been monitoring me.”

His fingers slide around my neck, and he runs them along my tattoo. “We’ll get it taken out. You heard what the doctor

said?”

Tears spring to my eyes as I nod. “I didn’t know,” I whisper. “I’m such a bad mom. I didn’t even know I was pregnant.”

“Fuck, *cara mia*,” he says as he climbs onto the bed and pulls me into his arms. “Trust me, Nessa, you’re an amazing mom. You’ve proven that with Alya. The doctor said you were early in your pregnancy, probably only a few weeks. You wouldn’t have known.”

I look up at him wondering if he realizes what that means. Sergei hadn’t touched me other than to hit me in over two months. The only person I had been with was Niccolò.

“We’re going to get through this,” he assures me. “It’s going to take time, but we’ll get you there.”

Tears stream down my eyes. “I couldn’t protect my baby.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead. “You did amazing, *cara mia*. You survived when others wouldn’t have. I’m so fucking proud of you.”

I shake my head. “You shouldn’t be. Our baby died,” I sob against him.

His arms tighten around me, and his body trembles as he holds me. “Trust me, Inessa, I’m so fucking proud of you. You are so strong. You are a survivor, baby. You amaze me.”

I sob against him, unable to keep my tears at bay any longer. Niccolò holds me tight, not once letting go. He presses kisses against my head while praising how strong I am. I wish I had his belief, because I feel anything but strong.

“Why do I feel so fuzzy and numb?” I ask him once my crying jag stops.

“That’s the medication, baby. I made them give you something more than the usual shit. I needed you to be able to not feel the pain, I needed you to sleep and rest.”

I pull back and look up at him. “Why are you doing this?”

He pushes my hair back behind my ears and frames my face. “I’m an asshole, Inessa. I’m a fucking bastard. I’ll always own up to that. Throughout my life, I was always seen as the monster, someone who’ll do whatever it takes to protect the Famiglia. And I do. I do it happily. It’s my job. It’s my family. But I was always conscious of never being a bastard to those I loved. Chiara was the one person in this world who I was never that monster to. Until I was.”

My heart breaks for my best friend. She loved him fiercely and she looked up to him. He was her hero. But that illusion shattered the day she watched him put a bullet in her boyfriend’s head.

“I was blinded by rage and grief. I vowed my daughter revenge. I was going to make those who caused her death pay for it. I was going to kill them, and I’ve done that.”

I understand that. I know the man that he is. I know exactly what he’s capable of. But never did I think he’d betray me in the way he did. Never did I think he’d hurt me the way that he did.

“I was wrong,” he says quietly. “I was so wrong about you, and I fucked up. I hurt you when I should have protected you. I should have loved you. I’m sorry.”

My emotions well up and I can’t hold it in any longer. I push my head into his chest and sob once again.

“I’m so damn sorry, Inessa. I fucked up.”

“It’s okay,” I cry. “I understand why you would think that I was involved,” I tell him through my tears. “It hurts that you were so cruel in making me fall in love with you when you had planned to break me.” I shake my head, the tears flowing harder. “You knew that my life wasn’t normal, that there was more to what was going on, and you still went through with your plan.”

Telling me that he’s sorry are just words and they don’t mean anything to me. I don’t believe him. He’s broken the trust that I had in him. He broke me just as I knew he could.

He kisses my head once again. “I’m going to show you that I’m sorry, baby. I’m going to show you just how much I fucking love you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think you can.” I don’t want to be around him. I’m free now. I’m able to breathe. I can live a life without wondering when Aleksei or Sergei are coming for me.

“I can,” he says adamantly.

I sigh heavily. He’s not going to listen and there’s no point in arguing. Sooner or later, he’s going to have to realize that sometimes our actions have consequences. Niccolò knew that I’d been abused. He knew that Aleksei had hurt me, and he still chose to pursue me and eventually break me.

I’m going to be free, and there’s nothing that Niccolò can do to stop that from happening.

NICCOLÒ

I hate leaving her. It fucking kills me, especially when she's sobbing. I never realized just how fucking fragile she was. Seeing that fucking asshole hurting her opened my eyes. I was finally seeing clearly for the first time in years. Inessa has been through so much, and I added to that. While I was right to go for revenge, I chose to get it against the wrong person. Now I have so much to make up for. I hate that I've hurt her.

Last night, she let me hold her while she was reeling from the pain of the miscarriage as well as the beating that she took. This morning, it was as though a switch flicked. She was distant, and she didn't want me to touch her. I hate that I can't comfort her, especially when she's grieving the loss of the baby. Our baby.

I didn't say anything when she said that. I also caught the sharp look on her face when I told her that it was just a few weeks into the pregnancy. She looked at me with shock and a little bit of happiness. I know that the baby she lost was mine. I'm fucking devastated that I've lost yet another child, but I don't blame Inessa. Far from it. I blame that bastard, Sergei. He did this. He's going to pay for it. I want to cut the bastard's head off and mount it so I can present it to Inessa, so she knows that he's gone. But my wife is sweet and caring. So

instead, I'll just let her know that she's safe and that he can't hurt her or her daughter again.

"How is she?" Gio asks, his face void of emotion, and I know that he's reeling from the pain I put her through when she was innocent. He tried to warn me from the get-go, but I wasn't in the right frame of mind to listen. I couldn't. All I saw and felt was pain and grief. I needed to get revenge. I needed a way to let the anger and pain out, and I found it.

"She's alive," I tell him. That's the best answer that I have. Right now, I need to do this one last thing. Make sure that my wife is safe and that my daughter can rest easy. Then I'm going back to Inessa and working on making things right.

"Please tell me we're going to end this fucking prick."

I give him my best shark's grin. "That, Gio, is exactly what we're going to do."

It's been a fucking long time coming, and I have come up with multiple ideas on how to kill Sergei, but now that the day has finally arrived, I'm unsure. I need something that has the most impact. Something painful that'll have the cunt begging for his life. Something that will satisfy my need for vengeance for both Chiara and Inessa.

We walk out of the hospital, and I know my wife is safe. She's surrounded by my men. They'll lose their heads if anything happens to her. I'm not taking any chances with her safety. I can't. I need her to be protected at all times. I need to know that when I'm not around, she's going to be okay.

I find both Rocco and Dario waiting for me outside of the hospital. "Let's get this done," Rocco says. "Gio, you're riding with Dario. Nic, you're with me."

There's no denying the boss. What he wants, he gets.

“How is Inessa?” he asks the moment we’re in the car.

“She’s hurting. You were right, she suffered a miscarriage. She’s blaming herself, and there’s nothing I can do that’s going to make her think otherwise.” I take a deep breath. Pain spreads across my chest at the thought of her going through this pain alone. It’s not going to happen.

“I’m sorry, Nic. I know how devastating it can be. Inessa is tough. She’s strong. She’ll get through this. Once she’s home, she’ll have you and Alya to help her through it.”

That pain slices deeper. “I don’t know, Roc. I fucked up. I have a feeling that if she had a choice, she’d leave.”

His gaze slides from the road to me and back again. “I heard what went down. Dario has a big mouth. If you want something kept secret, don’t tell him.”

I sigh, leaning my head back against the headrest. “Are you going to lecture me?”

He chuckles. “No. You’re old enough to know what you did was wrong. I’m not going to judge. I fucked up too. Hell, we all fucked up with regards to Teagan, and that’s not something any of us want to happen to Inessa. So I’m going to urge you to seek help for her. Get her the help she needs. The abuse she suffered was extensive, and she’s going to need people around her who will be a shoulder should she need it. Teagan’s already wanting to visit her in the hospital and Elio’s waiting on your okay, so he can take Teagan and Alya to visit her.”

“Yes,” I rasp, knowing that having a family around her is exactly what she needs right now.

“You made mistakes, Niccolò. It’s how we mend those mistakes that make us the men we are today. Don’t let Inessa

go, because if she does, I don't think she'll come back."

I grit my teeth because I know he's right, but I'm wondering if the freedom would be something that she could benefit from. Christ, I'm fucking losing my mind. I have no idea how to help her. All I know is that I have to. I can't lose her. I won't lose her. She's been through so much already. I won't let her go through anything else.

Rocco calls Elio, letting him know he's got the go ahead to bring Alya and Teagan to the hospital. I'm hoping that seeing Alya will help her. She's so torn up right now, I just want her to be able to take a breath and be with her daughter. The person she loves most.

The rest of the car ride is silent, both of us lost in our thoughts. Mine are focused on my wife and how to help her deal with her trauma.



"So how are we doing this?" Dario asks with a wicked grin as he rubs his hands together with glee.

"I'm not sure. I think it'll depend on what I see around me."

The fucker hoots with laughter. "I love it. The best deaths always come on the fly! Let's go make this bastard pay for what he's done."

The four of us walk into the house. No one's been here since we found Andrea and his family. Karma's a bitch, and it's come for Sergei Turgenev today.

"You bastards," he spits as we enter the living room. He's tied to a chair, both his hands and feet strapped with zip ties,

and he's been stripped down to his underwear. He's ready for me. Dario's already got the plastic wrap covering the floor, ready for the fucker's death. "You couldn't kill me one on one, so you tie me up and kill me like this?"

He's goading me, something that won't happen. As much anger as I have rolling through my body, I know that I'm going to get what I want and nothing he says will change that. He can spew all his shit and I'll take it, add it to the anger that I already have and then when I'm ready, I'll unleash it.

"Your wife," he spits. "How does it feel knowing that I was the one to take her virginity?"

"You fucked a child," I snarl at him. "There's nothing to fucking gloat about. You're the lowest of low, Sergei. Only pussies rape and beat women and children."

He fights against the bindings, his lips pulled back, showing his clenched teeth, his eyes wild with rage. He looks like a man possessed. He's beyond angry. No doubt because he's caught and no longer Pakhan.

"How does it feel, Sergei?" Rocco taunts. "Knowing that the man who gave us all the information on you is now the Pakhan of the Bratva?"

That was another revelation that was uncovered. Kirill was a lot higher up in the ranks of the Bratva than we had realized. The reason he was guarding Inessa was because he was one of the trusted few to do so. After the shootout at the warehouse last night, the more higher ups of the Bratva were killed, leaving Kirill as the next in line. Something I don't think he has in him, but the Bratva isn't our business, and there was always going to be someone to take over from the cunt in front of me.

Sergei's brows knit together. "What? You lie!"

I shake my head. "No. I've had an informant within your organization for years. You and Aleksei should have thought of that before you raped his wife."

"Sick bastards," Dario hisses. "Can't you get women normally? Instead you have to fucking rape them to get laid."

"You do not judge me," Sergei growls. "You are just as bad. Killing anyone who betrays you. Anyone who gets in your way. You Italians are all the same. Mutts."

Rocco laughs. "We're nothing like you. Do you know what I love most about this?" he asks, waving his hand in Sergei's direction. "All the hard work you put in being Aleksei's right-hand man, then working your way to the top, and for what? Nothing. You have no legacy within the Bratva. You are the man no one will remember. You'll be the guy who came after Aleksei."

I chuckle at the anger that flashes through his eyes. Seems as though Rocco has hit a nerve.

"It's time to get this over and done with. I want to tell my wife that you're dead. I'm sure she'll celebrate with the rest of womenkind." I step forward and pull out my knife.

This bastard has beaten and raped Inessa for years. It's only right that he feels the amount of pain that she has.

"Jade's asked that you cut the bastard's cock off and feed it to him."

I smile. Before Jade and Rocco married, she was in jail, having killed a man who shot at her. While in prison, she was assaulted both physically and sexually. The word of her revenge grew like wildfire around the Irish and Italian mafia. Jade was given the moniker 'The Chicago Mangler' because

of the way she mutilated the men who assaulted her. She either burned their cocks, or in the case of the last guy, she cut it off and fed it to him. She got her revenge, and she's someone both the Italians and the Irish respect.

"Sickening," Sergei spits at Rocco's feet. "Having a woman lead your men. Sick. You are not men. You are pussies."

I shake my head as I laugh bitterly at him. "The only pussy here is you."

"Roc, do you have your knife?" I ask. I have my own, but that's going to do a lot of damage and I need two others right now.

"Here," he says, handing it to me.

I shake my head. "His hand looks empty," I say and hear Dario's laughter.

Rocco doesn't miss a beat. He thrusts the blade into Sergei's hand, causing the Russian to howl in pain.

"Dario, do you have your knife?" I ask and watch as Dario hands it to Rocco. This is Roc's revenge for what happened to Andrea. He was Rocco's Consigliere, one of his most trusted men, and Sergei had his men kill him, his wife, and his kids. He more than deserves this. Once again, Rocco drives the blade into his hand, and Sergei howls in pain.

"Excellent," I say with a wicked grin. It's now my turn to play. "Jade had a great idea," I say and watch the fucker's eyes widen in horror. "But first, I get to play."

I run my own knife along his chest, making criss-cross shapes. The cuts are deep and the blood seeps like a fucking river out of him. He jerks against his bindings, trying to get free, but it's no use. I've got so much rage built up that one

punch to his solar plexus has the fucker winded and sagging back into the chair.

My knife continues to slice across his chest. The blood is everywhere, on the plastic covered floor, over Sergei and over me. I don't care. I'm used to this. This is my relief. This is how I unleash my anger. It's why I understand what Inessa meant about not being able to let it out. It's hard for some to let their emotions out. For someone like Inessa, who's been conditioned to behave a certain way, she wasn't allowed to let it out. She buried it until she couldn't any longer. She found an outlet, but now it's time for her to find a new way of doing so.

"Christ, Nic," Dario grouses, and I realize that the skin from Sergei's chest has fallen away. The criss-cross shapes have made little diamonds and the flesh is just peeling away. Good. This fucker has no idea what he put my wife through. And he has no remorse, no acceptance for his part in the pain and fear she felt. Well fuck him. He'll now know some of the pain she went through.

I move to his thighs, and he starts to struggle once again. "We're nowhere near finished," I snap at him. "You're going to be in a fucking lot of a pain for a long fucking time. So sit back and enjoy." I raise a brow at his growl. "Isn't that what you did to Inessa? Made her endure pain constantly?"

"Fuck you," he hisses at me.

I go back to work, making my way down his thighs, doing the same criss-cross pattern as before. It's not long until the flesh starts to fall away from his limbs. His veins and arteries are intact. The only thing that's gone is his skin. This isn't something I've done a lot of, but it's not my first time skinning someone. It will be the most I've taken from someone though.

Everyone is silent, including Sergei, who looks as though he's trying real hard not to cry. He's got his teeth gritted and his nostrils flaring.

It takes hours, but when I stand back and look at the bastard, he's unconscious and every part of his body has skin missing. The blood is seeping out of him like a fucking waterfall. There's no way he's going to survive much longer. His heart is beating beneath his ribcage and getting slower and slower with every second that passes.

"I think Jade's suggestion should be granted," Gio says. "He's raped too many women to not have it taken."

I nod in agreement. I know that taking his cock will be the biggest blow to him. Men like Sergei thrive off their manliness. They think that it counts for everything, when the truth is, it counts for nothing. Being a man isn't about how to hurt someone or how to make yourself seem taller. It's far from that. Physical strength doesn't play a part in it at all.

Dario and Gio take the fucker's underpants off him.

"Careful there, Nic," Dario laughs. "The second you touch him, he'll probably blow."

My stomach rolls at the thought. Christ, he's a fucking pedophile. He deserves to be in the depths of Hell for what he's done. This time, it's Gio who gives me his knife. I notice that it's not his actual blade, but one that's old and rusted.

Sergei wakes up with a shriek as I begin to hack away at his cock. The fucking blade that Gio's given me is blunt, but it has enough sharpness left in it that it takes a while to cut through the skin. Sergei continues to scream in pain as I cut through it. It takes longer than expected to cut the entire thing off.

“It all makes sense,” Dario says. “Men with small cocks always think they have to prove something.”

“Shove it in his mouth,” Rocco snaps. “It’s time to end this shit. I have a wife to go home to, as do you.”

He’s right. It’s time to get the fuck out of here. I shove the cock into his open mouth and push the rusted blade through his ribcage and into his heart. Within seconds, he’s dead, his cock jammed into his mouth.

He’s dead.

Now it’s time to go to Inessa and let her know that she’s safe. He can’t hurt her again.

INESSA

“Hey.” I hear the soft voice of a woman. I turn to the doorway and see a beautiful woman standing there. Her long, jet-black hair makes her creamy skin stand out. She’s beyond gorgeous. “I’m Teagan. I’m married to Elio. I wanted to come and see you.” She steps forward and to the side, giving me a clear view of the man who’s standing behind her with a wide smile. My heart races when I see what he’s got in his arms.

Alya.

Tears fall from my eyes as I watch my daughter reach for me. She’s got the biggest smile I’ve ever seen, and she looks happy and healthy. I can’t believe that it’s been days since I last saw her. It feels like an eternity since I last held her.

Elio walks toward me, and I remember that he was at the warehouse last night. He works with Niccolò. His name is Gallo, which means he’s either the boss or the brother of the boss. He’s also the gorgeous woman’s husband. He places Alya gently into my arms, and I pull her close, so happy that I have her with me again. I’ve missed her so much.

“I’ll be right outside if either of you need me,” Elio tells us as he walks over to his wife and pulls her into his arms. “I’ll give you both some time to talk. Yell if you need me.” He

presses a chaste kiss to the woman's lips before walking out of the room and closing the door behind him.

"Hey," the woman says again as she takes the seat beside the bed. "I'm Teagan. It's really nice to meet you, Inessa. I wish it were under better circumstances, but nonetheless, it's awesome to meet you."

I like her. She's got a soft, genuine smile and a caring look about her.

"I'm going to be upfront," she says, and she looks nervous, which sets me on edge. "Elio told me about what happened to you."

I pull in a ragged breath. God. Why would he do that? I never wanted anyone I didn't know to find out the horrors I have been through. I pull Alya even closer and press a kiss to her head, inhaling deeply. God, I love my little girl.

"Please don't be upset. Elio didn't want to trigger me."

My brows pull together at her words. What does that even mean?

"For you to understand, I'm going to have to start at the beginning. Please don't be upset with Elio, though. He was trying to help me."

Listening to what she went through is horrific. I hate that she's been abused too. Hers came from her father, a man who is meant to love and support her. Instead, they beat her whenever they felt like it. Not to mention, he gave her to his biker brothers who raped her. My heart hurts for her. She's so sweet and yet she's been through some tough times.

Bile burns my throat when she explains how she and her husband got together. How he forced her to marry him as revenge for something her father did. How he treated her like

she was a whore, and she felt so very alone and had only one way out. I close my eyes and hold my baby tightly. She was so low that she wanted to end it all.

“So please don’t be upset with him. He wanted me to know when he was around in case it brought back memories.”

I swallow, nodding in understanding. “Did it bring them back?”

She gives me a sad smile, and I know that it in fact did.

“How did you manage to move on? I’m just so angry and hurt at what Niccolò has done. I don’t think I could ever trust him again.”

“Trust and forgiveness don’t have to be together,” she tells me. “You can forgive him for being a stupid asshole, because he was drowning in his grief and plagued by rage, but you don’t have to trust him not to hurt you again until he’s able to show you that he’s worthy of that trust.” She gives me a soft, reassuring smile. “Does that make sense?”

I shrug. “Kind of, but I just don’t know how to move forward.” For me, I’m stuck trying to work things out, trying to figure out what comes next. Everything that’s happened has done so rapidly. Everything is just spiraling, and I don’t know what to do or how to deal with it.

“That’s tough to answer because everyone is different, and the truth of the matter is, until we find what will help you be able to do that, you won’t be able to.”

Tears form in my eyes. “I just want to be free,” I whisper.

“Oh, Inessa,” she breathes. “You are. You’re free now. No matter what you may think of Niccolò, he’s not going to keep you hostage. He’s not going to force you to do anything you

don't want to. But you're not alone. You have me and Jade. We're going to help you, okay?"

I slide my tongue along my lip as I take a deep breath. "What do I do now?"

"Get better," she tells me. "You take it one step at a time. Right now, we need you to heal from your injuries, and then once you're able to leave here, we'll reassess. Okay?"

She makes it sound so damn easy. I wish it were that simple. But she's right. Just one thing at a time.

"Can I say something?" she asks, and I nod. "When Niccolò found out that you were being hurt, he was devastated. That man does love you, Inessa. I think he's just so confused by everything that he didn't know what to do."

"I know," I whisper. "It's got to be hard for him. Losing Chiara has to be the most painful experience of his life, and I understand the need for revenge. But he knew that I was being hurt, Teagan. He knew that I wasn't okay there and he still treated me like shit."

She nods. "I know, he's an asshole. Do you think you can forgive him?"

I think back to last night and how he held me through all the tears and the pain. How he didn't move from my side and promised me that he'd help me through it all. "I have already forgiven him. I just don't trust him."

"That's okay. It's taken me so long to trust Elio again, and even now there are some days when I'm having a bad day and want to lie in bed and just hide from the world. Everything that happened will resurface, and I'm back in that place that is dark and filled with pain. But this time, it's him who's bringing me to the light instead of pushing me further into it."

Like last night, when I was drowning with pain after finding out about the baby. All I wanted to do was find an outlet. Get a blade and let the blood flow. Instead, Niccolò held me and let me cry it out. That was something I had never expected, but it helped. I was able to let the pain out through my tears.

“My doctor is amazing. She’s easy to talk to and was the biggest part of my recovery. I think she may help you too. I’ll leave her number for you. When you’re ready to take the step, call her.”

“Thank you,” I whisper as I lie Alya down beside me. She’s fast asleep. Seems as though she’s missed me. “I really appreciate it.”

“What did the doctor say about your injuries?”

I sigh. “I’m so high on pain meds that I can’t feel anything,” I say with a laugh. “But I have a broken nose and three bruised ribs.” I’m beyond lucky that he didn’t break anything else. I’ve had the cuts on my face stitched up by a plastic surgeon, as per Niccolò’s instructions. “It’s going to take a while to heal but I should make a full recovery.”

She reaches for my hand and squeezes tightly. “I’m sorry that he hurt you.”

I nod. “I’m used to the cuts, bruises, and broken bones, but the—” I shake my head, unable to say the words.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” she asks.

“I had a miscarriage,” I whisper, ashamed of saying it out loud.

Her eyes fill with tears and her expression falls. “I’m so very sorry, Inessa. God, I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” I reply, my throat lodged with emotion.

“Is there anything I can do to help you?” she asks.

“You’ve already done more than enough. Thank you. But I’m wondering if there’s any way that Alya can stay with me here in the hospital until I’m able to come home.”

She gets to her feet, her eyes still watery, but she’s got a determined look on her face. “Absolutely. We’ll make it happen. I’ll bring some things for the two of you.”

“I don’t have anything,” I confess, the shame once again rising within me. “Everything is left back at my old house.”

She waves me away. “I have all those things. The men have been busy. Everything that you and Alya need is at your home with Niccolò. I’ll bring a few things for you both. If you need more, just let me know. I’m happy to help.” She grins at me. “Now let me go and find a crib for Alya to sleep in.”

I watch as she walks out of the door in search of it. Happiness wells up inside of me. For the first time in years, I finally feel as though I’m able to start my life. That I’m not going to be kept somewhere out of the way. That Alya and I are going to have a good life.

I just pray that I’m not wrong.



“Hey, baby,” Niccolò says as he walks in. “I see that you managed to get the nursing staff onside,” he says as he glances down at my little angel who’s fast asleep in the crib.

“Yeah, they fell in love with her the moment they saw her and they couldn’t say no.”

He grins. “I don’t blame them.” He crosses the room and kicks off his shoes. I notice that he’s wearing different clothes than he was when he left this morning. Instead of the suit he was in, he’s now wearing jeans and a gray t-shirt. He looks gorgeous. He climbs onto the bed beside me and pulls me into his arms. “He’s gone, *cara mia*,” he says, and I still. “He’ll never be able to hurt you or Alya again. He’s dead.”

I look at the man I have grown to love and hate, and right at this moment, I think I love him more than ever. “Thank you,” I whisper as the tears flow down my face. “Thank you for making us safe.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to ensure that you are both safe, Nessa. Whatever it takes.”

“I want to talk to the woman Teagan suggested.”

He doesn’t even blink at my request. “I’ll call her first thing in the morning and set up a session for tomorrow,” he says. “Don’t ever think you can’t tell me what you need, Inessa.”

I nod. “I know that. I know that you are sorry for what happened, but I can’t trust you, Nico. You hurt me so much. You broke everything I had. I don’t know if I can ever trust you again.”

He presses his head against mine. “It’s going to take time. I just hope one day you’ll be able to.”

We stay like this for ages. He holds me close, not letting me go, and once again, I fall asleep tucked into his embrace, feeling safe and protected.

I’m finally free.

INESSA

The door to my hospital room opens and a woman with bright red hair walks in, a soft, beautiful smile on her face. I'm at complete ease as she comes to take a seat beside the bed. "Hi, Inessa," she says, not once taking the smile from her face.

"Hi," I reply. I'm weary, so damn weary, and I know that it's my own mistrust in people. My heart is racing.

Niccolò left with Alya an hour or so ago. He was bringing her to his house, where Jade's mom is currently getting the house ready for my return.

"I'm Lena. It's really nice to meet you. I know Teagan has spoken to you about what I do and how I have helped her. I just want to clarify a few things. What you tell me in our sessions is just between us. I need you to know that you are safe to be open and honest without repercussions."

My heartrate starts to slow down somewhat at her words. "Will you fix me?" I ask as my gaze moves to the door. Where's Niccolò? I had asked him to be here. I wanted him to sit in on the sessions with me as I spoke with her. As much as I don't trust him with my heart or my love, I do know that he is trying and he's very protective of me. But where the hell is he?

Her eyes soften and her expression turns to sorrow. “Oh Inessa, we’re going to try and help you. Okay?”

I nod, unsure of what to expect. I know Teagan really respects Lena and has been helped a lot by what she’s done, but I’m not sure if it’ll work for me.

“We’re going to start off slow. Just talk, and when you’re comfortable, and only when you’re comfortable, we’ll move on to harder topics. Is that okay?”

“Yes,” I whisper. That sounds like something I’ll be okay to do.

“So, you have a daughter?” she asks as she sits up straighter, her gaze on me, and it’s unwavering.

“I do. Alya. She’s ten months old. She’s my absolute world.” I can’t keep the smile off my face as I talk about her. Alya is my light, my one pure thing in this world. No matter how she came about being conceived, she will never be anything but my little girl.

“What was your pregnancy like?” Lena asks as the door opens and Niccolò enters the room. “Mr. Caruso, we’re in the middle of a session,” she says a little sternly, which has Nico sending her a death glare.

“It’s okay,” I say softly. “I asked him to sit in with us.”

Her eyes widen at my words. “You did?”

I nod. “I know that with your help, I’ll be able to be open with him. He’s hurt me a lot. Not physically,” I add quickly when I see the displeasure on her face. “But it’s made me unable to trust him, and until I’m able to do that, I won’t be able to open up.”

She reaches for my hand. Her warmth surrounds my cold digits, but she doesn't let go. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "I'm sure."

She turns back to Niccolò. "You are to sit and not interrupt," she says, her words like a whip. "Mr. Caruso, please sit down."

I bite my lip to stop the smile as Niccolò does exactly as she instructs. I'm surprised. I didn't think he'd take an order from anyone who isn't Rocco.

"Inessa, what was your pregnancy like?"

I swipe my tongue along my bottom lip and glance at Niccolò. He's watching me with his assessing gaze, but I see the worry swirling within his dark orbs. He gives me a little nod, and I know that he's listening.

"Hard," I whisper, hating to admit that. "It took me months to understand what was happening in my body. When I realized that I was pregnant, I wanted an abortion."

"Why didn't you get one?" she asks. There's no judgment in her tone, no horror or accusation, just calmness. I like that.

"I wasn't allowed to get one. I didn't want a baby," I whisper. I'm so angry at myself for thinking that way, but back then, I was terrified of what having a baby would mean. "I was sixteen. I was scared. I didn't know what would happen."

She nods. "The father—"

I shake my head, cutting her off. "I don't know who her father is," I confess.

"Do you want to talk about that, Inessa? Do you want to tell us why you don't know?" Lena asks, not once taking her eyes off me.

“There was a deal done. I’m not sure when, but I was young. Sergei made a deal with Aleksei that he’d be the only one to have me that way.” I close my eyes and pull in a deep breath. A coldness settles over my body. It’s one I’ve felt every day of my life. I hadn’t even realized that it had gone. But talking about this has brought it back. “Aleksei lied to Sergei. They were similar in that they hated being told what to do, and they’d take whatever the hell they wanted.”

“Okay,” Lena says, her voice a little thick. “What about the birth? How was that?”

“Painful,” I say through a laugh. “But I got through it, and then Alya was in my arms, and it was the best day of my life. All the fear and pain that I had felt before she was born was worth it because I had her.”

“How long did the abuse go on for?”

“The first time I remember them beating me, I was five. It happened before that, but that was my first real memory of it.”

“And sexually?”

“Sixteen,” I breathe. “They both took me,” I confess.

“You’re doing great, Inessa. Really good. There’s so much to unpack but you’re doing great.”

I open my eyes and see Niccolò’s head bowed as he sits and listens.

“You haven’t mentioned your parents, Inessa. Where are they?”

“They’re dead. My parents moved to Chicago and opened a store. Unfortunately, they opened it in Bratva territory. The Bratva were running a protection ring and my parents didn’t have a choice. They had to pay. But the shop wasn’t bringing

in enough money for them to pay for the protection the Bratva made them pay for, along with the rent and food, so they fell behind on their payments.” I learned so much about what my parents went through. Sergei and Aleksei were always talkative when they were angry. They loved to gloat about what they did to my parents.

“Carry on,” Lena says with a smile. “I’m listening.”

“They discovered they were pregnant, and they wanted to flee. They wanted to run. But they didn’t. Instead, they stayed. I was three days old when they gave me to the Bratva in return for their debt to be cleaned.” I would rather die than hand Alya over to anyone. No, I wouldn’t do it. I never would give my child up to someone for a debt. “They were killed anyway. It didn’t matter if they gave me up or not, they were going to die.”

“Do you hate them?” she asks me, and again, there’s no judgment in her voice.

“Yes,” I answer honestly. “I hate them for not running. Had they ran, I wouldn’t have ended up living the life I did and my daughter wouldn’t have been a product of rape.”

“That affects you, doesn’t it?”

I nod. “I’m scared that if she finds out, it’ll damage her. I know that if it were the other way round and I was a product of rape, I’d be affected. I want to protect my child. I want her to be happy and healthy. I don’t want her life to be tainted.”

It’s my worst fear. That I won’t be able to protect Alya from the past. I don’t want her to find out about how she was conceived or even about my past. I’d rather her live a life where she doesn’t have to deal with the pain from my past.

“I’m crazy, aren’t I?” I ask with a weary smile.

Lena shakes her head. “Not at all. You’re not crazy. You’re a good mom, Inessa. You want to protect her. You want to shield her from the world that hurt you. It’s understandable and even normal to do that.”

“Why didn’t my parents do it?” I ask, feeling like a little girl again wondering why my parents didn’t love me enough to protect me.

“Some people don’t have the strength to stand up against those who want to harm us. Your parents did what they thought was best for them. They’re dead now, Inessa, and it’s perfectly okay to hate the choices that they made, especially as they impacted your life so deeply. It may even take some time to put that hatred to bed and let them go.”

Relief washes through me. I don’t feel like such a bitch for hating them. Their actions led to a lifetime of pain, something that I’m not sure can ever be healed.

“What’s your favorite color, Inessa?” Lena asks, making me look at her in shock. That wasn’t something I had expected. She smiles at me. “I always ask my patients this question.”

“Purple and blue,” I reply, looking over at Niccolò. I smile when I see that his shirt is in fact a deep blue. He looks good in it.

“Blue represents calmness and responsibility, and it is often associated with sadness,” she tells me. “Do you feel calm?”

I nod. “I had to be calm. There was no other emotion I could have. I’ve perfected being numb.”

“You’ve had so much responsibility in your life. You’ve had to grow so much at such a young age,” she tells me,

glancing between Niccolò and I. “Does he wear blue much?”

I shake my head. “This is the first time I’ve seen him wear the color, but I think he should wear it more often,” I say low, my cheeks heating as I speak.

“I agree,” Lena laughs.

“What does purple represent?” Niccolò asks, speaking for the first time since he sat down.

“Purple is a harder one. There are many different views on what it represents. Most think it is luxury and royalty, but in Inessa’s case, I would state that it would represent frustration and sadness. It could even represent trust and reliability.”

“What’s yours, Mr. Caruso?” Lena asks him, and I smile, glad to have him answer something too.

“Red,” he responds, and I make a mental note of it.

Lena’s smile widens. “I’m not surprised. Red represents sacrifice, danger, and courage, it is the color of blood. In Europe, the color red is most commonly associated with heat, activity, passion, sexuality, anger, love, and joy. I’d hazard a guess and say that it fits you perfectly, Mr. Caruso.”

My cheeks heat. Definitely. Niccolò is an amazing lover, and he has so much passion—or we did when we were together. But he’s filled with so much anger that it radiates off him.

Lena glances at her watch. “Unfortunately, that is time. I’ll be back tomorrow, and we can talk some more, if that’s okay with you?”

I nod. I’d like that. It wasn’t too hard today. I was scared at first, but it was okay. I was able to speak, and she was understanding and never pushed me.

“I would like to have my session with Inessa to be the two of us tomorrow, if that is okay, Mr. Caruso?”

“Of course,” he says. “Inessa will be discharged once the doctor has been by. Tomorrow, your session will be at our home.”

Lena smiles. “That’s perfect. I’ll see you tomorrow, Inessa,” she says as she gets to her feet.

Niccolò follows her to the door and the two of them speak. I watch as Lena narrows her eyes at him. I love that she doesn’t take his shit.

When he returns, he raises a brow at me in question. “Your charms don’t work on her.”

His lips twitch. “Charms?”

I nod. “Yes, charms. She doesn’t seem to like you.”

He shrugs. “I don’t give a fuck about her opinion. Yours is the only one I care about.”

My heart swells at his words. He can be this amazing, sweet man, yet he has the darkest side to him that scares me. I don’t know how to deal with it.

“Can we go home now?” I ask, really wanting to go and be with my baby.

“Soon,” he promises me.

I have no idea what’s going to happen when we do return home. I just hope that I’m able to find a way to start living my life.

NICCOLÒ

“How is she settling in?” Elio asks, his gaze on his wife, who’s currently sat talking to my own. “She’s so at ease with Alya. How did we not know about the baby? Why was it never on any intel we uncovered?”

That’s something Gio and I have discussed, and it all goes back to Kirill. “Right now, I’m more focused on Inessa recovering before I go and kill someone,” I tell him, and his lips twitch. “I don’t want her left alone. What’s happened to her hasn’t hit her yet, not fully, and Inessa can’t deal with pain like others would.”

My wife has been conditioned to endure it until she can’t any longer, and I won’t sit back and watch her self-harm again. I can’t do it again. While she’s recovering from her injuries, Gio and I are coming up with ways that she can effectively let her emotions out without harming herself.

“Where’s Dario?” I ask. I haven’t seen him in a few days.

“In Missouri. He’s looking at properties. It’s time for the fucker to fly the nest and become the man Rocco and I know that he is.”

I smile. “He’s changed a lot. He’s proven himself more than capable of being an Underboss. He’ll thrive in Missouri.”

Elio nods. “He will. Not to mention he’s got Portia there.”

I shake my head. “He’s still chasing her?” She’s Teagan’s best friend and lives in Jefferson City, Missouri. Every time I see the two of them together, Portia and Dario are on and off.

Elio shrugs. “I don’t think he stopped. He’s pissed that she’s close to Kelvin, and Dario fucking hates it. I think he’s about ready to shoot the English asshole and be done with it.”

I can’t help but chuckle. These fucking Gallos are jealous of anyone who goes near their women. Kelvin Acaster is an enigma. The man knows everyone’s business and owns more properties in the USA than most. He helped the Gallaghers when Jade’s cousin Chloe went missing—it was when Elio was burned by those fucking bikers. Since then, Kelvin has been a fucking fixture in all of our lives whether we like it or not.

“You’ll find it funny when he’s all over Inessa like a fucking rash,” he grouses.

The doorbell rings and Jade moves toward the door. My house is filled with people—something that I don’t like, but my wife seems to thrive on. They’re all here for Inessa to welcome her home. I put my foot down yesterday when I brought her home from the hospital. The Gallo and Gallagher families wanted to be here, and while I understand they want her to know they care, she needed rest and to be able to spend time with Alya, so I said no. However, the women in these families don’t know how to take no for an answer and decided to come over this morning, along with their husbands.

“Mr. Caruso.” I hear the dry tone of Lena, Inessa’s therapist.

“Lena,” I reply equally as dry. “Inessa’s in the living room. I have the library set up for the two of you.” I had to do something when all the crazy people descended on my house this morning with no intention of leaving.

“Perfect,” she says as she moves further into the house.

“Christ, Nic, what did you do to piss off Lena?” Jade asks with a disapproving look.

I shrug. “She doesn’t like me.”

Elio grins. “Nor me. There’s not much we can do about it. She helps our wives and that’s the main thing.”

Jade sighs. “You two are ridiculous,” she comments.

“How is Santino?” I ask, knowing that Andrea’s youngest boy is still with Jade and Rocco. Andrea’s mother-in-law has said that she’s too old to take care of the baby, and Jade and Rocco have been unable to locate another member of the family. The poor kid is alone.

She nods, a heavy sigh escaping her. “He’s good. Thriving and happy. I don’t know what to do. There’s no one to take him.”

I shrug. “Why don’t you and Rocco adopt him?”

I know they’ve been thinking of starting a family, and with the miscarriage that Jade suffered, it could be too soon. But I don’t know anyone who’d look after the boy better than they would.

She glances at her husband, who’s making his way over to us. “I’m not sure that’ll be the way to go.”

“Why?” Elio asks, his brows knitted together. “The boy needs a family and he’s got one. You and Roc. No one would

take better care of him than you would. Andrea would want someone he trusted to take care of his kids. He trusted Rocco.”

“Not now,” Rocco says, glaring at his brother. “This isn’t a discussion for now.”

Right now, both Santino and Alya are in the backyard with Jade’s parents, her brothers and sisters-in-law, along with her nieces and nephews. The only people in this house are the five of us, along with Inessa and Lena, who are now in the library.

“I think it’s the perfect time,” Elio returns. “Who else is going to take the kid?”

“Elio,” Jade says softly. “We know our world. Santino is a baby, and we’d love to have him, but you know what will happen.”

“Then it’s time to set the precedent,” I say, knowing what she means. “So what if Santino isn’t your blood? He’ll be your son and that makes him yours.”

“You think the men will allow that?” Rocco asks with a raised brow. “You think that when the time comes, they’ll want a man who isn’t my blood taking the helm?”

“If the boy was raised by you, they would. Anyone who doesn’t, well...” I leave the words hanging. It’s not Santino’s fault that his parents are dead, and if Jade and Rocco want to raise him, then the boy should be given the same respect as any child that Jade and Rocco conceive.

“Exactly,” Elio growls. “It shouldn’t matter what anyone else thinks. Look at Jade’s cousin. He’s the head of Spain and he’s not Denis’ kid. It doesn’t matter,” he reiterates.

Denis Gallagher is Jade’s cousin. He lives in Ireland and has more kids than I can count. He’s also a good man who loves his family. His second son, Malcom, isn’t biologically

his, but that didn't stop Denis or the Gallaghers from having Malcom run their organization out of Spain.

Rocco and Jade share a look, and I see the warmth in Jade's eyes. She wants this, and Rocco isn't a man to deny his wife anything.

"I'll have my attorney get the paperwork set up." He turns to me. "Have you thought more about what we discussed yesterday?"

I nod. "I'm going to talk to her once all you fuckers go home."

I heard every word that was spoken yesterday between Inessa and Lena in the hospital, and my heart fucking broke when she spoke about wanting to protect Alya. She doesn't want her daughter to find out what happened, and I understand that. I have a proposition for her. I want to adopt Alya. I want her to put my name on the birth certificate. That way, Alya will know that she has a father rather than wondering who it is or knowing what those cunts did to her mom.

"Ominous," Jade says. "But if there's anything that you need, don't hesitate to let us know. You're family, Nic, and that means that Inessa and Alya are too. Whatever you need, we're here to help."

Rocco slides his arm around Jade's shoulders and pulls her into his body. "What the man needs is to have time with his wife alone. It's time for us to go. Nic and Inessa have our numbers if they need us."

I grin. This is why Rocco's the shit. He knows his men and what they need. He also knows I'm not a sociable person and having this many people in my house is grating on my fucking nerves.

“Fine,” Jade sighs. “But we’ll be back tomorrow.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” I know that having the women here isn’t because of me. They saw the devastation of what happened to Teagan, and they want to ensure that Inessa knows that she’s not alone. I’m fucking grateful that they’re doing that, and I know Inessa is too. She’s never had friends before, and all of a sudden, she has four women wanting to befriend her and an older woman wanting to mother her. It’s going to be a lot to deal with.

Everyone says their goodbyes until it’s just Alya and I left while Inessa and Lena talk in the library. It’s been years since I’ve held a baby in my arms. My heart fucking cracks as Alya looks up at me, those blue eyes of hers just like her mom’s, dusky and bright. She reaches up and tries to grab my stubble. When she’s unable to clench it in her grasp, she runs her hands down my cheeks.

I glance at the time and realize it’s going to be time for her bottle soon. Inessa has everything set up and ready for her when she needs it. My wife is an amazing mother. She loves Alya. She’s so besotted with her daughter that it’s amazing to watch. I feel it deeply, knowing that Chiara never felt what Alya does. Maria was never the one to show her love. She had Chiara because it was the thing to do in our world, but she didn’t love our daughter. It’s good to watch Inessa with Alya. I know that no matter what, she’s going to love and protect her.

I get Alya’s diaper changed, and the moment I do, she starts to fuss, letting me know that it’s time for food. I fucking hate that Alya doesn’t scream or cry often, and I can only guess that’s because she, like her mother, was conditioned not to do so. If I could, I’d kill that fucking bastard, Sergei, over

and over again. I think his death was too easy. He deserved to suffer a fucking lot more than he did.

I get Alya's bottle ready and settle on the couch with her, putting on some crappy kids tv show that I saw her watching earlier—I think it's the colorful lights and shapes that she was glued to. Then I begin to feed her. It's like riding a bike. I haven't forgotten what to do. It's come back naturally.

I watch as Alya greedily gulps down her bottle, and my heart begins to thaw. The anger and pain that had encased it when my daughter died is slowly ebbing away. I know Chiara would be happy that her friend is finally free. I'm just angry that she never got to see it.

Once Alya's finished drinking, I burp her, making sure to get all the gas out of her. Of course, like most children, once she's finished, she's tired. Her eyes droop, and it doesn't take long until she's fast asleep in my arms.

I want this. I fucking want a life with my wife—a woman who I love more than words can express—and I want her daughter. I want us to be a family. I know for that to happen, I've got a lot to make up for, but I'm not a man who gives up. I'm not going to. Inessa and Alya are mine, and I'm going to do whatever it takes to ensure they stay mine.

INESSA

“**H**ow are you really doing, Inessa?” Lena asks me. We’ve been talking for ages, and she keeps pausing and looking at me.

We’ve gone through the abuse, the sexual abuse that I suffered, and she’s asked me questions about how it felt and how I’ve managed to deal with it. We’ve skated around the subject of self-harm. I’m not ready to discuss it yet. I’m not sure if I’ll ever be ready. It’s something that has been my crutch for years.

“I’m okay,” I repeat for the fifth time since this session started.

Lena sighs as she sits forward and clasps her hands together on her lap. “You suffered a miscarriage only days ago,” she says gently.

My stomach clenches at her words, my throat closes, and my eyes fill with tears. I haven’t spoken about it because it hurts to do so. I swallow back the tears, not wanting them to fall.

“Hey,” she whispers softly. “I’m here to listen to you, to help you. You can tell me whatever you’re feeling.”

“It’s my fault,” I cry. “It’s all my fault.”

She shakes her head. “That’s not true, Inessa. It’s not.”

“It is. I ran away from Niccolò. I wanted to get away. I couldn’t be stuck here anymore. I just needed to get away and look what happened. Sergei took me and my baby died.” I can’t hold back the tears any longer. They pour out of me like an open wound.

“Inessa, what Niccolò did to you, hurt. He hurt you and you did the only thing you could. You ran. That’s a natural instinct. When we’re hurting, our fight or flight instinct kicks in, and, Inessa, you’ve had to fight every day of your life. You’ve had to be strong. Sometimes running is the only option we have.”

“I feel empty,” I whisper. “I didn’t even know I was pregnant and yet I feel empty. I’ve lost something so precious. How did I not know? How shitty am I to not know?” The tears continue to tumble down my face.

“This isn’t your fault, Inessa. From what Niccolò told me, you were in the very early stages of the pregnancy. You couldn’t have known. It was too early.”

My body buckles as my emotions take over me. It’s such a surreal experience to let the tears flow and allow my sobs to wrack through my body. I’ve only done it once or twice before and I still find it weird. “Why me?”

She gets up off her chair and walks over to me. “Oh, honey,” she whispers softly. “It happens to a lot more people than you think. More than thirty percent of pregnancies result in the loss of the baby. It’s not your fault. I’m so sorry for your loss.” She wraps her arms around me and holds me tight.

“I’m so angry,” I cry. “So damn angry. Why did this happen? Haven’t I been through enough?”

Lena doesn't say anything. She just continues to hold me, letting me cry it all out.

"Have you spoken to Niccolò about the loss?" she asks me once I'm able to compose myself.

I lift my shoulders and shrug. "Only on the night we found out."

"Do you think he's dealing with it?"

My brows knit together. "Niccolò?" I ask, wondering why she's asking if he's dealing with it.

"He lost his daughter a few years ago, correct?" she questions, and I nod. "How did he deal with that?"

I swipe away my tears with the palms of my hands. "He didn't," I whisper. "He's still not let it out." He couldn't have, not when he was so determined for revenge. There's no way that he could have let the grief out. Instead, he's kept it bottled in, seeking the vengeance that he desperately needs.

"Do you think he'll feel guilty for the loss of your baby?"

My heart clenches as I think about it. "Yes," I whisper. "I think he feels the guilt," I say as I remember the night he saved me from Sergei, the way he held me tight and wouldn't let me go. "He shouldn't. It wasn't his fault."

She nods. "It was a tragic loss, one that was neither of your faults."

I wring my hands together. She's right. It was a tragic loss, one that I'm not sure I'll be able to get past. I should have protected my child, but I didn't, and now they're dead.

"We're almost out of time," she says softly. "Before I go, I want to ask you something."

I look up at her through teary eyes and wait for her to continue speaking.

“Have you sat down and had a conversation with Niccolò without anyone being around?” I shake my head. “I think it would be productive for you to speak with him. Be open and honest, Inessa. You’ve had to hide your feelings for such a long time. You’ve had to repress the emotions. We’re not doing that any longer. To be able to express yourself is natural. It’s our way of being able to deal with everything. I’d like for you to talk with Niccolò. Explain to him how he hurt you and why you’re unsure of whether you can trust him again.”

“I did tell him. The night I lost the baby, I told him.”

“Your emotions were running high that night,” she explains. “The two of you had suffered a loss, you had been assaulted, and he was worried. Tonight, if you’re ready, have that conversation with him. Maybe you’ll be able to get him to understand why what he did affected you so much.”

I swallow hard. The thought of confronting him scares me. Not because I think he’ll hurt me, but because I don’t know how to express myself properly.

“You can call me anytime you need me,” she says as she rises to her feet. “But I’ll be back tomorrow, and we can discuss other ways of expressing yourself.”

I nod, knowing that she means other ways rather than self-harming. The conversation that she had with Niccolò at the hospital was about me and what he wanted her to know in case I hadn’t told her. He let her know about the miscarriage and the self-harming. It hurt knowing he did that. He told her something that I wasn’t ready for a stranger to know about.

I rise to my feet and wrap my arms around my stomach. Lena's eyes soften. "Tomorrow," she promises me.

I follow her out of the library and down the stairs toward the front door. "If you get scared or worried, remember the technique that I showed you," she tells me as she reaches for the door handle. "Deep breath in and slowly release it as you count. Do this over and over again, until you feel the fear or anxiousness slowly ebb away."

I close the door after we say our goodbyes and go in search of Niccolò. The house is quiet. It seems as though everyone has gone and it's just us. My pace quickens as I push toward the living room, wanting to ensure that both Alya and Niccolò are still here. My heart fills with so much emotion as I see Niccolò holding my daughter in his arms. It's such a tender hold he has on her, but what makes my throat lodge with unshed tears is the look of such sweetness he has when he looks at her.

He'd have been such a good father to our baby.



I've put it off long enough. We've had dinner, Alya is fast asleep, and the night has worn on. It's now or never. I do as Lena taught me. I take a deep breath and slowly release it, counting down from five. It takes a few turns, but I manage to gather enough strength to speak.

He's already watching me, his gaze firmly on mine. There's worry swirling in those dark orbs, and I know that it's out of concern for me. "Niccolò, can we talk?"

He doesn't hesitate. He reaches for the remote control for the TV and switches it off. "Of course, *cara mia*."

I hate that I love when he calls me that. I get tingles in my spine, especially when he uses that rough tone to his voice.

“I don’t know where to begin,” I mumble. “Lena wants me to explain how and why you hurt me.”

He nods. “I’m listening,” he says, leaning forward in his seat. I know that he is, that he’s being attentive, and while I love that side, it’s making me wary as it’s not what he’s done before.

“Chiara was my best friend,” I begin, my words a little hoarse. “She was the only person who saw me. My entire life, I’ve been treated like I’m lower than scum. If I was in the way, I’d be punched, kicked, spat on, anything to get me away from the men of the Bratva. But Chiara never did that. She treated me like I belonged in this world.”

My eyes start to fill with tears. I have a feeling that I’m not going to get through this conversation without crying.

“She was like a sister. The only family that I had. I would never have betrayed her. I swear to you, Niccolò, if I had known that she was that deep with Aleksei, I would have protected her. I would have done anything possible to get her free of him.”

“I know,” he says thickly, his eyes shining with unshed tears. “I know that now.”

“But you believed that I would have done that.” I’m unable to keep the anger and pain out of my voice. “That’s what hurt. God, Nico, I fell so hard for you. It hurts so much that you’d believe I’d ever do anything to hurt the people I love.”

“I’m sorry.” His words seem genuine, and I believe that he is sorry, but I’m not sure if it’s because he truly is, or to ease the guilt that he has.

‘I tried my hardest to get Chiara to not take the drugs. I pleaded with her that we’d find another way. Nothing I said worked. She had so many demons that she was fighting. She wasn’t strong enough to fight them, until you stepped in.’ The tears fall from my eyes, and I leave them unchecked.

“I made plenty of mistakes,” he tells me. “I didn’t realize that Chiara was addicted until it was too late. Had I been a better father, I would have seen the signs.” He shakes his head. “The life I lead, I’ve seen the lowest of lows, Inessa. I know what a drug addict looks like, but I didn’t know my daughter was one until she was so deep in them.”

“You got her clean,” I tell him. “I was so damn proud of her for getting clean. I can’t imagine the pain and strength it took to do that, but it was down to you. You got her clean.”

He nods. “I did, but it wasn’t good enough.”

“Her demons got the better of her. It could happen to any of us.” I know that my own chase me on a daily basis. It’s hard to fight them when you’re exhausted and in need of help but there’s nowhere to turn to.

“I don’t regret many things in my life, Inessa,” he begins. “But there are two things I do. Not being there for my daughter when she needed me the most, and for being a bastard to you. I pushed you too far. I should have known that you weren’t involved.”

I nod. “You should have. She was my sister, Nico. I loved her. I couldn’t—wouldn’t—have done anything to hurt her.”

“Forgiveness isn’t something I deserve, *cara mia*, but it’s something that I seek. It may take some time, but I hope that one day, you can forgive me for hurting you.”

“Why did you?” I ask, needing to understand why he did that to me. “Why did you make me fall in love with you? Did you lie to me? Did you never care at all?” It’s something that’s been playing on my mind. He led me to believe that he fell for me too, but I don’t know if that was him just saying that so I’d do what he wanted or if he truly did.

“I found her,” he tells me, and my heart breaks for him. “She was already dead when I found her. She was ice cold to the touch, her lips blue, and she wasn’t breathing.” He shakes his head. “I’ve never seen her look so peaceful as she did at that moment.”

My God. I can’t imagine the pain and grief that he must feel. The thought of it happening to Alya makes me feel like throwing up.

“I’ve let the grief of her death consume me. I’ve become angrier and colder. I wanted to make everyone pay. I wasn’t thinking straight, Inessa. All I could see was her dead body, and then there was you.” He swallows hard. “I couldn’t help but think that you should have stopped it. You were her friend. You should have helped her.”

“I tried,” I whisper. “I really did.”

He pushes to his feet and comes to sit beside me on the couch. “I know, and I’m the one who fucked up, Inessa, not you. I should have never come for you, but I don’t regret it. In doing so, you and Alya are now safe. You’re here and you’re no longer in danger. I’d do it all over again if it meant keeping you safe.”

I gaze up at him, my heart pounding in my chest as I take in his deep, dark eyes. I can feel my hatred and love for him swirling inside me like a boiling tempest, and it’s making me dizzy.

“Thank you,” I whisper thickly; the tears streaming down my face mixing with my words of gratitude. “For saving us.”

He slides his hand along the back of my neck, careful of the bandage that’s there from the removal of the tracker. He pulls me close to him until our chests are touching. His lips crash against mine in a possessive kiss that leaves me trembling in its wake.

“Never,” he mutters against my mouth as he pulls away breathlessly, “thank me for that, *cara mia*.” He holds me tight as he speaks, his voice heavy with emotion. “Don’t ever doubt my love for you, Inessa. My actions weren’t right, but my feelings were true.”

The intensity of his words leaves me speechless, overwhelmed, and unable to look away from him. I look up at him, and those dark eyes of his have such a pull on me. While I hate that he hurt me, listening to his explanation has helped me understand why he did what he did.

Holy shit. Did he just say that he loves me?

NICCOLÒ

The look of disbelief in her eyes is like a kick to the gut. She doubts my love for her, and I understand why. She's lived a life without it. She has no idea what it's like to be loved.

I take her face between my hands, those dusky eyes of hers so fucking bright and beautiful. "No one has captivated me the way you have, Inessa. You are the only woman I have ever loved. I've never told anyone but you those three words."

Her eyes widen and tears shine in their depths. "What?" she whispers, her voice catching as one lone tear falls from her eye. "But you were married."

I press a chaste kiss against her lips, so fucking relieved that she's not pushing me away. I reach for her hips and pull her onto my lap. I keep my hands on her hips, letting her know that I want her here. She molds her body into mine, her knees either side of my hips, and she looks at me with such a tenderness that my fucking heart clenches. How is it that a woman who's been through so fucking much heartache, someone that I've hurt deeply, can still look at me with such care and love?

I'm a lucky motherfucker. I know what I have in my hands, and I'm going to fight tooth and nail to keep it. Inessa

and Alya are everything, and I'll do whatever the fuck it takes to protect them.

"I'm not sure how much you know about the politics of our world," I say. The woman knows more than she should but that's because those fucking bastards who abused her for years treated her like shit and were extremely chatty.

"Some," she murmurs.

"Mine and Maria's marriage was political, so to speak. Our fathers wanted to ensure their ranks within the Famiglia were strengthened, and having a marriage between their children was the way to do that. I married her for duty, and she married me because she had no choice." Her eyes spark, and I have a feeling that she's thinking that she knows how that feels. "Maria gave me a daughter because it was expected of her. It was what the agreement was between our fathers. Maria would be married and have the life that being the wife of a soldier—soon to be captain—would bring her, including wealth, power, and respect. In return, I would have a wife and children."

"It sounds so clinical," she says softly, her eyes roaming my face.

"That's because it is. Some of the marriages end with love, but for Maria and I, it ended with hatred."

Her lips press together, and she glances down between our bodies. "Did she get help after Chiara was born?"

My brows knit together. "What do you mean?"

"It's hard raising a child, Nicky. I know that without the help of Kirill and Czarina, I wouldn't have been able to do it."

I run my hands along her back, not missing the shiver that runs through her body nor the goosebumps on her arms. "I loved my child, Inessa. The first few months, I was home

more than ever. Back then, both mine and Maria's mothers were alive, and they were around to help as we were their only children. She had support. She just wasn't maternal. More often than not, as Chiara grew up, she'd tell her that she wished she never had her."

Inessa shakes her head. "That's awful to say to your child."

"Chiara and Maria butted heads all the fucking time. Never a dull moment between them, and it didn't help matters when Maria would lose her shit about me caring more for my child than I did my wife." I fucking hated her for that shit. "In the end, Maria was so caught up in her own shit that she had no idea that Chiara wasn't doing okay."

"What happened to her?"

My body freezes, and my blood runs cold. Fuck. I always knew this conversation would happen. I'm not sure if now is the best time, but Christ, no secrets and no lies.

"The day Chiara died, I lost it. I went into a rage, and Maria had pissed me off with her lack of awareness or even care for her daughter. I killed her."

She stares at me. There's no horror or fear in her eyes, but she's watching me carefully. It's fucking unnerving. "Say something, *cara mia*," I urge, needed her to fucking speak.

"I'm so sorry for your loss. It's every parent's worst nightmare."

I breathe a sigh of relief. Christ, this woman completely amazes me. When I think she'll react one way, she does the complete opposite.

"How are you doing, baby?" I ask, glad that the conversation about Maria is out of the way.

She blows out a breath, her eyes closing, but not before I see the pain slashing through them. “I’m tired,” she admits. “So damn tired. I keep thinking that this is all just a dream and that I’m not actually free.”

“You are free, *cara mia*. It’s just going to take some time to get used to it.”

She nods. “I know. I ran out of hope a long time ago, Nicky. I didn’t think this would ever happen, but it has, and I don’t know what to do.”

I press a kiss against her lips. “Whatever you want, Nessa. Whatever the fuck you want.”

She gives me the sweetest soft smile before resting her head against my shoulder. “Are you okay?” she asks. “You’ve been taking care of me since we found out about the miscarriage. Who’s taking care of you?”

My body goes solid at her words.

“I’m so sorry for losing our baby.”

I tighten my hands on her hips. “You don’t ever apologize for that, baby. It wasn’t your fault.” I wish I had gotten to her in time. I wish that I could have helped her sooner. But I couldn’t. The person to blame for all of this is Sergei and that cunt is dead.

“I feel so empty,” she whispers. “I cry at the drop of a hat. I can’t stop thinking about the baby.”

“We’ll get there,” I assure her. “It’s going to take some time, but one day, we’ll get there.”

She raises her head and looks at me. “What if I don’t want another baby?” she whispers, her words soft, but I can hear the fear in her voice.

“That’s okay,” I promise her. “We have Alya.”

Her lips pull into a smile and her eyes shine with tears.

“I wanted to talk to you about something, and I feel this is a good time.” She tenses in my arms, but I continue. “After hearing you talk in the hospital, I’ve been thinking a lot. I want to adopt Alya. I want her birth certificate to have me named as her father.”

She pulls in a sharp breath, her eyes wide and her fingers clenching around my clothes.

“If we can do that, she’ll never know what happened, *caramia*. We can save her from that pain. When she gets older, she’ll always have a father, no matter what.” I know that it’s important to her and it’s something that I can understand.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her tears once again spilling down her cheeks. “God, I’m a mess.”

“Not even fucking close,” I tell her as I pull her further into me. “Do you think talking with Lena is helping? If not, we can find you someone new.”

“It’s helping. I like her. She’s nice. It’s just a lot of things to work through.”

I press a kiss to her head. “If anyone can do it, it’s you.” I’m so fucking proud of how she’s dealing with everything. How she’s slowly recovering from what happened.

“I still need time,” she whispers, and I know that she doesn’t just mean coming to terms with her past, but also with me.

“I know,” I say, wishing like fuck that I could change the past, that I would have been able to think clearer, been able to realize just how fucked up Inessa’s life was. “Let’s get you to

bed,” I say softly as I get to my feet with her still in my arms. She’s so fucking light, too damn light.

I walk her to the guest bedroom—she isn’t comfortable spending the night in my room just yet. I let her slide down my body, not missing her intake of breath as she feels my thickening cock.

“I’m down the hall if you need me,” I tell her as I press a kiss to her lips.

I want to do a fuck of a lot more than that, but I know I can’t push her. She’s not ready for anything more than what we have right now and that’s on me. I fucked it up. I hurt her. Now I have to repair the damage I caused.

“Good night, Nico,” she says as she steps into the room and closes the door.

I need a shower. A cold fucking one.



“Where are we going?” Inessa asks, glancing out the passenger’s window.

“You’ll see when we get there,” I tell her with a grin.

She shakes her head, but she’s unable to keep the smile from her face.

It’s been almost a week since Inessa and I sat down and spoke about what happened. In that time, she’s kept her sessions with Lena, and they seem to be helping. From what Inessa has said, they’ve focused a lot on her self-harm and have come up with ways for an outlet instead of harming herself.

That's good, and I'm glad she has that. Gio and I have also helped her in that department. Gio and I turned the basement into a gym, letting her know that she can come to it at any time and let off steam. There's also a boxing ring down there. Gio has already started to teach Inessa self-defense moves.

"Mama," Alya says as she rattles her toy in her hand.

"Hey, baby girl. Are you having fun?"

Over the past week, it's not just Inessa who's grown into herself. Alya has too. She's a lot more vocal not only in speaking but also with her cries and happiness. Seeing how repressed she was has made not only me but the men that are Inessa and Alya's guards beyond pissed.

I truly let that cunt die too easily. Fuck.

I pull into the cemetery and park the car in one of the empty spaces.

"What's going on?" she asks as we climb out of the vehicle. I reach for Alya's stroller while Inessa takes her out of the car.

"Just a few more minutes, *cara mia*," I say softly as I reach for Alya and strap her into the stroller.

I paid a lot of money to have this done quickly. I don't give a fuck how much it cost. I just knew I needed it done. I spoke to Lena about it, and she agreed that it would help not only Inessa but me.

We walk over to the grave that marks where Chiara is buried, and Inessa's unable to keep her emotions in check. I haven't even shown her the reason we're here, but I know she needs to speak with Chiara and finally say her goodbye.

I take the stroller from her and give her some privacy, and she talks with my daughter. I come to see her every week. It's something I'll never stop doing. Chiara is and will always be my daughter, and I fucked up with her, but I miss her with every day that passes, and I know in the depths of my soul that she'll be happy that her friend is safe and thriving.

"Thank you," Inessa says to me a while later.

I've walked around the perimeter of the cemetery and Alya is fast asleep in her stroller. "That's okay, *cara mia*. You needed to say your goodbye. Are you ready to see what I wanted to show you?"

Her eyes widen at my words. But she nods.

I take her to the grave that's behind Chiara's. It's a plot that I purchased years ago. It was meant to be Maria's, but after the shit that went down, I couldn't have her near my daughter in death. Maria is buried in this cemetery, but not here.

The headstone reads: **Our little angel, our arms will forever ache to hold you. We hold you in our hearts until we can hold you in Heaven.**

Inessa turns to me, her eyes wide, her face pale, and tears streaming down her face. "Oh, Nico," she whispers. "Oh," she cries as her knees tremble and her body lurches.

I push forward, knowing what's going to happen. I try to catch her but I'm too slow. She drops to her knees and sobs. I pull her into my arms and hold her.

"Beautiful," she cries against me. "So beautiful. Thank you."

I can't speak past the lump in my throat. Seeing the grave makes it all real. Fuck. Inessa continues to sob, and I can't do

anything but hold her as she lets the pain of losing our child out.

I get to my feet, Inessa in my arms, having cried herself to sleep. It's a struggle to carry her while pushing Alya's stroller, but I manage to get both girls back to the vehicle and into the car. Both mother and daughter are so fucking alike in looks and mannerisms, even the way they sleep.

I have lost a lot in my life, but I have also gained something amazing.

I have my wife and daughter.

I'm a lucky bastard.

INESSA

“Shlyukha,” Aleksei growls as he continues to thrust into me. My body is floating. The pain is gone. He’s beaten me to the point I’m unable to feel anything.

“Christ,” I hear a deep growl.

I don’t recognize the voice. Fear encases me. Is he going to join in?

“Get the fuck off her.” My heart soars. I know that gravelly, deep tone. God, I know it. Niccolò.

“The fuck are you doing here?” I hear Aleksei snarl. “How did you get in?”

“Fucking a child,” an unknown voice says. The weight is lifted off me. “You’re going to die.”

I’m drifting, my body sinking into the abyss.

“How long has this been going on?” Niccolò growls, getting closer. “How long have you been raping her?”

Aleksei scoffs. “Rape? No, she belongs to the Bratva. She’s ours to do with as we want. The shlyukha doesn’t get raped; she takes what I give her, just like your daughter did.”

That sounds about right. I belong to the Bratva. Everything that happens to me is because my parents gave me to them at

the age of three days old.

Another voice fills the air. Who are these people? "Don't touch him, Nic. He's not fucking worth it. He's going to get what's coming to him. He's going to die, and he's going to lose everything he's worked hard for."

"Not here," Elio grunts. "When we get to the bar, you can do whatever the fuck you need to, but not here."

"Christ," the voice growls. "It's time to get out of here. I don't know if she's going to make it through the night. She's been beaten to within an inch of her life."

"There's nothing we can do now," he says, and then there's silence. Utter silence.

"Cara mia, wake up." I hear the deep, gravelly voice of Niccolò and feel his hands on my shoulders, waking me from the depths of my nightmare.

I open my eyes, gasping for breath, tears streaming down my face and sweat drenching my body. "What?" I breathe.

"What the fuck, baby?" he says roughly. "You were thrashing in your sleep. Did you have a nightmare?" His hands brush my hair from my face. "Want to talk about it?"

"It's just a dream," I say, pulling away from his arms. "Just a dream."

"Tell me," he urges me. "What was it about?"

I tell him about my dream, and it's completely fucked up. "It's just a dream," I repeat.

"No, *cara mia*, it wasn't." His voice is low but I hear it. There's an edge to his tone, and he sounds almost remorseful.

I rear back and look at him. “What?” I hiss, unable to believe what I’m hearing. There’s no fucking way.

“That night,” he begins, and chills spread across my body. “It was a clusterfuck, Inessa, so fucked up. Rocco, Elio, Dario and I, we went to Aleksei’s house.” He pauses and looks at me, those dark eyes of his so tortured and pain-filled. “We were there to kill him. What we saw...” He shakes his head. “I wanted to hurt him for what he was doing to you. Christ, baby, you were unconscious.”

“You left me there,” I hiss, my anger hitting once again. “You left me there,” I repeat, my heart shattering into a thousand pieces. “Why?”

“I thought you were dead. You were a fucking mess, *cara mia*. Your face was battered and bloody, and you weren’t moving. Hell, you hadn’t made a sound the entire time we were there.” His jaw clenches and he reaches for me. I can’t hide the flinch as his fingers caress my cheek. “Had I known you were alive, I’d have taken you with me. It was weeks after I left you that I found out you were alive.”

“How?”

“Kirill,” he tells me, and it’s like a shot to the heart. Christ, is there no one in my life who I can trust? No one at all? “I killed Aleksei and Artyom, and in doing so, Kirill gave me information on the Bratva.”

My breathing becomes choppy, my palms become sweaty, and it feels as though the walls are closing in on me. This is what happens when my emotions become too much. I can’t function. I can’t even think.

I try to remember the techniques that Lena taught me, how the breathing will help me regulate my heartrate, but it’s no

use. I'm drowning in the pain right now and there's no fucking way out.

Niccolò takes a hold of my arm and pulls me out of the room, my chest burning as I try to suck in some much-needed oxygen. My head's swimming with everything that he's said. He's still talking to me, but I can't make out the words, just the low hum of his voice.

It's too much. Too fucking much. Whenever I think my life is on the up, something comes along to knock me off my feet.

Niccolò's hands grab my cheeks. He holds me, his face inches from my own. "Breathe, Inessa. Fucking breathe."

I realize that we're in the basement. He brought me here to help me. He's told me repeatedly that he wanted to show me how to let my emotions out. I guess tonight's the night we put that into practice. But I'm unable to move. I'm so fucking terrified, my heart hearts, and I'm broken. "I'm trying," I gasp. "I can't."

"Then fucking hit me," he snarls. "You need to let the anger, pain, and hurt out. Over my fucking dead body will you hurt yourself, so fucking hit me." He releases my face and stands in front of me, hands at his sides, his eyes begging me to hit him.

"Nic—"

"Fucking do it," he snaps.

The anger in his voice is like a crack in the air, and it's all that I need to push me forward. I pull my arm back and let fly. I can't hold back. I do it over and over again. Each time he just stands there and takes everything that I give him. With every hit, my heart shatters. I don't want to hurt him, but I can't stop myself from the rage that's swirling in my body.

“Why?” I scream as I punch my fists against his chest.
“Why did you leave me there, Nico?”

“I’m so fucking sorry,” he says thickly.

“Sorry?” I shout. “Sorry? You’re fucking sorry for leaving me to rot in the bed, for leaving me to the mercy of that monster. You’re sorry?”

“Baby—”

“No,” I cry. “You do not call me that. God, you could have saved me from years of pain and abuse. Instead, you left me to rot.” There’s tears and snot running down my face, but I’m so worked up, my emotions are spilling out, and Niccolò is at the receiving end of it. I punch my fists against his chest over and over again. “You,” I breathe. “You could have saved me.”

“I’m so fucking sorry,” he says again. “If I thought you were alive, Inessa, I’d have gotten you help, but I believed you were dead.”

“Would you have?” I ask, not once letting up on my fists pounding against his chest. “Or would you have let me stay where I was out of your stupid revenge? God, what did I ever do to you, Nico? What did I ever do to anyone to make them hurt me so bad?”

My knees buckle and my heart feels as though it’s about to burst. I can’t hold the sobs in any longer. “Why do you hate me?” I ask, wondering what I did to make someone treat me so badly.

“Nothing.” His voice is filled with grit and determination. “You, *cara mia*, are the purest thing on this earth. You did nothing wrong. I fucked up. I wish I could go back and help you. Save you.” He holds me against his chest and rocks me as I sob against him. “Seeing what Aleksei did to you, it fucking

affected me. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to kill him and make him pay, just as I did to Sergei.”

“What’s wrong with me?” I ask, my body fatigued, but I can’t stop the tears from falling.

“Not a fucking thing. You’re perfect the way you are, Inessa,” he tells me with such tenderness that I cry harder.

“Why does no one love me?” I whimper, my heart feeling as though there’s something heavy sitting on it. There’s such a tightness that I can’t move, can’t breathe, can’t function.

“*Cara mia*, you are beautiful, kind, caring, and so fucking pure hearted that anyone who’s in your presence is drawn to you. The Gallos and Gallaghers aren’t here for me; they’re here for you because you bring out all their protective instincts. But most of all, I love you. I think I loved you before it was legal. Before I should have. You aren’t alone. You’re never going to be, and no one is ever going to hurt you again.”

“Except you,” I whisper. “Don’t you see?” I breathe. “What Aleksei and Sergei did to me didn’t impact me as much as what you’ve done to me. I loved you, Nico. I loved you with everything that I am, and you broke me harder than anyone else ever could have.”

“Fuck,” he growls. “*Cara mia*, tell me how to fix it. How can I make it better?”

I shrug. I have no idea. “I’m tired,” I tell him. So damn tired of fighting the inevitable. There’s only one person who’s going to help me and that’s me. Niccolò has given me the path to ensure that I’m safe, it’s up to me to live my life the way I want, to ensure that Alya is happy and healthy. I don’t need a man to validate me or my daughter. I never did. I just needed someone to give me a chance to live.

“I thought you were dead,” he says gruffly. “All I kept thinking about that night was how I found Chiara, wondering if Aleksei had done to her what he had done to you. I couldn’t think clearly. I couldn’t fucking stand the thought of losing another part of my daughter. I had to leave. I couldn’t stay in that fucking house. I needed to kill those bastards.”

“I know,” I whisper. I know that he was drowning in grief, that he still is. I respect him for wanting to do everything in his power to protect his daughter and get revenge for her death. But in doing so, he hurt me so deeply that I’m not sure I’ll be able to move on.

“Baby,” he breathes, pulling me close to him once again. I don’t push him away. I can’t. I need the comfort, and as much as Nico’s hurt me, I still love him. I love that he’s protective and he wants the best for not only me but Alya. I love how he’s determined to show me that he’s changed, that he’s willing to do whatever it takes to become my husband. But I can’t get past the pain that he left me there, that if he hadn’t, Sergei wouldn’t have hurt me for the years that followed. Had Niccolò done what a normal person would have done and got me to the hospital, then things could have been so very different.

Am I stupid for even thinking that he’ll change, or can I give him another chance; let him have the opportunity to be the husband he so desperately wants to be for me?

NICCOLÒ

TWO MONTHS LATER

“How is she, Lena?”

The good doctor looks at me with a strained smile. She’s trying to remain professional, but we both know that she dislikes me, and I get it. The shit that I’ve done would make a lot of people run for the hills, but not Inessa. She’s stayed, and Lena doesn’t seem to understand that.

“Better,” she replies, her voice strong and her gaze firmly on my wife, who’s cradling Alya in her arms. “It’s been an intense two months of therapy for her, Niccolò, but it’s helping her.”

After her nightmare, it sent her spiraling—not that I can blame her. She was on the verge of death, and instead of helping her, I walked away. That hurt her more than anything else. The sessions she had with Lena ended up being more frequent and intense. But the past few weeks, I’ve seen a change in Inessa. She’s not as withdrawn, she’s finding her feet, she’s smiling more often, and she’s slowly coming into herself.

She’s so fucking beautiful. She has no idea just how stunning she is, but there’s nothing better than watching her as she smiles and plays with Alya.

“Thank you.”

Her smile drops and she releases a harsh breath. “I know what happened between the two of you.”

“I’d assume so,” I reply dryly. “If Inessa’s to get the help she needs, she has to be open with you.”

She rolls her eyes. “Well yes. But Inessa’s been wary of what happens next. She doesn’t know whether to walk away or stay with you.”

If she walks away, I’m finding her. I’ll bring her back home. This is where she belongs, where both she and Alya belong.

“But for some reason, she loves you. One more thing, Niccolò, if she gets hurt again, she’s gone. I need you to understand that. If you hurt her, there’s no keeping her.”

“I won’t,” I vow. I’d rather die than hurt Inessa again. The woman’s been through so fucking much and I’ve added to that. No more. Not ever again.

Lena nods, seemingly satisfied. “Good. I’ve spoken with Inessa and let her know that I think we can push our sessions to once a week.”

“Do you think she’s ready for that?”

She smiles, but this time, it’s not forced. “Yes, she’s more than ready. I’ve slowly been pushing the sessions apart so that she’ll not be so alarmed. I want her to come to my office for her appointments.”

My body goes solid at her words. “What?”

“Niccolò, it’s time,” she tells me. “I know you’re trying to protect her, and I admire that, but keeping her in the house

isn't helping. Start off slowly. Tomorrow, you'll bring her to her appointment and go from there."

Christ. The last time Inessa left the house, she was taken. She was hurt and she lost our baby. The thought of someone getting to her is too much. I'll tear the fucking world apart if it does happen.

"She needs this," she urges me. "Your wife needs to be free, Niccolò. Give her the chance to spread her wings and let her do it with you by her side." She gives me one last smile before she leaves the house.

Christ. Can I do it? Can I loosen the reins that I have in place to protect her?

Two hours later, and I'm having a meeting with Gio in my office.

"Dario's finally settled into Missouri. He's started to gain traction. The men are joining him faster than they joined Elio when he went to Indianapolis," he tells me, and I smile. That's good. The more men we have onside, the better. There are always going to be wars, and when the next one comes along, we're going to have more soldiers fighting alongside us.

"Good. He'll be taking over the farms there now." The Famiglia have farms throughout the US. We have about a dozen in Missouri, and with Dario now the underboss there, he'll be dealing with the product and making sure we get the best supplies to distribute.

Gio nods. "The Famiglia is growing and it's only going to get better."

"Damn fucking straight. Now tomorrow, I need you with me," I tell him. "Inessa has an appointment with Lena, at Lena's office."

Silence ensues as he watches me carefully. “Are you sure about this?” Gio asks, and I nod, even though every inch of me is coiled in protest. “Fuck,” he snarls. “Okay, then we’ll make sure our men are in position. We’ll ensure that she’s never alone.”

This is why he’s my right-hand man and best friend. He’s always one step ahead.

“Tomorrow, we’ll ensure that her appointment goes as smoothly as possible.” I need it to go smoothly. If not, I’m going to lose my fucking mind.

He wraps his knuckles on the desk as he rises to his feet. “I’ll set it up. I’ll talk with the men now.”

I nod. “I’ll let Inessa know the plan. Thanks, Gio.”

I follow him out of the office and go in search of my wife. I find her sitting on the back deck reading a book. “Where’s Alya?” I ask.

She lifts her head and looks at me. “Mama Gallagher wanted to take her for the evening, something about having a sleep over with all her grandbabies. I couldn’t say no, especially when the woman was excited to have Alya as part of the family.”

I smile. I’m not surprised. Edwina Gallagher has been asking to take Alya for a while now. Every few weeks she’ll take all the grandchildren for the night and let their parents have time alone. Now she’s taken Inessa under her wing and views her as a daughter, something I know my wife loves.

“You okay about that?”

She nods. “Yeah. She’s sent me messages already and they’ve only been gone thirty minutes.”

“That’s good, baby. Now, I wanted to talk to you.”

She gets to her feet, placing her book down on the chair, and looks at me. She’s wearing that fucking sundress that I love. It’s bright yellow and stops just below mid-thigh. If she were to bend over, I’d see her ass. Something that I fucking love doing. Inessa never wears the dress unless we’re at home and it’s just the two of us.

“What’s wrong?” There’s worry in her voice, and I hate that I’ve made her scared.

“I’ve spoken with Gio about your appointment tomorrow at Lena’s office and he will be coming along with us.”

“Us?” she breathes. “You’re coming too?”

I nod. “Of course. I need you safe, *cara mia*. This appointment is important. I know you need to have some independence, so I’ll be waiting in either the waiting room or the car. Whatever you’d prefer.”

She steps forward, her breasts pressing against my chest, and my cock thickens. “Waiting room,” she whispers.

“Whatever you want, *cara mia*,” I reply as I slide my hands around her waist. It’s been fucking months since I’ve touched her, and fuck, it feels so fucking good. “I’ll be with you.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, reaching up onto her tiptoes and pressing a kiss against my lips.

The softness of them is too much for me to deny, and I can’t hold back. I take over the kiss, sweeping my tongue past her lips and taking her mouth. I bite, taste, and sip from her mouth. My cock thickens even more. It’s been months since I’ve had her and I’m dying to sink inside of her. I need her. Fuck, I need her more than I need air.

I pull back, hating it as I do, but I can't push her.

"Please, Nico," she pleads with me. "I need you."

Fuck. "Are you sure?"

She gifts me the sweetest fucking smile and nods. "I'm sure. Make love to me, Nico."

There's no fucking way I'm denying her that request. I lift her into my arms, her pussy pressed against my cock, and I'm cursing myself for wearing jeans. I realize that she's not wearing any panties. Fuck. Did she have this planned? Christ, I fucking hope so.

Our lips connect once again, and I walk toward our bedroom. I can't get enough of her. I can't fucking think about anything but her. She's invaded all my senses, and I know that once I take her now, she's not getting out of bed for the rest of the day. I'm going to spend the night worshiping her body, letting her fucking know just how much I love her.

"Strip," I growl as I place her on the bed. She doesn't hesitate. She reaches for the hem of her dress and pulls it over her head, a beautiful smile on her face. "So fucking gorgeous," I growl as I unsnap my fly. "All fucking mine."

"Yours," she breathes as I strip out of my clothes. "My husband."

My cock twitches at her words. Christ, she's killing me.

"My wife," I growl. "So fucking beautiful."

She grins at me as she scrambles onto her hands and knees and crawls toward the end of the bed where I'm standing. "I've missed you," she whispers, her hand wrapping around my cock. "But, Nico, hurt me again and we're done. Understand?"

I slide my hand into her hair and pull so that her head snaps backward. “I hurt you again. Shoot me,” I tell her, and watch as that beautiful smile forms on her face. “Now what do you want?”

Her eyes fill with lust as she swipes her tongue along her bottom lip. “You,” she tells me. “I want you.” She leans forward, running her tongue along my cock before she deep throats me.

The moment her perfectly pouty lips wrap around my cock, I’m fucking lost. Christ, she’s so fucking gorgeous with my cock in her mouth. Her cheeks hollow as she takes me deeper.

“That’s it,” I hiss, loving the way she looks at me with hooded eyes. “So fucking good, *cara mia*.”

She whimpers around my cock, her eyes dilating, her pussy grinding against the bedsheets. “Are you needy, baby?”

Her throat constricts around my cock as she swallows. She nods, and I know that she’s probably burning inside with need, just as I am. I slide my hand along her stomach, while my other stays in her hair. I grip her hair tighter as I push a finger into her tight, wet pussy.

She hums around my cock as she grinds down on my fingers. “Christ,” I growl, loving the feel of her tight pussy squeezing my digits. I tighten my hand in her hair and pull slightly. She swallows around my cock once again, and I’m gone. Completely fucking gone.

I fuck her face and pussy with abandonment, my fingers drenched with her juices.

“I’m going to come,” I tell her as her cheeks hollow. She’s grinding harder and faster against my fingers, and I know she’s

close. “Fucking come for me, *cara mia*,” I growl. She doesn’t have to be told twice. I fuck her pussy with my fingers and rub her clit with my thumb, and that’s all it takes to make her detonate. She moans around my cock, sending vibrations along my shaft.

I thrust into her mouth once—twice—three times, my cock nudging against her throat, and I’m unable to hold back any longer. I release a groan as I pull out slightly. Keeping only the head of my cock in her mouth, I unload stream after stream of cum.

Her cheeks fill and she swallows, taking every last drop that I give her.

“I’m going to fuck you now, baby,” I growl, my cock still semi-hard. It’s going to be like that all fucking night.

She releases a giggle, and it’s so fucking dainty, the sound is something I’m going to want to hear a fuck of a lot more of.

I position myself over her, pressing my lips against hers, capturing her giggle in my mouth. I thrust deep into her, loving the hitch of her breath as I bottom out inside of her. “Fuck,” I groan. Christ, she’s so fucking tight, it feels as though she’s strangling my cock with her pussy.

“Nico,” she whimpers as I begin to move. “I love you,” she tells me.

“Never doubt my love for you, *cara mia*. Never. Not fucking ever.”

I hook her legs over my shoulders and pound into her, my pace unrelenting. I’m going to spend my life buried inside of her. Christ, she feels so fucking good.

She starts to move, her body getting in sync with mine, and she fucks me back with just as much passion and need as I am

her. My thrusts are hard, fast, and fucking brutal, but she's taking it all. Every fucking inch of me.

"More," she moans. "Nico, I need more."

I can't deny her. I grit my teeth, rotate my hips, and slam into her. My hands roam her body, loving the softness of her skin. She's so fucking beautiful, and all mine.

Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes bright with lust and love, our bodies covered in sweat, and the only sound that can be heard is our moaning and groaning.

Sex with Inessa is by far the best that I've ever had. Then again, she's the only woman I've loved.

"I'm going to come," she cries, her body tensing, her pussy tightening around my cock. She throws her head back, her fingers clawing at my chest as she detonates, my name spilling from her lips.

I continue to fuck her, not wanting to stop. She feels so fucking good. "Christ, Nessa," I growl when I feel her walls squeezing my cock.

"Please," she whimpers. "Please, Nico."

I grit my teeth and hammer into her. My spine tingles and my balls tighten. I'm not going to hold on for much longer. "Fucking love you, Inessa."

She wraps her arms around my neck, pulling my head down until our lips touch. "And I love you, Nico, always." Her kiss is soft and gentle, but Christ, it's so fucking good. I slide my tongue past her lips and take control. I'm fucking her into oblivion right now and she's taking it. She's mewling with every thrust of my cock.

Fucking made for me.

I pull back from the kiss, both of us breathless, but Christ. I'm about ready to explode. "Baby," I say through clenched teeth, "I'm going to come. I'm not wearing a condom." She's not on the pill. "You've got a choice: I come in your cunt or I come on your stomach."

She pulls in a ragged breath, her eyes flashing with need, and I know she wants both. Good, she'll get it. We've got a long night ahead of us and I'm planning on marking her every which way I can.

"In me," she breathes.

"You sure about that?" I want her round with my baby. I want to see her pregnant. But is it too soon for her?

"In me," she repeats, and I know that this is what she wants too.

I hammer into her again and again. My cock twitches as I bottom out inside of her and let go, groaning her name as I do. "Fuck, Nessa," I breath. "I'm going to want to do that again."

Her laughter fills the air. "Feed me first, then we'll go again."

I look at her. The happiness that radiates off her is unlike anything I've ever seen before. She's fucking glowing with it. "Love you," I tell her.

I watch as her expression softens. "I love you too," she whispers. "Thank you for being patient."

Christ, I was anything but. "You are all I want, Inessa. Nothing was ever going to keep me from you."

I'd have waited a fucking year if it meant that she was free of the demons that plagued her.

I pull out of her and roll over onto the bed, pulling her on top of me and holding her there. She snuggles against my chest and releases a contented sigh.

This is all that I have wanted. The woman I love being happy and healthy.

I'm a lucky bastard. I know that I am, and I'm going to ensure that my wife stays happy, always.

INESSA

SIX MONTHS LATER

“**Y**ou look beautiful, Inessa,” Mama Gallagher says as Niccolò and I take a seat. “I love that color on you. It’s perfect.”

“Thank you,” I say with a bright smile. “You do too. I love the lilac on you.” She’s wearing a long-sleeved lilac dress that looks divine. Her husband, Liam, has his arm around her and a satisfied grin on his face. The two of them are so in love that it gives me hope that Nico and I can have a happy marriage like they do.

Nico’s hand slides along my thigh, and I glance down at the bright yellow dress I’m wearing and smile. Niccolò picked it out for me. It’s his favorite color on me, and when he told me that we had an event to attend and that it was a fancy event, I almost cried. I don’t have anything fancy to wear. Of course, my husband had it all under control. He had people come to the house and do my hair and makeup. I felt like a princess. Never have I felt as pretty as I do now.

“I can’t wait to get you home,” Nico growls against my ear, and I shiver at the tone. God, he drives me crazy. From the moment I stepped out of our bedroom, dressed up and ready to go, he’s been dying to go home, and I love that he wants me

that badly. It makes me feel wanted and loved. Something he's shown me a lot in the past few months.

"Behave," I tell him as I press a kiss to his cheek. "I thought we had to mingle?"

He jerks back in horror, and I hear laughter behind me. "Niccolò doesn't know how to do that. He usually glares and grunts at people." I turn and see Dario Gallo taking a seat beside me. "It's good to see you again, Inessa. You look beautiful."

I give him a smile. "It's good to see you too, Dario. How have you been?"

He's not been around in a while. He's now living in Missouri. Whenever there's a meeting with the Famiglia, he'll be here, but he doesn't stick around for long.

"Good, but don't think you have to make small talk with everyone here, Inessa. Most of them would talk your ear off given the chance. Besides, the women are dying to befriend you, so be careful." He turns his head and starts talking to Elio.

"What does he mean by the women and that I have to be careful?" I ask Niccolò, but before he can speak, someone touches my shoulder. I turn to see who it is and I'm relieved when I realize that Teagan and Dario have switched seats.

"The women in the Famiglia are nice enough, but some of them are social climbers. Meaning they'll befriend you to get closer to the men that work for your husband. They'd rather be with the men who are captains and right-hand men than soldiers. Trying to figure out who wants to be your friend because they're nice, and who wants to befriend you to climb the social ladder, is hard. I gave up," she says through a laugh.

“I’ve got you, Portia, Ade, and Jade. I don’t need any more friends.”

I sigh as I lean back against my chair. “It’s all so confusing. I don’t understand why they’d do that. Surely you’d want to be with someone you love, not who can give you everything your heart desires?”

“That, Inessa, is why you’re so fucking sweet,” Nico says thickly. “So fucking perfect and sweet.”

My brows knit together. “What?” I ask, wondering what he means.

“Not everyone marries for love, baby. Most marry out of duty, and the women do it to gain status and power.”

I nod, remembering him telling me about his marriage to Maria and how that was an arranged marriage. They were married over fifteen years and didn’t love one another. That’s something that is crazy to me, but then again, it’s the way of our world. I’d have been married to Sergei if Nico hadn’t saved me. I’d have spent my life being abused and pretending that I loved him while in front of others. It’s the way things go.

I guess I got lucky falling for Nico.

“Oh, Portia’s here,” Teagan says with a smile. “Have you met her?” she asks me, and I shake my head. Teagan grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet. “Come, let me introduce the two of you. You’re going to love her.”

I laugh as Niccolò shakes his head in amusement. He’s comfortable with Teagan, Ade, Jade, and Anna-marie—who’s Jade’s sister-in-law, she’s married to Jade’s brother Hayes—around me, but everyone else he’s like a watchdog, carefully assessing everything that happens to ensure that I’m okay. I know he’ll do the same now that I’m meeting someone new.

Over the past six months, our relationship has gotten stronger. There are some days that are harder than others, but together, we're able to push through them. I have forgiven him fully for what happened in the past, and what he had planned for me. It's something that we spoke about a lot, and something that I spoke to Lena about alone too. In the end, it came down to whether or not I could move forward from what happened. Everyone needs a second chance, I've given that to Nico, and he's taken it with both hands. I trust him not to hurt me, and I truly believe that he won't. Not again.

"You must be the gorgeous Inessa," Portia says as she greets me. "I've heard so much about you." Her brunette hair is in a long bob with streaks of blonde through it. She's so freaking pretty. "How are you?"

I nod. "I'm doing a lot better, thanks."

"Your husband can't take his eyes off you," she tells me with a grin. "He doesn't look as haunted anymore."

I turn and see that she's right. Niccolò's watching me with assessing eyes, but some of the darkness has gone. I smile at him, and he gives me that heated look, one that promises me all kinds of naughtiness tonight.

"Holy shit," Portia hoots. "Now that is hot."

I notice that Dario is looking at Portia with the exact same look that Nico's giving me.

"Like you can talk," I say with a smile as I turn back and face her. "You and Dario?"

She raises a brow at me. "Yes?"

I laugh. "Is it serious?"

She shrugs, glancing around at anyone but Dario. “Sometimes it’s fine, other times it’s a little crazy.”

Teagan and I share a look. It’s a whole lot more than that, but she’s not wanting to talk about it. That’s something that I understand. Sometimes you’re not ready, and Portia isn’t ready to deal with whatever is going on with her and Dario.

“I’m in town for the next week. We need to have a girls night,” Portia grins. “That includes you, Inessa. It’ll be nice for us all to get to know you better.”

“Who’s we?” I ask, wondering who else would be joining us.

Teagan steps closer to me. “It’s us girls. Me, Portia, Jade, Ade, Anna-Marie, and you.”

Relief washes through me. “Sounds good. I’ll be there, but don’t be surprised if Niccolò wants men on me. He’s a little protective.” Knowing Niccolò, he’ll have Gio be my guard for the evening.

Portia waves a hand in the air. “Don’t worry about that. We usually pick a house and stay in for the night. If Niccolò would prefer to have it at your house, that’s fine.”

“Thank you,” I say, knowing he’ll most definitely prefer that.

“Portia, Teagan,” I hear a man say with a very British accent. “Lovely to see you again, and you’ve brought me a friend.”

Teagan laughs and Portia shakes her head. “Kelvin, this is Inessa. Inessa, meet Kelvin. He’s a friend and Portia’s boss.”

I flash him a quick smile. “Hi,” I say politely. I can feel the weighted gaze of Niccolò on my back and I know that he’s

watching our every move.

“I like her,” he says to Portia.

“She’s married, and if you don’t want to go to war with the Gallos, I’d stay clear.”

Kelvin throws his head back and laughs. “Oh, Portia, you already know that I’m head-to-head with the Gallos. It’s only a matter of time before that fucker loses his mind and we go into a full-blown war.”

Portia’s eyes flash with anger. “Why do you have to be such an ass, Kelvin? Seriously, you’re always pushing him. Why?”

“It’s easy to do and it’s fun watching you try and rein him in,” he laughs. “Besides, you’re hot and you’re a good flirt.”

Teagan shakes her head. “Seriously, you guys need to get a room. You’ve been tiptoeing around this attraction for a while now.”

“Never going to happen,” Portia hisses. “I’d rather be dead than be with him.”

“That can be arranged,” Kelvin replies with a smirk.

“I’ll put you six feet under before you even touch a hair on her head,” Dario snarls, and there’s so much possessiveness in his tone, it’s impossible to miss it.

“Why am I not surprised you’re here. You’re always fucking around Portia.”

“That’s ‘cause she’s mine. Something you need to get through your thick skull.”

“Enough,” Portia hisses. “God, why do you two always push me too far? You’re both assholes.”

“He shouldn’t be so jealous,” Kelvin says with a laugh. “We were just talking. Just as I was with Teagan and Inessa. You don’t see their husbands being arseholes.”

Dario smirks, and it reminds me so much of how Sergei would be when he was in a rage, that swirling storm behind his eyes, it makes me take a step backward. Dario pulls his arm back and lets it fly, smashing his fist into Kelvin’s nose. The crunch is loud enough to make people close by wince. Blood pours from his nostrils and he curses as he tries to stop the bleeding.

“Christ,” Portia cries. “What the fuck, Dario?”

“Exactly,” he snaps. “What the fuck is this fucker’s problem? Why is he always flirting. He knows that you’re mine.”

“Seriously?” she hisses. “This is what you do? Break his nose?”

“Better than killing him? I don’t think you’d forgive me for that,” he says with a smirk.

But Portia’s had enough. Just as Dario had done to Kelvin, she pulls her arm back and lets fly, hitting him in his face. I wince as Dario roars in pain.

Kelvin starts laughing and Portia turns on him. Teagan grabs my hand, her body shaking with silent laughter.

“And you,” she shouts at Kelvin. “I told you to stop the shit. Why are you always shit-stirring?”

Kelvin grins, blood still dripping from his nose. “It’s too fucking easy.”

“What?” She snaps. “You think this is funny?”

He pulls his hand away from his face and holds his hands up in the air. “It is, he’s always around you.”

Just like she did to Dario she pulls her arm back and punches him in the face, hitting his nose the exact same spot as Dario had. “That’s because he’s my husband you asshole.”

I press my lips together to stop the laughter from spilling out. God, she’s a hoot!

“I’ll be in touch about our girls night,” she tells us before walking out of the room with her head held high.

An arm slides around my waist and I sink back into their embrace. Niccolò presses a kiss against my head. “Are all the events this eventful?” I ask with a smile.

“Not all of them. Now, can we get the hell out of here? I want to get you home and fuck you wearing that dress.”

My body shivers at his gravelly tone. “Yes,” I breathe, unable to deny him any longer.

I laugh as he pulls me toward the exit. I wave goodbye to Teagan, who’s watching Jade, who’s currently helping Dario with the bleeding while also giving Kelvin a piece of her mind.

The car ride is filled with suspense and anxiousness. My palms are sweaty and I’m beginning to feel the fear creeping in.

“What’s going on?” Niccolò asks me once we’re home. I bite my lip, unsure of how to tell him. He pushes me against the door, pressing his lips to my neck. “Talk to me,” he says softly. “What’s wrong?”

I wrap my arms around his neck. “Nothing,” I promise him. “Nothing is wrong.”

He lifts his head and looks at me, his eyes narrowed. “What aren’t you telling me?”

I take a deep breath and steel myself. “I love you,” I tell him, wanting him to know that I love him before I tell him my news. “With everything that I am. I love you.”

“*Cara mia*,” he says thickly. “I love you too. But you’ve got to tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m pregnant,” I whisper, my heart ready to beat out of my chest. “We’re having a baby.”

He’s silent, and it’s as though time stands still as I wait for him to speak. “You are?” he asks low.

I nod. “I am. We’re ten weeks-ish.”

He drops to his knees and presses a kiss against my stomach. “Fuck, Inessa,” he growls. “God.”

Tears spring to my eyes. This is everything that I could have ever hoped for.

He rises to his feet and pulls me into his arms. My legs wrap around his waist and he holds me tight. “I’m adopting, Alya. We’re making it official. I want to make sure my girl knows that I’m her dad.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat. “Absolutely,” I breathe.

“We’ll do that tomorrow, first thing. But tonight, we’re celebrating.”

My heart continues to pound, but this time for a whole other reason. “Definitely,” I reply huskily. “I need you, Nico.”

His gaze dips to my lips and back to my eyes. “I fucking love you, *cara mia*, and I’m going to enjoy fucking my

pregnant wife all night long.”

Well now, that sounds like a night to remember.

ARE YOU READY FOR PORTIA AND DARIO'S STORY?

<https://books2read.com/u/b5wXyR>

All I've ever wanted is to feel safe. He wants to upturn my carefully constructed world.

Losing my father shaped me. Pushing me into the dark.

Having my stepfather want to sell me made me run.
Forcing me into the shadows.

Living on the streets wasn't the plan, but it's all that I could do. And I'd do anything to survive.

Until him.

Dario Gallo has bad news written all over him.

He wants to deconstruct the meagre life I've built for myself and force me back into the light.

In order to protect myself and those I care about, what else can I do but push him away?

Even though he's the only man who's ever made me feel protected. Safe.

He wants me, but he's part of a life I want nothing to do with.

The chemistry between us is undeniable.

Will he destroy me just like the Mafia did my father.

Or will he be the solace that I have craved for so long?

BOOKS BY BROOKE:

The Kingpin Series:

Forbidden Lust

Dangerous Secrets

Forever Love

The Made Series:

Bloody Union

Unexpected Union

Fragile Union

Shattered Union

Hateful Union

Vengeful Union

Explosive Union

Cherished Union

Obsessive Union

Gallo Famiglia:

Ruthless Arrangement

Ruthless Betrayal

Ruthless Passion

The Fury Vipers MC Series:

Stag

Mayhem

Digger

Ace

Pyro

Shadow

Wrath

Reaper

Standalones:

Saving Reli

Taken By Nikolai

A Love So Wrong

Other pen names

Stella Bella

(A forbidden Steamy Pen name)

Taboo Temptations:

Wicked With the Professor

Snowed in with Daddy

Woody by Daddy

Loving Daddy's Best Friend

Brother's Glory

Daddy's Curvy Girl

Daddy's Intern

His Curvy Brat

Taboo Teachings:

Royally Taught

Extra Curricular with Mr. Abbot

Private Seduction:

Seduced by Daddy's Best Friend

Stepbrother Seduction

His Curvy Seduction

ABOUT BROOKE SUMMERS:

USA Today Bestselling Author Brooke Summers is a Mafia Romance author and is best known for her Made Series.

Brooke Summers was born and raised in South London. She lives with her daughter and hubby.

Brooke has been an avid reader for many years. She's a huge fan of Colleen Hoover and Kristen Ashley.

Brooke has been dreaming of writing for such a long time. When she was little, she would make up stories just for fun. Seems as though she was destined to become an author.

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT BROOKE SUMMERS?

Check out her website:

www.brookesummersbooks.com

Subscribe to her newsletter:

www.brookesummersbooks.com/newsletter