

RUTHLESS HEIR

S.R. WATSON & RYAN STACKS

Ruthless Heir: An Arranged Marriage Dark Mafia Romance (The Gallagher Crime Family Book 2)

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello Readers,

Ruthless Heir is a dark mafia romance with themes that can be offensive or triggering for some. This series isn't sweet or for the faint of heart.

This book contains a villainous hero, morally gray characters, taboo topics, arranged marriage, angst, explicit sex, dubcon, imprisonment, various kinks, humiliation, degradation, and enemies to lovers.

Ruthless Heir is a standalone within the series, but must be read in order due to the overall suspense continuing through each book in the series. Each of in the Gallagher Crime Family will get their HEA, but not before some serious angst!

If you're still here, then buck up and enjoy the mind fuck!

THE GALLAGHER CRIME FAMILY:

- #1 Ruthless Crown ~ Available Now
- #2 Ruthless Heir ~ Available Now
- #3 Ruthless Prince ~ Coming this Fall
- #4 Ruthless Princess ~ Coming this Winter
- #5 Ruthless Reign ~ Coming Early 2024
- #6 Ruthless Empire ~ Coming Early 2024

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SNEAK PEEK ~ Phoenix Rising: Issue#1

Ruthless Heir Playlist

Other Books by S.R. Watson & Ryan Stacks

About S.R. Watson

About Ryan Stacks

PROLOGUE

L ong dark hair tumbles from the once tightly wound bun of the woman I have pinned against the wall. Her legs dangle several inches from the ground as she works tirelessly to loosen my grip. Her nails dig into the flesh of my hand. Her black latex catsuit hugs every inch of her assets. It would be a distraction for most men, but I'm a far cry from most. The material is meant to be difficult to grasp, but it leaves her neck bare and exposed. Her face reddens as my grip tightens against her futile attempts to set herself free. Trickles of blood begin to seep over the back of my hand from her persistent clawing.

"Please let her go, Kai," Persephone pleads. "There has to be an explanation for all of this."

"Yeah, she was planning to fucking kill you. She tried to throw you over your balcony, for fuck's sake."

Persephone hugs me from behind and sobs against my back, her pleas unrelenting. Reluctantly, I let the woman I'm strangling fall to the floor, watching as she clutches her neck and gasps for air. Persephone wastes no time scrambling over to her.

"Why, Margo? It's me, Persie. Did you have another blackout? Do you know where you are right now? I know you wouldn't want to hurt me."

What the shite is she going on about? Who is this woman, and what did I miss here? "She didn't want to hurt you. She wanted you dead," I point out incredulously. "How do you know this woman?"

"I refuse to believe she was aware of her actions. Margo is my best friend from childhood. We ran into each other a month ago, and I helped her get the apartment unit right next door to mine. You don't understand." Persephone sniffles. "She has these blackouts related to a terrible trauma in her past. She wasn't herself when she tried to push me over that balcony." Margo has yet to say a word to defend her actions.

Persephone is the daughter of a very prominent politician in Sacramento. I've been her bodyguard for the past couple of months after the previous one declined to move to Los Angeles, where she now attends the University of Southern California. This job was never supposed to be permanent. My brother Lennon and I thought the timing and the convenience of the location to our next mission was a no-brainer. Still, I've given this assignment the same dedication as any. I did my due diligence in researching the principal. I've never heard of or seen this Margo woman before. Persephone's dossier didn't contain anything about her either. I pull out my phone to make a call.

"The authorities are on the way," I announce. "You're too damn naive. She's only alive because of you, so you better be prepared to make a fucking statement. She is not getting away with an attempt on your life, nutcase or not."

I've killed men for less, but I've never had to exert such force on a woman, so I hate that I've been placed in this fucking situation. I have to remind myself that this is my *above board* job, and that means playing by the rules of the law ... to an extent. I will have to debrief with Persephone's father. I'm sure he will use his reach to ensure that this *Margo* woman gets all that she deserves and then some. This was a hit ... premeditated. This woman suspiciously comes back into Persephone's life, and she doesn't question it. Margo is dressed like an assassin. She had her hair pulled back into a bun and outfitted in a fucking latex catsuit—not normal attire for a Tuesday afternoon. She didn't want Persephone to have anything to grab onto when she attempted to throw her over that balcony. I don't know how she managed to get this close to the principal, but I plan to find out.

"Some bodyguard," Margo finally says once she catches her breath. "You want to know how I slipped past your defenses so easily?" she taunts as though she's reading my mind.

"Maybe I should end you after all," I growl, grabbing her by the neck and lifting her to her feet once again. I push her back against the wall but allow her to remain on her feet this time.

"You won't! You're a fucking pussy," she spits. "Persie has you wrapped around her finger. That's what happens when you fuck the person you're supposed to be protecting."

Her words land their desired mark. How in the hell could she possibly know that? And if she knows it, who else does? How long has she been watching us? What does this woman know about me? My professional reputation is at risk because she's right. I've never gotten involved with the principal before, and one has never had such an influence on my actions. This woman just tried to end Persephone's life, and I didn't eliminate the threat because she begged me not to. Given who Persephone is, nobody would have questioned my means to end the imminent danger.

"Why are you talking like that?" Persephone questions as realization begins to dawn. "Did you play me? Were you actually trying to kill me? I don't understand. I thought you forgave me for our past. We drank tons of fucking tequila together while I cried with you. My heart ached from all the traumatic crap you've endured and now running from your psycho ex. I helped you because I wanted you to be safe from him. I wanted us to have a fresh start with our friendship. I believed you were having some kind of mental breakdown and weren't aware of your actions just now."

The police barge through the door before Margo can respond. Time's up. If Margo's smirk is anything to go by, she wasn't planning to give Persephone an explanation anyway. I hand her over to the authorities, not liking what comes next, but it's imperative.

I listen to Persephone tell one of the officers that she and Margo went to the same private middle school and part of high school, but she hasn't seen Margo since eleventh grade. She ran into Margo in the nail salon a month ago while Tony was parked out front. Tony is her bodyguard during the day, and I guard at night since neither of us are contracted for a twenty-four-hour protection detail. Her father didn't want her to have a live-in guard, and she refused to live in the university dorms. Our post is strictly to remain outside her unit door to give her a wide berth so she can maintain some semblance of normalcy. We typically walk ten paces behind her for the same reason. She invited Margo to dinner after she insisted they catch up. This led to them rekindling their friendship, and Margo letting Persephone in on her shite life up to this point. Persephone gave her money and helped her leave her abusive ex by assisting her to get the apartment next door. It's only been two and a half weeks since she's moved in. Margo was already inside when I arrived for my shift. Why didn't Tony fucking hand off that Persephone had someone inside?

I don't want to even think of how close I was to losing her on my watch.

It's because we're fucking that I felt comfortable enough to enter her bedroom without knocking when I started my shift. It's the reason she's still alive. Margo had her nearly over the railing before I could intervene. I got too complacent ... too laxed on how I handled the principal. I allowed her freedoms that should have been strictly avoided for her safety. The handoff from the last bodyguard before Tony and me stated she was a minimal risk. Somewhere along the way, the lines have blurred. In addition to phenomenal sex, she lights up any room she's in, has so much optimism, and sees the good in everyone. I'm the opposite of that and knew I could never corrupt someone so beautiful inside and out, but my dick never got the memo. I can't be selfish with her. I have to resign as her bodyguard sooner than intended. I'm no longer what she needs. I'm compromised.

CHAPTER ONE

I t's been three weeks since I had *the talk* with my brother, Lennon—his wedding day, to be exact. His looming nuptials laid the framework for what was next for me. The trajectory for my life morphed into different expectations the moment someone ended our father's life—duty versus desire as I like to describe it. The time was nearing for me to make my own marital contribution to our clan to further strengthen our numbers. That day in his dressing room, we solidified an oath that the clan came first before all others, including ourselves. I dared not reveal that I wish I could have a different life —one that a man like me could be with someone like Persephone. I'm not in love with her, but if any woman could make me fall, it would be her. Being around her is so easy and feels so right, but I have to let her go. I would never want to dim her light. She doesn't belong in our world, yet I'd forsaken my own personal oath—the very oath I swear that I'd live and die by. Never get involved with the principal. I was hired to protect her... to shield her from men like me and anyone who'd wish to cause her harm. She was my cover to be among some very influential people. Now duty waits on the other side of the proverbial door, and only I can walk through. She can't come with me. What I want and desire needs to be a distant memory. I told my brother I was all in even though I never wanted this life. My job was to gather intelligence that my clan could leverage for extortion, which allowed me to work above board and get less dirt on my hands. The underworld is the opposite of that. It's dark and has no place for a conscience or morals. Though we have some boundaries we won't cross, there aren't many of them. My siblings and I were born into this life, and I need to find a way to give them a little more time before our destiny consumes them. Be that as it may, none of this is an easy feat. Why was the thought of walking away from Persephone so suffocating? That was always the plan. The answer is simple. I crossed the line that should have never been crossed, and now I will pay the penance for such treachery.

I push the buzzer at the gate in front of the Mikhailov mansion, then wait for security to identify me on the camera and let me through. I drive slowly across the cobblestone as the electric gates open, stopping in front of the valet on the circular drive. He greets me with a smile and opens my car door, inviting me to step out. I get out of my Bugatti, taking in my surroundings as my eyes adjust to the brightness of the day. It's nearly noon, so I hope to be done here in time to meet up with Persephone after her last class. She deserves an explanation from me about why I'm no longer her bodyguard—a half truth anyway.

The sprawling estate before me is framed by tall trees and perfectly manicured shrubs along its perimeter. I can appreciate the intricacies of the architecture. The valet leads me to the mansion's entrance, where two grand marble pillars stand guard on either side of the large wooden double doors. A butler opens it for us, and we enter into an immense foyer with a modern mosaic floor, chandeliers hanging from above, and several high archways leading into different rooms. We cross through this space until we reach a grand staircase that spirals up to the second floor. The house buzzes with activity as staff members hurry past us, carrying grocery bags of food and decor pieces. The butler explains the staff is preparing for a small dinner party in the garden later tonight.

We ascend the stairs and turn down a hallway lined with elegant artwork on either side until we reach an ornate wooden door at its end. The butler knocks, and upon receiving permission from inside, he opens it for us and leads me into a grand study with rich mahogany woodwork—bookcases lining one wall, leather chairs near a roaring fireplace on another, all illuminated by soft recessed lighting coming from each corner of the room.

"That will be all, Sergei," Vladimir Mikhailov says, dismissing the butler. He motions for me to be seated in one of the comfortable leather chairs near him. "Can I interest you in a cigar?" he asks as he lights the one in his hand.

"No, but thank you."

He nods and takes a few initial puffs before he addresses me again. "Kai, I'm a man of few words, so I won't entertain you with pleasantries. We can get straight to why I've asked you here."

"I can appreciate that. I don't do pleasantries either."

He smiles and takes another puff. His unnaturally black hair has some gray at the temples. His taut face looks as if he's had some work done— the pursuit to preserve youth. I study his mannerisms and look for tells. I like studying people, especially those I will have ongoing dealings with. It's not the words that one speaks; their truth lies in what they don't say and their body language.

"I've been in conversation with your brother, Lennon, about my daughter, Vasilisa. I'm aware that not long ago, you lost a great number of your clan to an ambush. I'm also aware that your clan currently has an alliance with the Italians. With those numbers on your side, you don't need our numbers, so why request to marry my daughter?" He takes another puff of his cigar. "I know your brother's reasoning and what you're willing to share in exchange, but I want to hear it from you."

"If I had to guess, you're a very intelligent man, Mr. Mikhailov. I'm quite sure that your question is rhetorical, but if you need to hear me say it, I won't shy away from the obvious. We're looking to strengthen our numbers from all angles. We don't wish to simply be under the Italians' thumb."

The tall, lanky butler who escorted me appears in the doorway, and Vladimir pauses long enough to ask him to make a drink. "Dalmore 25, neat," he instructs. "Can I interest you in a gentleman's drink? I have the finest whiskey selection—better than most palates have had the pleasure to taste."

"No, I'm good," I decline, wishing he'd get on with it. I can feel my jaw tighten. How dare he stand on his imaginary pedestal as if this exchange wouldn't be a benefit to us both?

"You're right," he concedes, taking the first sip of the amber liquid. "My question was rhetorical. I already knew your clan's motivation for wanting to forge an alliance with my Bratva. Having a foot on both sides of the fence gives your clan more power than both us and the Italians. Why should I agree to that? You're asking to strengthen your foothold in the underworld while lessening our own."

"Because our alliance would be mutually beneficial," I retort. "With our clan in the middle, it neutralizes the upper hand on both sides, thus giving the Italians a reason not to take your Bratva for granted. We would be your allies — your leverage. We also have the numbers of additional clan members in Ireland, although we prefer to have more numbers closer to home. You have

no such affiliation with Russia. Without our reach, you're on the bottom of this triad and vulnerable."

Yes. My brother and I have done our research. He and his men don't have the support of the Bratva in Russia to engage in any turf wars here. He is correct that merging their numbers with ours would strengthen our foothold in the underworld while lessening theirs, but it also lessens that of the Italians. The difference is that his outfit doesn't have an alliance with the Italians, so either way, he and his men have less power than us. We're offering a chance to level the playing field.

"My daughter isn't the easiest to manage," he warns while simultaneously changing the subject. "She has a stubborn streak and takes after her old man."

"Noted," I say. I couldn't care less about her stubborn streak, nor do I have any doubts about my ability to break her. No father needs to hear that, so I don't elaborate. He has to know the type of man he's giving his daughter to, so we'll just leave it at that.

"Unfortunately, Vasilisa is not here at the moment, and I have some things to address before our dinner party later tonight. I'm not sure if my princess will grace us with her presence, so why don't you come over tomorrow morning around ten? We'll have brunch, and I'll make sure my daughter is present to meet you."

There really wasn't a question in that invitation, but I'll oblige his request. It will give me a chance to observe Vasilisa in her domain before I bring her to mine. I need to assess just how much work she's going to take.

"Tomorrow at ten it is," I agree as I stand. He follows suit and gives me a firm handshake.

My assessment of him is hesitation. He doesn't like the idea of this arrangement, but he knows it's what's best for him and his men. He will tolerate me and my clan as long as we are of benefit to him. We could never fully trust them. We still don't know if they had a hand in our father's murder. One thing for certain, if an opportunity arose that afforded them better odds or benefit, they wouldn't hesitate to end this alliance between us. His daughter will be more of an insurance policy—collateral—than my wife. We don't trust anyone.

A black Range Rover pulls up as I leave the Mikhailov estate. The driver exits the car and immediately goes around to the passenger back door to open it. Through my rearview mirror, I see a young woman with a fitted white dress and heels being assisted out of the SUV. Her long brunette hair hides

her face from my view, but she exudes elegance and grace even from the short distance. The train of her dress drags behind her as she is escorted to the door. She flips her hair once to turn to see my car that's taking its time to depart. A colorful scarf is tied around her neck, adding an additional flair of sophistication. I know she cannot see me, but I turn away and accelerate out through the electric gates anyway. Could that have been Vasilisa—the woman I'm supposed to marry? Hope not for her sake. The unfortunate woman who ends up with me will have to submit. I doubt the woman I just saw even knows the meaning of the word.

CHAPTER TWO

Vasilisa

I rev the engine of my Ducati, feeling the power of the machine between my legs. The rain comes down in sheets, but I don't care. I need to get away from the expectations that await me and forget about the fact that I'm supposed to marry some Irish Mafia heir. I've been successful in sabotaging the efforts to marry the Russian prospects brought forward after Viktor refused me, but this feels different. I'm not confident that I'll be able to shake this guy.

The wind whips around me as I ride through the streets of Monterey. I'm three hours from home, but this is where the drive took me. The sound of the rain hits my helmet like a thousand tiny drums. I feel alive in a way that I haven't in months, the thrill of the ride pushing all my worries to the back of my mind. I only feel like this when I'm on the brink of danger or the outskirts of my comfort zone. Fear morphs into adrenaline. My ability to conquer that fear makes me feel more in control of my fate. I haven't been able to ride lately because it's not exactly approved of. My father hates when I ride. He wants me to be this perfect little princess for the world to envy and for men to beat down our doorstep for a chance at my hand in marriage. Except now he's handing me over to the Irish for whatever deal he's arranged. My three brothers have done nothing to thwart this plan.

I turn onto the highway, the rain coming down even harder now. It's

almost like the universe is trying to stop me from riding, but I refuse to be deterred. I know that I need this, that I need to escape the suffocating world that awaits me ... even for just a little bit.

As I ride, I take in the beauty of the California coastline, the waves crashing against the rocks in a fierce dance. It's breathtaking, and for a moment, I succeed at forgetting about everything else. I'm just a regular woman on a motorcycle, living in the moment. As the rain starts to let up, I decide to prolong returning home and get something to eat. There is no way I'm attending the dinner party with my father and the woman of the month. I agreed to the stupid brunch in the morning to meet the man he's betrothed me to, but I refuse to sit around dinner and pretend I'm happy about any of this. I pull off into a small diner on the side of the road, the sign flickering in the fading light. The inside is warm and cozy, the smell of coffee and bacon filling my senses.

I SIT AT A BOOTH BY THE WINDOW AS THE SERVER COMES OVER TO HAND ME A menu. I look over it and smile. None of it is what I usually eat at home. *Perfect*. I order a bacon cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate shake. The rain is still coming down, but it's not as heavy now. I watch as cars and trucks drive by, their lights reflecting off the wet pavement.

While eating, my mind lingers on thoughts of Viktor. He didn't want me—said I was too boring for him. He wants a wife who can keep up with him in all aspects of his life. We grew up together, and I think I've always loved him. If he knew my secret, would he still reject me? Our world changed him. Midway through our junior year, his family moved back to Moscow so his father could take his rightful place as a Russian Mafia boss for the Sokolov Bratva. Viktor is now the heir to the throne and in search of a wife. My family thought I was the obvious choice since our family used to be so close. Viktor has made numerous trips back to California since he has a second residence here as a vacation home, but he respects my father's reign here. My father salivated at the chance to merge our family into such a

powerful family with ties back to Russia. He blamed me for not being enough for Viktor and then tried several times to betroth me to other Mafia heirs in Russia after Viktor rejected me. Our family is isolated here, and it's our father's fault. The weight of his past mistakes shouldn't rest so heavily on my shoulders, but they do.

I FINISH MY MEAL AND PAY THE BILL BEFORE RETURNING TO MY MOTORCYCLE. The rain has stopped completely now, and the air is fresh and clean. I dread the ride back and what the future holds, but I know I have to face it head-on. I have a duty to my family, and I'm tired of my sabotaging efforts. If marrying the Irish heir will help my family because our Russian family turned their back on us, I can't continue to be a part of the problem.

I RIDE BACK TOWARD SACRAMENTO, THE WIND IN MY HAIR AS I HOLD BACK the tears. I don't know when I'll be able to ride again. Will my future husband allow it? I've witnessed firsthand the dominance of a Mafia man. I would have submitted for Viktor, but I can't say the same for this unknown man. I will marry him as expected, but I will not just hand over my submission blindly. He will have to earn it.

CHAPTER THREE

runch is being served in the gardens. There are no signs of last night's dinner party. I walk through a maze of hedges, cobblestone walkways, and statues. The grounds are large enough to house hundreds of people. Freshly baked bread, a variety of cheeses from around the world, cured meats, and an assortment of fruits, nuts, and vegetables make up the spread over the wrought-iron table—definitely enough food for more than three people. I take a seat at the table and pour myself a cup of coffee. Vladimir has his hand wrapped around his glass of whiskey as he leans back in his seat. He wastes no time diving into the timeframe for the wedding. He pauses mid conversation when a young woman appears along the pathway to where we're seated. Vasilisa's heels click along the pavement as she walks with her head held high and an air of confidence. The first thing I notice is her long, luscious brunette hair that cascades down her back in soft waves. Each strand seems to glisten in the sunlight. Her hair frames her face perfectly, accentuating her delicate features and giving her an almost ethereal appearance. I may have seen her from afar yesterday, but I have no doubt she is the woman I saw in the long white dress with a train.

As she approaches, her piercing blue eyes catch the light, her familiarity becoming more and more pronounced. Her bright eyes are a striking shade of blue, like the clear waters around the Maldives. How could I ever forget them after having an opportunity to stare at them as I denied her of oxygen. She's wearing a colorful Hermes scarf around her neck, similar to the one yesterday, but I bet if she removed it, my fingerprints would be visible at the base of her neck.

Her face is flawlessly symmetrical, with high cheekbones and a straight

nose. Her lips are full and pouty, with a natural pink hue that gives her a soft and innocent look. Only I know differently. She shares an obviously practiced smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

She is petite with curves in all the right places. Her stilettos make her legs seem longer than what they are. I put her at about five foot six without the heels. Her movements are graceful and fluid. Her simple yet elegant white dress hugs her figure, showing off her slender waist and toned arms. If I had to guess, her favorite color is white.

As she greets me with a soft hello, her soft voice is melodic, like a songbird's—a stark contrast from when she called me a pussy. Her words are thoughtful and measured as she introduces herself and takes a seat opposite of me. She has to recognize me too, but her mask of indifference is Academy-Award worthy.

To any other man, this beautiful woman with long brunette hair and blue eyes would be a true vision of perfection. She exudes an effortless beauty both captivating and inspiring, and it would be impossible not to be enchanted by her presence. I, however, know that this version of her is a lie. Her ability not to react upon seeing me is very telling. It speaks to her ease to be deceitful and a chameleon. She's not to be trusted. Once I'm done breaking her, her true identity will prevail.

"Morning, sweetheart," Vladimir greets. He passes her a mimosa from the tray at the center of the table. "I would like you to meet Kai Gallagher."

"Nice to meet you," I say, the word Margo on the tip of my tongue, but I refrain. Why the fuck is she not in jail? Is her father aware of her assassination attempt? Did he use his reach to get the charge dismissed?

Our eyes meet for the briefest of seconds before she looks away. "Hello," she says again.

My quest to break her just became much more essential. She may have escaped through the confines of the law, but she won't escape my punishment. She will pay for her attempt on Persephone's life. So if she wants to continue this charade for her father's sake, so be it.

Vasilisa falls silent, but her eyes trail over my body, assessing me with an intensity that would make most uncomfortable. It's clear she is not happy with this arrangement.

"I'm sorry for my daughter's quietness," Vladimir speaks up, pouring himself a cup of coffee now that he's finished his whiskey. "She's had some issues adapting to the idea of an arranged marriage." He turns to his daughter. "We were just discussing the timeframe for your wedding," Vladimir continues. "I think three months will be sufficient. It will give the two of you a chance to get to know each other before you exchange vows."

Vasilisa takes a small sip of her mimosa, but I see the slightest slip in her mask of indifference. "Are you saying you want us to date first?" she questions.

I smirk at the audacity. Surely, she isn't as naive as she's trying to appear. "I don't date, sweetheart," I answer, using the same nickname her father used but condescendingly.

"Well, how is this supposed to work?" She snarls, before it transitions back into her practiced smile.

Vladmir interrupts, sensing the tension building. "Vasilisa, you will have today to pack up your things. Tomorrow, Kai will send a driver for you. You will join him at his home during this short engagement period so the two of you can work through any differences you may have."

"This seems far from appropriate," she scoffs, her feistiness rearing its head. Yeah, she's going to be a treat to bring down a few pegs.

"You're twenty-one now, so you're of age. And Kai is aware that he isn't getting a virgin ... you made sure of that," Vladimir growls, his own temper flaring. "So given the circumstances, it's very appropriate. It's time for you to fall in line. And that won't be happening under the roof of this house where you constantly do as you goddamn well please."

Vasilisa glares at me before pushing back from the table. "I freaking hate this whole idea." She slams the champagne glass on the table, breaking it at the stem. The shards fall between the opening of the wrought iron. She storms off, and her father looks embarrassed for her.

"You'll have to excuse my daughter," Vladimir says. "Growing up without a mother means she didn't have a nurturing upbringing or examples of how to be submissive. I warned you that she was stubborn. The three months will give her a chance to get more comfortable with the idea of this wedding."

I nod in agreement, but comfort will be the furthest thing from her three months with me. If this is the lie he needs to tell himself to turn her over to me, who am I to intervene in that delusion.

"I will send my driver over in the morning at ten sharp."

I stand, and we shake hands to solidify the agreement. "Sorry about brunch. Do you want to take any of it with you? I can have one of my house staff get you a to-go container."

"Nah. Just means less calories to burn off at the gym. I'll be in touch."

I see myself out. The morning wasn't a complete waste. Now that I know who Vasilisa really is, my plans for her can commence. I have some modifications to make for her room at the home I just bought in San Francisco, an hour and a half from here. I just became her worst nightmare, so she better enjoy her last day of freedom.

CHAPTER FOUR

Vasilisa

A s I neared the table for brunch, my gaze was immediately drawn to him —the man I'm betrothed to marry. The first thing that captured my attention was his muscular frame, sculpted like a work of art. Every movement he made so casually exuded strength and power. The way his broad shoulders fill out his plain white T-shirt, the definition in his arms, and the confident way he carries himself were impossible to ignore.

But it wasn't just his physique that got my attention; it was his hair, flowing in wild, untamed curls. Each strand seemed to have a life of its own, cascading down his chest and framing his chiseled face. The thickness of his locks only added to the allure, a testament to his vitality and masculinity.

When I finally got close enough to see his eyes, they were mesmerizing— a shade of amber so deep and rich, it was as if they held the secrets of the universe. They were like a fine cognac—warm and inviting. There was a certain spark within them, an undeniable twinkle that danced with danger and mischief. When those eyes met mine, it felt as if time stood still. Familiarity knocked me off kilter, and I had to work to maintain my composure. Those wild locks were secured in a top knot on his head before in Persie's apartment, and I was too distracted by my failed attempt to kill her to really get an appreciative look at him before, but it's definitely him. It's the bodyguard from Persie's apartment. While he sat across the table from me, he

gave nothing away. Was it possible he didn't recognize me? It's very possible since I was dressed and styled differently today from that disastrous encounter.

HIS PRESENCE WAS INTOXICATING, HIS CONFIDENCE CONTAGIOUS. THERE WAS an air of mystery about him, a sense that he was much more dangerous than his astonishing good looks portrayed. I'm still not a fan of this whole forced marriage thing, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't intrigued, curious to uncover the stories hidden behind those bulging muscles and wild curls. My first impression of him is that he's savagely loyal. My life was spared due to his respect and admiration for Persie.

And as I continued to observe him, to admire the intricate details of his masculinity, I realized that his exterior beauty was merely an illusion for the man he likely is underneath. "I don't date" is what he said. I don't doubt that. Things between us got a bit tense due to his flippant, condescending attitude regarding this whole ordeal. Add in my father's insensitive comments about me not being a virgin and insisting that I move in with this savage god, and I knew I needed to get out of there. If I have to go through with this whole arrangement, at least he's easy to look at. For now though, I need another distraction ... a last hurrah of sorts, and I know just the place.

CHAPTER FIVE

Vasilisa

I walk into the dimly lit club, my heart pounding with anticipation. The bass thumps through my body as I make my way to the dance floor. The lights flicker in hues of purple and blue, illuminating the sea of bodies writhing to the music. The energy pulsates around me, and I know I'm exactly where I need to be. I invited my two best girlfriends, Zara and Abbey, out to join me, but they both had other plans.

I close my eyes, letting the music wash over me. I sway to the beat, my hips moving in slow, sensual circles. The rhythm courses through me, and I begin to let go of all inhibitions. I become lost in the music, lost in the moment, and lost in myself. For this small moment in time, I'm free ... just like the ride on my motorcycle yesterday.

I take a deep breath and open my eyes. I see people around me, watching me, but I don't care. I begin to dance with more intention, moving my body in ways that make me feel powerful and sexy. Viktor couldn't be more wrong about me being boring. As the tempo increases, I feel that surge of adrenaline that I've been chasing since I arrived. I take a step back and begin to slowly roll my hips, feeling the music move through me. I let my hands travel down my body, over my hips and thighs, and back up to my waist. I can feel eyes on me, but I don't shy away. Instead, I embrace the attention, using it to fuel my movements. I turn around and let my back arch, revealing the curve of my spine. Lifting my arms, I let my fingers trace over my body, teasing and enticing the crowd. My eyes meet those of a dark-haired man, and I recognize the hunger in his gaze. I smile and continue to move, feeling in complete control.

The music shifts, and I feel a surge of energy. I jump and spin, my hair

whipping around me. My heart races, my breath coming in short bursts. As the night wears on, I continue to dance, my movements growing more and more seductive. I feel the eyes of the crowd on me, but I'm no longer dancing for them. I'm dancing for myself, for the woman inside me who wants to be seen as more than just someone to barter and trade for power.

As the music fades and the lights come up, a sense of reality washes over me. Tomorrow morning, I'll be trading these carefree days for duty and responsibility.

I make my way off the dance floor, my body still humming with the energy of the night. I wish I had ridden my motorcycle here, but instead, I had our driver drop me off at Zara's house. I took an Uber here, but now that everyone is leaving the club, it will be a while before I can get one if I stand out front. There is already a surge in demand, and I don't want to call for our driver. The whole point of being dropped off at Zara's is to enjoy a night out without being under my father's watchful eye. If I can get some distance from the club, maybe more cars will be available.

After I step out into the cool night air, I decide to walk a few blocks east before trying to call for an Uber. As I make my way down the street, I notice a man walking a few paces behind me. I glance over my shoulder, but he seems to be lost in thought, his eyes focused on the ground. I shrug it off and continue walking, but as I turn down a side street, I realize he continues to follow me. A sense of unease creeps up my spine, and I begin to walk faster. But no matter how quickly I move, the man remains a few paces behind me. I stop and turn around, my heart pounding in my chest. The man stops too, his eyes meeting mine. I feel a surge of fear, unsure of what he wants or why he's following me.

I try to compose myself, to appear calm and collected. "Can I help you?" I ask, my voice shaking slightly.

The man doesn't respond. Instead, he continues to stare at me, his eyes dark and unyielding. I take a step back, unsure of what to do next. Suddenly, the man lunges forward, his arms outstretched. I scream and begin to run, my heart pounding in my chest. I can hear his footsteps behind me, the sound growing louder with each passing moment. My heels slow me down, but I can't stop to take them off. I dash down the deserted street, my eyes scanning for any signs of help. But no one is around to hear my cries for help. I can feel the man closing in on me, his breath hot on the back of my neck at one point. I turn a corner and dart into an alleyway, hoping to lose him in the

maze of buildings. But as I turn around, I see the man walking toward me, his eyes fixed on mine. A sense of panic rises in my chest, but I know I can't let fear take over. I take a deep breath and stand my ground, my eyes locked on his.

"What do you want?" I ask, my voice stern.

The man smiles with a sinister glint in his eye. "I want you," he says, his voice low and menacing.

I take a step back, unsure of how to respond. "I don't know you," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. It's a stupid response, but I'm trying to buy time to figure out how to get myself out of this mess.

The man takes another step forward, his hand reaching out to grab me. I scream and try to run again, but he grabs me by the arm, his tight grip unrelenting. I struggle and fight, but the man is too strong. He drags me farther into the alleyway, his intentions clear as he pulls at the hem of my dress. I lower to the ground, trying to escape his grasp. I can feel my face redden and my heart pounding in my chest, but I refuse to cry.

But then, out of nowhere, I hear a voice. "Hey!" someone shouts. "Let her the fuck go!"

I recognize that voice. "Nothing to see here, pal. Just keep it moving. Mind your fucking ..."

The man who has a hold of me doesn't get to finish that statement. He takes a punch to the face so hard that he slumps over. That's it. No fight. The guy who just laid him out looks pissed. It's fucking Kai. What is he doing here and how did he find me? He grabs me by the arm and pulls me to my feet.

"Are you stalking me now?" I ask incredulously, attempting to pull my arm away.

"Let's go, now!" he growls. "I don't have time for your ungrateful bullshite. I should have let that guy rape your arse before I intervened."

"Fuck you," I spit. Ugh, I knew better than to be blinded by his handsomeness. He's the devil incarnate in a beautiful contradicting package. "If you're going to talk shit about it, then you should have just let him try. I have until ten tomorrow morning before I have to go anywhere with you."

"That timeline just fucking moved up, princess, since you have no sense of self-preservation. I need to protect my investment."

"I'm not an investment, jackass. I'm a person."

He growls louder this time before reaching down and throwing me over

his shoulder. "Whatever you say, Margo." My body stiffens. "Yes, I know exactly who you are, and I'm going to enjoy showing you just how much of a pussy I really am."

He all but throws me in the passenger seat of a Bugatti and buckles me in. "Stay," he says, daring me to run with a lethal stare. "If you so much as unbuckle that goddamn seat belt, I will lock you in the trunk."

I don't have the energy to fight with this jerk. Not now anyway. He knows who I am, and I need to think. I can't let him succeed in taking me wherever he's taking me, but I also know it will be harder to escape from that small-ass trunk. Of course I recognized him the moment I saw him at brunch today, but I was holding on to hope that the recognition wasn't reciprocated. Why didn't he call me out then? I have real concerns on what he plans to do to me. I tried to kill the woman I suspect he really wants. So why marry me? My mind races with so many questions—questions that distract me from what almost happened if he hadn't been there to intervene.

I can feel the tension in the car as we drive to his intended destination. I know he's upset for having to save me, especially knowing now that he must hate me. I'm thankful he was there to stop that guy, but my embarrassment has made that hard to admit. I'm not ungrateful.

As we drive in silence, I glance over at him. His jaw is clenched, and I can see the muscle in his cheek twitching. He's beyond angry, and I know I should say something to deescalate things, but I just can't bring myself to do it.

"What the fuck was that at the club?" he finally asks, his voice tight. "Dancing like a slut, begging for attention. Then you choose to walk alone into some dark alley. What did you think would happen?"

I shrug, not looking at him. So he was stalking me. "I don't know," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "I like to dance, and I was enjoying my last night as a free woman."

He scoffs, clearly not satisfied with my answer. "That was not dancing," he accuses. "That was a show to get attention. The wrong attention. You're betrothed to me, and you were out acting like a whore. This is the sabotaging shite your father spoke of—how you got out of having to get married before now. No respectable heir would want you with that type of behavior. Well, unfortunately for you, I'm not the average heir. You want to be a slut ...? Don't do it half arse. My plans for you mean more to me than whatever intentions you have to ruin this."

I roll my eyes, feeling my temper start to flare. "Call me a slut," I snap. "Maybe I am. I won't be for you, though, so no worries there. Your words can't hurt me but keep trying. I can't believe my father is willing to have me deal with this for some stupid agreement."

The car falls silent again, and I can tell he's struggling to keep his anger in check. I know I'm pushing his buttons, but I can't help it. I don't want to admit that I was partly wrong, and I don't want to feel weak in front of him. I know I should run the minute this car stops, but he may just be the last chance for my father. I hate that he's put me in this situation to save our family and his precious Bratva, but he and my brothers are the last family I have left. If something were to happen to them because I was unable to endure whatever this prick has in store for me, I'd be crushed. I don't think he'd kill me. He needs me alive. He said it himself. He called me an *investment*.

"You need to stop trying to be so damn tough," he says finally, his voice stern. "You're only going to make things harder for yourself."

I grit my teeth, feeling my frustration rise. "I don't need you to tell me how to live my life," I say, my voice shaking with anger. "I'm a grown woman, and I can take care of myself."

He looks at me, his eyes flashing with irritation. "Clearly, you can't," he snaps. "Otherwise, we wouldn't be having this conversation. I wouldn't have been called by one of my men who I asked to keep an eye on you in case you decided to run."

I cross my arms over my chest, feeling defensive. "I didn't need you to save me," I say firmly. "I could have taken care of myself. And I wasn't planning on running."

He sighs, raking an agitated hand through those thick, untamed curls. "Because you're an assassin, right?" he taunts. "Or is that just with defenseless college girls who don't know how to fight back?"

"Fuck you! You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, but I plan to, princess. You're going to tell me every last detail. Who was behind the hit, and how the fuck did you manage to get out of jail?"

After a long drive, he detours onto a road off the beaten path. We pull up to an electric gate and he inputs a code. We drive another quarter mile until we are in front of what looks like an abandoned warehouse. My heart plummets. Why are we here? What are his plans for me? There is nowhere to escape, even if I tried. I attempt to take in more of my surroundings, but it's

too dark, and the warehouse has few lights. Kai finally parks, and I can only wait for the fate that awaits me. He unlocks his door and rounds the front of the car. I pause until he opens my door and unbuckles my seat belt. He grabs me by the arm and leads me toward the side of the building. Inside is quiet and empty, so I'm not sure what this place is supposed to be for. He takes me down some stairs and to a cell at the end of the hall. Small light fixtures line the steel walls, but the pathway is still dimly lit. No words are exchanged as he pushes me inside before securing three locks on the other side. I don't attempt to plead with him or fight. I wish to hold on to the last remaining dignity I have left. The sturdy metal bars of the cell are unforgiving, much like a jail cell. Holding the bars, I look behind me, but all I see is darkness. My future husband is already gone. I stand as long as I can, but my legs grow tired after a bit. I lower myself to sit on the concrete floor but don't release the bars. I rest my head against the cold metal. I fucking hate this new life, and I'm not even into the first hour yet. If he has plans to kill me, I wish he'd just put me out of my misery already.

CHAPTER SIX

Vasilisa

hen I awake from my slumber, I'm still in this locked cell in a dark basement of a warehouse. The only light comes from the small light fixtures high up on the wall outside the cell. The air is thick with musty odors, and my nose wrinkles at the smell of mildew and decay. I bet this building has been condemned. There is no way it would meet code. I feel around the cell and only find a bucket in the corner, a loaf of bread, and three bottles of water. The bucket is my only option for relieving myself. I shudder at the thought of using it, but I know I'll have no other choice. Last night's events come rushing to the forefront of my mind now that my adrenaline has had time to settle. Is this my future husband's plan for me? Will he leave me down here? Panic sets in as I realize the severity of my situation. I am alone. The silence is deafening. There's no sound from outside the cell, no voices, no footsteps. It's like the world has forgotten about me and left me to rot in this dark hole. I try to shout for help, hoping that the new day has brought workers, construction, anything, but my voice is hoarse from screaming last night. I don't even know if anyone could hear me, even if they were here on the property. I was better off in that alley with the man who wanted to rape me. I had better odds of fighting back.

Hours pass, and I become increasingly thirsty and hungry. My stomach growls, but I push the hunger aside as long as I can before giving in to eat a couple of slices of bread and drink a bottle of water. I know my immediate concern is finding a way to escape. I want to help my family, but this can't be the way. I pace back and forth, periodically shaking the rusting metal bars to find a weak spot. But everything is solid and impenetrable. My heart sinks as I realize the futility of my efforts.

The bucket in the corner is becoming unbearable. Was someone imprisoned down here before me? I can't stand the smell, so I try to hold it in for as long as possible. But eventually, my bladder gives out, and I have no choice but to use it. A wave of disgust and humiliation washes over me as I squat down over the bucket. I close my eyes and try to block out the reality of my situation, but the overpowering stench causes me to gag as I finish.

As more time passes, I become more and more desperate. I try to conserve my energy by sitting in one corner of the cell, but the discomfort is unbearable. My muscles ache, and my joints are stiff from lack of movement. I start to lose track of time. I don't know how many days have passed since I've been locked up. My thoughts become jumbled and irrational. I start to imagine that I hear voices and footsteps outside the cell, but every time I shout for help, there's no response.

I try to sleep to escape, but it's hard. The floor is hard and uncomfortable, and the bucket smells even worse when I'm lying down. And when I do manage to drift off, I'm haunted by nightmares. Why have they returned? I start to lose hope. I don't know if I'll ever get out of this cell. I'm afraid that my *captor*, because that's what he is, changed his mind about me being an investment. Maybe the moment he discovered who I was, he decided to screw my family over and just do what he initially set out to do that day in Persie's apartment. *Kill me*.

Just when I've given up all hope, I hear a faint clicking noise from the outside of my cell. My heart races with fear. Has the ruthless heir sent someone to end me? The cell door creaks open, and blinding light floods into the cell from a flashlight. I shield my eyes as the form walks toward me.

"You have one chance and one chance only to get this right," my savage captor warns. "You lie to me or smart off, and I will leave your princess arse down here for another three days. And that's after I have some rats set lose down here to keep you company."

I bite my tongue before speaking to keep from saying something that will ruin my chances of getting out of this hellhole. "Okay," I say.

"Good girl. I see your time down here hasn't been for nought," he surmises. "Tell me. Why did you try to kill Persephone? Who hired you?"

I blow out a cleansing breath as I push myself to sit up. The reasoning is fucking asinine and embarrassing, but what choice do I have? "Nobody hired me," I start. He turns to leave, and I scream with all the energy I have left, my throat raw. "Wait! Please. I'm not lying to you. I promise."

He slowly turns and walks back toward me. "I swear this better not be bullshite. Speak!"

"Nobody hired me. I did it for Viktor. I wanted to prove that I wasn't vanilla, boring, or fragile."

"Who the fuck is Viktor? Elaborate!"

"Viktor is heir to the Sokolov Bratva in Russia. We grew up here together before his family moved back to Moscow. My father wanted to betroth me to him, but he refused me. He said he needed a wife who could keep up with him and not some fragile princess," I explain. "I thought if I could take on one of his jobs, that I could prove my worth."

He's quiet for what seems like an eternity before he finally responds. "Why did Persephone call you Margo? She said she grew up with you too. Why did you think she was one of Viktor's jobs?"

I have to dig deep to continue this story. Talking about my sister is never easy. "Margo was my twin," I begin, my voice betraying me as it shakes. "Growing up, we were forced to attend different private schools— my father's way of ensuring we weren't in direct competition with each other and didn't form a co-dependency. He wanted us both to have a separate journey, everything being strategic with him. At sixteen, she was brutally raped by a gang of men and then shot in the head. They left her body to be found in an abandoned warehouse, probably like this one. Margo was the spontaneous one—the one everyone gravitated to, including Viktor. She was his girlfriend, and he loved her. He blamed Persie for her death."

"What? Why?" he asks.

"Margo and Persie were best friends until Viktor came between them. Persie wanted him to leave my sister for her, but when he rejected her and told my sister of her betrayal, Persie started rumors about Margo being promiscuous. That ultimately led to her being raped and then killed to keep her from identifying the assailants. It's believed that Persie's father used his connections and money to cover it up. And it worked. Margo's murder was ruled as Mafia related and retaliation to get to my father."

"That sounds more plausible to me," Kai surmises. "More so than the conspiracy theory that Persephone was responsible."

"One would think, but one of the guys who stood by and did nothing during her attack later confessed to clear his conscience. Shortly thereafter, he disappeared, assumed to have been murdered to keep him quiet. Without his testimony, it was hearsay—especially given who my father is."

Kai pulls me to my feet to stand. "And Viktor didn't ask you to kill Persephone to prove yourself as a worthy prospect for marriage?"

"No. He would never see me as capable of anything other than being Daddy's princess." I sigh. "After he respectfully refused my hand in marriage, I overheard him tell my father that I was no replacement for Margo and that he'd plan to avenge her death. He would start with Persie and then with every person who played a part in her rape and murder. He just had to claim his rightful place as heir in Moscow first, but he'd be back. He would never forget her, and now that he has to choose a wife that isn't her, it brings all that angst back to the surface."

Kai shakes his head in disgust before pushing my back against the cold steel wall next to the cell. "Wait... hold the fuck up. If Persephone caused this, then she would know that Margo is dead. Why would she possibly think you were Margo? You're leaving something out. This makes no sense."

"Nobody knew Margo was a twin except Viktor's family. I told you my father made us go to separate private schools. He wanted to ensure when the time came we each had our individual prospects to be betrothed to without the man feeling the need to choose between us. We were meant to exist as one and the same." Kai wraps a firm hand around my neck, his nares flaring. I know that struggling against his grasp is futile, so I continue in hopes of giving enough info for him to let me go. Persie is not around this time to plea for my release. "Persie was unaware that Margo had a twin, so I stated that my death was faked to protect me, but the rape was real. I told her that some of my father's enemies were closing in on me. She apologized profusely for letting her unrequited feelings for Viktor end our friendship, and that, yes, she started those ugly rumors about me, but she didn't know it would lead to anything serious. Her guilt was consuming her, and I knew she would overcompensate to make it up to me. I used this knowledge to get close to her —fed her lies about being in a toxic relationship in which I was hiding from. She got me a unit next to hers, but she missed the fact that I was only there certain times of the day. I drove between Los Angeles and my home in Sacramento to facilitate this lie. I played the role of my sister well, and she was too blinded by guilt to see otherwise. I was released from jail because she came down to the precinct and explained that it was all a mistake and that she didn't plan to press charges."

"You sound so proud of your manipulative actions, yet you're so desperate for a man who doesn't want you. You're the one blind here—

blinded by rejection. Had you been successful in killing Persephone, it wouldn't have brought your sister back, and it wouldn't have made Viktor want you. It just makes you look pathetic."

He releases his grip around my neck, but the disgust in his eyes is still there. "I'm not proud," I admit. "I can't take my actions back, but your anger is so hypocritical. I'm sure you have more than a little blood on your hands. Irish, Russian, Italian, it doesn't matter. All you Mafia men are the same. You don't live by the rules of society. You end lives as necessary to advance your agendas. What I attempted was no different."

"I said if you were truthful with me that I'd let you out of this shitehole, so I will keep my word until I can verify your story. Just know this whole fucking marriage thing is a farce for the sake of both of our families. I won't take you seriously, let alone love you. Viktor was right to stay as far from you as he could get. I can't speak for your family, but if we kill, it's for a purpose and well deserved. We don't kill with the hopes of getting chosen by someone. That's not honorable, so don't ever compare yourself and lack of character to that of my family. You weren't trying to avenge your sister's death; you did it for a man who doesn't want you. You're spoiled, entitled, and manipulative. Three qualities no man wants to have in a wife."

His words are worst than his chokehold, each syllable a punch to the gut. I can feel my face growing hot and the tears threatening to fall, but I refuse to let them. Instead, I smirk. *Fuck him*. He doesn't know anything about me other than I tried to kill his precious Persephone. While the initial plan may have been to prove myself worthy for Viktor, avenging my sister would have been the icing on the cake. Persie didn't commit any of the acts herself, but her rumors resulted in the outcome.

He grabs me by the arm and leads me up and out of the basement. He blindfolds me and secures my arms with zip ties before leading me outside and all but throwing me in the car. We ride for what feels like at least a half an hour. Once we reach what I'm guessing is his home, he removes the blindfold and zip ties in the foyer. The house is a blur as we head up the grandiose staircase and to the room at the end of the hall. He pushes me inside a bedroom before securing the locks on the opposite side.

One thing I've mastered is to blocking it all out—words, pain, and rejection. Even in my sister's death, I continue to live in her shadow. I'm not really living ... I'm simply existing.

"

CHAPTER SEVEN

I startle at the unexpected ring of my burner phone on my nightstand. I have two, both Nokias, but the gold 8110 one holds a special purpose. It means there is a lead in my father's murder. I quickly snatch the phone to answer.

"Hope this is a good time," the voice says on the other end of the line. "I figured nine was a safe time before you start your day. I have news."

It's Jacob, one of my inside contacts with the NYPD. He doesn't know that I'm not in New York—nobody outside of my family does. It's actually six in the morning here.

"What is it?" I probe.

"Nothing I'm willing to disclose over the phone. What's a good time for us to meet? I get off at seven tonight if that works."

Shite. I can't send for our private jet. Nobody is to know I'm here in San Francisco or why. The movement of our jet is easy to track, so I'll have to fly commercial. A direct flight can get me there in about five and a half hours, so it depends on the available departure times.

"Give me a sec," I stall as I scroll through flights on my primary phone. *Perfect!* "Let's plan to meet around nine tonight," I suggest after finding a Jet Blue flight that would get me back to New York just after seven. I added the additional time for potential delays. I fucking hate flying commercial.

"That works. I'll meet you at Jessica's."

"See you then," I confirm before ending the call.

Jessica is his mistress. She lives in some swanky high-rise apartment that he pays for with his side hustle, but we never actually go up to her unit. Instead, we use the private apartment garage as neutral ground. He informs

her that he is meeting someone, and she doesn't ask questions. She just buzzes me in when I put in the three digit code for her unit. I have plenty of shite on Jacob aside from his philandering ways. Knowing things gains me favors. I quickly book my flight to depart at 10:39 a.m. I make quick work of packing and getting ready before giving explicit instructions to my house staff not to let Vasilisa out of her room while I'm gone. I will have to decide how I want to move forward with her when I return.

As I board the plane, I feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins. To think we may be one step closer to finding our father's killer fuels me to prepare to avenge him. All eyes are on Lennon at the moment since he's become the Clan Chief, so I'm seeking this info solo. We're in stealth mode. The enemy will never see us coming.

The flight is uneventful, and I spend most of it trying not to get my hopes up. I know I have to be careful. Our father's killer is still out there, and he could be from any one of the syndicates— Russian, Italian, or even Irish. That means I can't let my guard down for even a second. When I land, I can feel the familiar buzz of the city around me. New York is always alive, always moving, even when the rest of the world is at a standstill. I grab a cab to go pick up my throwaway car. It's the car I use when I don't want to be tracked. It's a used cash car, titled in a fictitious name.

I arrive at Jessica's apartment at exactly nine, dressed in all black and blending into the shadows cast by the tall buildings surrounding us. I notice Jacob's car already parked in the garage in Jessica's one and only designated visitor spot. I pull in next to him but am prepared to move my car should the tenant arrive before we finish our business since Jessica's car is in her only other allocated spot. Jacob rolls down his window and greets me with a nod. I hear the passenger door unlock as I approach to get inside with him.

"What's the news?" I ask him, my arse barely making contact with the leather seat before I get straight to the point.

"It's about your father's case," he says, his voice low. "There's been a break in the case with the ballistics."

It's been months since the murder, yet his case hasn't been a top priority. Once it was labeled Mafia-related, NYPD hasn't made any real effort to solve his case. They'd much rather we take each other out. It'd make their jobs easier. I'm sure our clan isn't the only family with a few inside connections, so I've asked Jacob to be as discreet as possible with this side investigation.

"You know who shot my father?" My hackles rise.

"Not exactly," he admits. "Our forensic ballistics expert matched the bullet that killed your father to three other homicides. Those cases are ongoing, so if they solve those, we will be one step closer to identifying the person who shot your father."

I run an agitated hand through my hair. We figured our father wasn't a one-off, but it's still not great to fucking hear. "Were the other victims Mafia or gang related too?"

"No. It was a college student, a banker, and a lawyer—people who will keep an investigation going."

"Unlike my father's case," I say more to myself. The question is rhetorical because I know the answer to that. But that's good. If the police give more effort to find their killer, then we can find my father's killer as a bonus.

Jacob nods, understanding the weight of my words. "I've also heard rumors of some movement within the other Irish clan. They might be getting ready to make a move on your turf."

My blood runs cold at the mention of the Flanagans. I've suspected they wanted to be more powerful than our family although we both have an alliance with the Italians. "Do you have any intel on what their plans are?"

"Not yet. But I'm keeping an ear out. I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything."

I nod in appreciation. Jacob is one of the few people we can somewhat trust in this city outside of our remaining clan members. He's been loyal to me and to our family, and he knows how to keep his mouth shut. But we can never be too careful. "Keep me in the loop," I say before getting out of his car.

As I walk back to my car, my mind races. The fact that the bullet that killed my father was linked to three other homicides is a good lead, but it also means that the killer could be more dangerous and unpredictable than we thought. Those other three murders can't be random. My father warned Lennon, so we know his murder wasn't random either. And now, hearing rumors that the Flanagan clan may be making a move on our turf, it's clear that we need to be more vigilant than ever.

I'm driving back toward my place when I get an incoming call from my youngest brother, Callum. He's managed to lose his car keys at some bar that our family doesn't have reign over. He sounded arse over tit over the phone when he called. I don't know why he's alone at this bar in the first place, but I didn't have time to dwell on it. I arrive at the seedy-looking dive that he had

no place venturing into in the first place. I step through the doors of the poorly lit bar, scanning the room with a sense of unease. The air is thick with smoke and the smell of alcohol, and the patrons inside are rowdy and aggressive. It's the kind of place where trouble is always just around the corner, and I can't help but feel a sense of apprehension as I make my way to the bar to look for Callum. This is not his scene at all. He is the most straightlaced of all of us. He's a freaking college kid who just got accepted into New York Law School. I describe my brother to the bartender, and he tells me I can find him in the restroom. Of course the bartender knows who I was referring to. My brother sticks out like a sore thumb in this place. What was he thinking?

As I take a seat on a stool, I notice a group of men huddled together in the corner of the room. They're speaking in hushed tones, their eyes darting around suspiciously. I can tell they're trying to keep a low profile, but their presence is unmistakable.

They're Mexican cartel guys. We've never had any run-ins with them before, but I know enough to know they aren't intimidated by our clan. Callum needs to hurry the hell up in the restroom so we can go. We'll send our men for his car later. Just as I contemplate whether to check on him, the front door bursts open, and a group of men barges in. My skin prickles. They're definitely looking for trouble.

One of the men, a burly man with a thick beard and a mean scowl, strides over to the cartel guys. He starts yelling at them, accusing them of all sorts of things I can't quite make out. The situation escalates quickly. Before I know it, punches are being thrown and chairs are being overturned. The other patrons in the bar start to scatter, running for the exits as the fight spills out into the open. Callum picks this time to emerge from the restroom, and just as I thought, he's drunk. I watch him sway on his feet as he grabs the bar. He sees me and makes his way over to me with a silly oblivious smile plastered on his face. I try to grab his arm to get us the hell out of there, but we're caught in the crossfire, in the middle of the chaos, and unable to escape. I throw the nearest drink in the face of one of the attackers, buying us a moment of respite. The man staggers back, cursing at me. But I'm already moving, pushing my way through the crowd to get to my brother and get the hell out of here.

We're outnumbered and outmatched. It becomes clear that we're not escaping this chaos unscathed. I jump into the fray, fists flying as I try to fend

off their strikes. I managed to push my brother out the door—hoping like fuck he has enough sense to stay out and get help.

The sound of breaking glass fills my ears as one of the attackers smashes a bottle over my head. I stumble backward, feeling blood trickling down my face, but I don't stop fighting. Of course, I have a handgun strapped to my ankle, but I won't retrieve it unless necessary. It is important that I remain above board and refrain from anything that will get me thrown in jail. If I murder any of these deserving fuckers, I will be arrested and have to go through the nuances of a trial to prove it was justified. Our clan can't afford that. I lunge forward, tackling one of the attackers to the ground. As I struggle to get back to my feet, I see some of the cartel guys making a break for the door. They're bruised and battered, but they're alive. Now that my brother is safe, I need to find a way to escape too. My attempt is futile. They swarm around those of us remaining, raining blows down on us from all sides. I take a bunch of them out, but even with my trained military skill, it's a tough match due to the sheer number of them.

I feel myself tiring, my body battered, but I have to keep going. With a surge of adrenaline, I push myself to my feet. The attackers are relentless, their punches coming faster and harder. But I'm quicker. I dodge and weave, trying to tire them out. And when I see an opening, I strike. My fist connects with the jaw of one of the attackers, sending him sprawling to the ground. Another attacker steps up to take his place, but I'm ready. I sidestep his punch and deliver a powerful blow to his gut. The fight rages on, with what seems to be no end, but then I hear it. The sound of this shite show coming to an end —police sirens. The fighting halts immediately, and everyone begins to flee to avoid being caught. I make my way outside and see my brother standing under the streetlamp talking to one of the cops. His face cringes when he sees me walk over.

"Holy shite, brother. I'm so sorry. I know I fucked up. I called the police as soon as you pushed me out of there." His words are slightly slurred.

"Your brother was explaining that you came to pick him up because he wasn't in any condition to drive," the female officer explains. "And that a bar fight broke out, and you were stuck in the middle."

In the midst of her recap of my brother's story, I realize he wouldn't have been in any condition to drive even if he hadn't lost his keys. Would he have still called me or tried to drive home? The narrative he told the cop is a modified one, but he and I will have lots to discuss once he sobers up. "Yes.

That about sums it up," I say.

"I won't hold you up. You need to get that looked at," she says, pointing at my head. "I'll send one of my officers to get your statement at the hospital."

"Sure thing," I reply. "I'm sure a few stitches will do the trick, but I'll head over to Mount Sinai after I get my brother home."

She nods to confirm as I grab my brother by the arm and lead him toward my car. I could have had the small cut in my head stitched up at home, but I have to be cooperative with the fucking police now. I have to pretend not to know the Mexican cartel was there. I won't snitch and bring about unnecessary problems for our clan.

"What the fuck were you doing at a place like that?" I ask as soon as we're in my car.

"I was supposed to meet Connor there. We haven't seen each other in a while, and he wanted to meet for drinks at a neutral place not tied to our families. No Mafia crap—just two mates catching up."

"I didn't see Connor Flanagan in there," I point out.

"He never showed. By the time I realized he wasn't coming, I'd had a few drinks too many, and my keys were missing."

"Had they not been missing, were you going to drive back to your place like this?" I slam my fist on the steering wheel. "We have too much shite on our plates right now to worry about you too. You have to make smarter decisions than this. I'm going to drop you back at school. Stay the fuck away from Connor, and don't answer his calls."

"I'm sure he has a reasonable explanation for not showing up tonight."

I question if Connor was trying to set my brother up for something. Was this what Jacob was referring to? "Listen, I have to look into some shady shite that the Flanagans may be up to. In the meantime, I need you to promise me that you will stay away from them—all of them. Fucking promise me, Callum."

"Geez, I promise."

"Call me if any of them reaches out to you again."

"I will."

I pull up to his campus apartment. "I will have someone retrieve your car and get you a new set of keys. Stay on campus and out of trouble. I need to know that you're safe."

He gets out of my car but turns to me before closing the door. "Aye aye,

captain." He laughs, making a play on my new role as clan captain in relation to fucking SpongeBob. He slams my door and walks toward his place. I watch until he disappears inside the building. Now that my babysitter duties are complete, I need to fucking get to the hospital for the formality of answering these questions that I have no plans to be truthful about and get my cut stitched up. Lennon gets back with his bride tomorrow afternoon, but I plan to be gone before then. I definitely have lots to share as soon as he touches down, though.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Vasilisa

I 'm sitting in this room that's supposed to be mine, feeling frustrated and trapped. I have been locked in here for what feels like an eternity, with no way to escape. My ruthless captor has traded one prison for another. The only time anyone comes in is to bring me food, and even then, she quickly leaves without saying a word. It's the same young woman every time— a pretty redhead who looks to be about my age. I know I'm not allowed to leave this room, but I can't help but feel angry and resentful toward Kai for taking me away from my home only to imprison me here. I get that he is angry too. He probably has every right to be. The part I'm struggling with is why did he agree to marry me then? If he hates me so much and has so much more character than I do, why lower his standards for me?

As I sit on the edge of my bed, I hear footsteps approaching the door. My heart begins to race, wondering if this will be the day I'm finally released from my confinement. But as the door opens, I see it is only one of the maids bringing me my meal, a different woman this time—older. The anger inside me begins to boil as I watch her place the tray on the table next to my bed and exit the room without a word. Were they given instructions not to speak to me?

I stare at the food in front of me, feeling no desire to eat. The woman leaves without a single word. Kai may provide for me physically, but I'm starving emotionally. I pick up the fork and poke at the scrambled eggs on my plate, feeling a sense of hopelessness wash over me. How long will I be forced to stay in this room? How long will I have to endure the loneliness and isolation?

My thoughts drift to the man who has put me here. We're supposed to be

getting to know each other before our wedding in three months, but all I feel is anger and resentment toward him. How could he do this to me? If he can't get past my attempt on Persie's life, why not just let me go, or was this his plan all along? Was his investment speech a facade for his real motive to make me suffer and then kill me?

I walk over to the window and look out, hoping to catch a glimpse of something, anything, to distract me from my thoughts. But all I see is the same view I've been staring at for days—a manicured garden of solitude. I turn away from the window, feeling defeated. I know I'm powerless to change my situation, and that thought only makes me more angry. I want to fight back, to resist the man who has taken away my freedom, but I know there is nothing I can do. I'm trapped here and at his mercy.

As days have passed, I've found myself sinking deeper into despair. The isolation and confinement are taking their toll on me physically and mentally. My once fighting spirit is fading. I'm struggling to hold out hope. How can we get to know each other or turn things around if I never see him? I've already gotten over his attempt to strangle me to death, so why can't he put my actions behind him? I may be angry, but I refuse to let him break me.

With a newfound determination, I begin to plot ways to get his attention. I'm mid thought when I hear the locks disengaging on the other side. It's the maid I'm more familiar with—the redhead. She has a stack of towels and toiletries in hand. Looks like I will finally get a chance to shower after more days than I care to think about.

"Excuse me," I call out, my voice carrying a note of desperation as she sets the towels and toiletries on the counter in the en suite bathroom. I've rinsed off in the shower once, but having to put the same clothes back on kind of defeated the point. "Could you spare a moment? I'd like to talk."

The redhead stops in her tracks, surprise flickering across her face. She turns toward me, her eyes narrowing slightly as she assesses whether she should respond to me. I can only imagine what she must be thinking. Who am I, and why am I locked away in this room? Why am I seeking conversation now?

"Um... sure," she responds hesitantly, her tone betraying a mix of curiosity and caution. "What would you like to talk about?"

Relief floods through me as I realize she's willing to engage. I quickly search my mind for a topic, anything to break the suffocating silence.

"Tell me about your day," I say, attempting to sound casual despite the

desperation lingering in my tone. I refrain from any questions that may cause her to stop talking to me.

The maid pauses for a moment, as if considering whether to share details of her day with the prisoner. Does she even know that I'm supposed to be the fiancée? I don't even have a ring yet, but at this point, I'm not sure there will even be a wedding. Finally, she shrugs her shoulders. "Well, it's mostly the usual routine—cleaning, cooking, taking care of the household. It can get repetitive, but it makes the day pass quickly."

I nod empathetically, my mind grasping onto the mundane details she's offered. "I can understand how that might feel monotonous at times. But I imagine the other house staff you work with makes these tasks a bit easier to work through."

A small smile tugs at the corners of her lips. "Oh, definitely! We divide the chores, and then once dinner is prepared, we get some downtime to hang out and enjoy each other's company. We have our own quarters in the east wing of the estate, and they're actually quite luxurious," she says, looking at the bareness of my room. I have a single bed and an empty dresser.

Her words spark a glimmer of hope within me. It has been nice to engage in conversation to distract from the realities of my isolation.

"My name is Vasilisa, by the way," I say, introducing myself. "I hope this won't be the last of our talks."

The maid's eyes soften as she takes in my words. The boundaries between us seem to blur, if only for a moment, as we share a common desire for human connection. "Nice to meet you, Vasilisa. My name is Andrea, but you can call me Andie. The other house staff does, and it sounds much cooler. I can imagine it's tough being locked away like this," she says gently. "Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?"

I pause, contemplating her offer. I don't want to cheapen our interaction by trying to get intel out of her, so I keep the conversation at surface level. "Actually, yes. Just having someone to talk to, even for a few minutes, makes a world of difference. What do you like to do for fun outside of this place?"

Her expression brightens, and she laughs. "Well, those of us here are from Kai's other estate. We're not from California. This home is new, and we're still getting acquainted with all that is needed to be done here, so there's no chance of leaving the grounds anytime soon. Back at the other home, we had days off to do stuff in our free time. I had friends, and we'd head over to the college and pretend we belonged there. Want to know what

we enjoyed most?"

I nod eagerly, my curiosity piqued. As she begins to recount the memories, her voice is laced with excitement, but she's careful not to give too much away—careful not to mention which state she is speaking of or the college. Her stories about the frat parties and eating lunch on the lawn, pretending to have a different life other than being a maid, draw me into a world far beyond the confines of my room. The words flow effortlessly from her lips, carrying with them a sense of her being wild and free. At that moment, as Andie shares a tiny piece of her life, I realize that we all yearn for a regular life. The power of connection, of shared experiences and stories, transcends the physical barriers that hold me hostage here. And though my freedom may be restricted, my mind and spirit can still roam freely, carried by the tales of others. I'm tempted to ask for paper and a pen. I want to journal and get my bottled-up thoughts on paper, but I'm not sure it's allowed, so I don't bother.

As Andie finishes her story, we sit in silence for a moment, the weight of our shared humanity hanging in the air. The brief conversation has breathed life into the stagnant atmosphere of my room. Maybe next time she comes by, I'll share a story of my own—from happier times.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice filled with gratitude. "For talking to me, for sharing your memories. It means more to me than you'll ever know."

She smiles warmly, a glimmer of understanding in her eyes. "You're welcome. I'll be back later to bring fresh linen for your bed and some sleepwear and loungewear, but for now, you should enjoy a nice hot shower with the toiletries I brought in. They're heavenly."

Was that her way of saying I could use a shower? I chuckle at her discernment. It's the first laugh I've had in days.

Her words and story linger in the room after she's gone, carrying a profound truth that resonates within me. And so, I find solace in the connection forged through conversation, even as the locked door continues to keep me confined.

CHAPTER NINE

V asilisa has been locked in her room for four days and spent three days in a locked cell in my warehouse before that. I know I can't avoid her forever, but I'm struggling to look at her while knowing the attempt she made on Persephone's life. Her rationale for doing so just made things worse. She showed no remorse for her justification. She needs discipline and to be brought down a peg. She needs to learn her place before we get married, and I can't keep putting it off. Now that I'm back from New York, her worst nightmare starts.

I sit at the breakfast table, awaiting her arrival. I've only been home for a couple of hours, but I had my butler, Samuel, go retrieve her. I'll see if the seven days in isolation have taken some of the fight out of her. This first real conversation between us should be interesting.

Vasilisa's arrival is marked by an audible sigh. She's clearly not enthusiastic about joining me for breakfast. Samuel clears his throat and pulls a chair out for her as she glares at me from under her furrowed brow.

"I see you're still alive," I say mockingly.

"And I see you're still a bastard," she spits.

My eyes narrow at her insolence. "You're in no position to insult me," I say, my voice low and threatening.

Vasilisa rolls her eyes. "Oh, please. I've been locked up for countless days now. What more do you plan to do to me? What do you want from me?"

"I want you to realize the gravity of your actions," I say sternly. "You need to learn who is in charge here and submit. Your defiance won't be tolerated."

"Submit?" She scoffs. "You haven't earned that. You don't have to like

me ... hell, you can continue to hate me. But it's not fair for you to expect me to submit to you when you have yet to even treat me like a human."

I raise an eyebrow. "I've given you the essentials until you earn otherwise," I sneer. "Food and a roof over your head. I could have left you down in the basement at the warehouse with water and bread."

"How about some basic decency?" she retorts. "You have treated me like a prisoner since the moment you rescued me in that alley. You've insulted me, belittled me, and now you want me to submit to you?"

She has learned absolutely nothing, yet I can't say I'm surprised. She has no idea the patience that I've exercised with her. Any other person would have earned themselves a bullet between the eyes by now for the level of disrespect she continues to show. "You may not like how I treat you, but you will learn to respect me," I warn firmly. "I am your fiancé, whether we like it or not."

"I never agreed to this willingly," she says bitterly. "I was forced into it, just like I was forced into moving here three months before the wedding. I don't even have a ring on my finger. We should get it over with, set some ground rules, and live on separate sides of the house. You get to do what you want, and I get to do the same. This farce doesn't need to play out in the traditional marriage sense."

I lean forward. "You don't get to say how this plays out." I smirk. "And make no mistakes about it, I will always do what I want. I don't need your permission."

"Whatever."

"The harder you fight against my will, the harder my dick gets for the submission. So keep fighting, milseán. It will be just that much more fun to break you."

Her eyes widen in horror at my crass words. "You're disgusting," she spits out. "You think this is all a game? That you can just break me like some kind of toy?"

I laugh. "It's not a game, acushla. It's the real world. *My world*. And you need to learn that." I lean back in my chair and take a sip of my coffee. The spread of food before us is getting cold. "But enough of this unpleasantness. Let's discuss something more pleasant like your upcoming punishment."

Her eyes widen even further, and she begins to clench her fists. "P-punishment?" she stammers.

"Yes," I say matter-of-factly. "You need to learn your place and

understand the consequences of your actions. And so, you will be punished."

"Don't you think the isolation that I have endured is punishment enough?" she asks incredulously.

I smile darkly. "Not even a little bit. That was merely a reprieve for you while I calculated my next move. Besides, you've learned absolutely nothing from that reflection time. You're as defiant and mouthy as ever, but you'll learn."

Vasilisa's eyes dart around the room frantically, searching for any sign of mercy or understanding, but she finds nothing. Only my cold, unyielding gaze stares back at her.

"What kind of punishment?" she tries again, the slight tremble to her voice giving away her fear.

I lean forward and rest my elbows on the table, steepling my fingers in front of me. "Oh, you'll find out soon enough," I say slowly. "It will teach you the error of your ways and remind you who is in charge."

She rolls her eyes and sits up straight in her chair. "You can't be serious," she retorts.

"I'm dead serious," I say, my voice like steel. "You need to understand that you can't just do and say whatever you want without consequences. I'm not your father. I don't care about your stubbornness or your tantrums. Those annoyances will only escalate things."

She opens her mouth to protest, but I cut her off. "You will submit to this punishment willingly," I warn firmly. "Or you will be forced to submit. The choice is yours. You won't get many of those."

"You think you're going to get away with this?" she asks. "How will you explain this treatment to my father when I tell him?"

I grin in amusement. "I'm an Irish Mafia heir. I hold the fate of your family's Bratva in the palm of my hand. Your father knew the life he was sending you to," I say simply. "I don't have to explain myself to anyone."

"This is ridiculous," she mutters, looking away from me. "You have no right to do this."

"I have every right," I say menacingly, my voice rising slightly in volume, my patience wearing thin. "You will learn to respect me, even if you don't respect yourself. And you will learn to obey me without question. You will respect my every demand. You will obey every command. During your punishment, you will learn to be a good girl."

"I will never respect you," she hisses under her breath.

"Then you have a hard road ahead of you," I reply coldly. "You can begin that lesson today."

The tension during the remainder of breakfast is palpable. She works hard to remain poised and unaffected by my ominous promises, but the rigidness in her posture gives her away. She pushes the breakfast potatoes around her plate with her fork. I dare not insist that she eat up. It will make tonight's lesson more suitable. Instead, I quickly finish my omelet and toast, then rise from the table. I grab my coffee to take with me.

I summon Samuel with a gesture. "Ensure that she returns to her room once she's finished here," I instruct. "Don't let her out of your sight."

"Will do, sir," he acknowledges.

I head toward my office to make a phone call. Vasilisa needs discipline. It's time for her actions and disrespect to have consequences. She hasn't learned anything from her time in isolation, but she will. After looking through some of my beginner thud tools, I had planned to put her across my knee, but I think I'd much rather rip the Band-Aid off. First, I need to update Lennon on everything he's missed about the lead in our father's case and tell him to keep a watchful eye on Callum.

After my call to Lennon, I think back to Vasilisa's overt disrespect in my own home. My initial plans for her have changed. I call for Samuel and instruct him to bring the *pain-in-the-arse* troublemaker to my office. She enters the room with a scowl on her face and her arms folded across her chest. My hand twitches at her insubordination. It's time I introduce her to the man underneath all the Mafia bullshite. This punishment will simply be out of necessity. Pleasure has absolutely nothing to do with it.

CHAPTER TEN

Vasilisa

I 'm escorted to the fucktard's office by the one person with an even bigger stick up his ass than his employer. He follows every command without hesitation. I bet he's getting paid handsomely for his blind obedience ... well, I hope he is.

As I enter Kai's office, I find him leaning against his presumingly cherry wood desk. He does that finger motion thingy where the butler disappears, yet he is always lurking—waiting to be summoned again. The whole thing is idiotic to watch.

"Come closer," Kai instructs.

I hesitantly approach him, knowing any attempts to refuse him will be futile. Once I'm in an acceptable proximity to him, he steps aside, revealing six shot glasses filled with a clear liquid.

"What is that?"

"Alcohol," he deadpans.

"Clearly," I retort. But who is it for? Why have you summoned me? Unlike *Butler Suck-up*, I'm not on your payroll."

A small grin forms on his lips. But not the pleased kind ... it's the sinister kind that haunts you even while you're awake.

"These are for you. You want to be tough ... my equal in all things, so drink up."

"What does one have to do with the other? Your logic makes no sense."

His eyes narrow. "It doesn't have to. Just fucking drink up. You can drink them on your own, or I can waterboard you with them ... your choice. The choices I give are rare, remember?"

"You wouldn't."

"You want to try me? Have I given you any indications thus far that I bluff?"

"If I drink these, then what?"

"You're stalling. Take the fucking shots, or I will do it for you."

The coldness in his eyes convinces me. I down the six shots in rapid succession. The burn is not so bad after the first two. I quickly realized the shots were tequila. This guy is seriously psycho, and I'm clearly being subjected to participating in some weird punishment he deems appropriate.

"Okay. I drank the fucking shots. Can I go back to my room now?"

"We have about thirty minutes before those take effect so let's set some things straight before inebriation renders you completely useless."

"Whatever. Set away," I taunt, refusing to give in to his play for power.

"Hmm, let's see. So far, you've verbalized your refusal to submit to me, respect me, or fuck me. Did I cover all of your objections?"

"You're correct. Especially the last part—the fuck part."

Kai's grin widens as if he's pleased with my response. I see the challenge resonate within his whiskey-colored eyes. "Is that so? Are you sure about that?"

"You're delusional if you think I'd ever want to sleep with you. This marriage will be on paper only. We will not be consummating that farce."

His lips curve up into a sly smile as he leans in closer to me. "Oh, there will be no sleeping when I take you... no making love either. I fuck," he murmurs, his voice low and husky.

I can feel my heart racing as he continues to stare at me with those piercing brown eyes. It's as though he's daring me to look away, to break the intense eye contact that has held us both captive for the past few minutes.

"Well, like I said ... we won't be doing any of that either," I assure him.

He reaches out and takes hold of my hand, his touch sending shivers down my spine. Despite myself, I feel an unwelcome tremble run through my body as he draws me closer, his face just inches from mine.

"I think you're lying," he whispers, his breath hot against my cheek. "I think you want the privilege to have my cock buried deep within your cunt."

I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks. I try to pull away, but he only tightens his grip on my hand.

"Let go of me. I freaking hate you, and I hate this goddamn arrangement. I'm only agreeing to this because I love my family."

His eyes narrow as if my words have struck a nerve. I can see the anger

and frustration building up inside him. "Let me show you what I think of your hate," he says, spinning me around and bending me over his desk.

He makes quick work of yanking down my panties. "I'm on my period!" I yell. "You can't do this."

"You think something as trivial as blood will stop me?" he growls. I can hear him undoing his pants behind me as he keeps one forceful hand on my back.

"You're hurting me," I scream as he forces me flatter onto his desk, my face and breasts pressed against the hard surface.

"You're quite the liar, Vasilisa. I'm not hurting you—not yet anyway. I don't like liars. You're just another greedy whore who wants my cock," he snarls. "I have the perfect view of your cunt, and you know what I see ... aside from your dangling tampon string? *Wetness*. Why are you so turned on right now? Are you going to be truthful and beg me for it?"

I can't look back at him. I'm embarrassed by how my body responds to him right now. "Don't touch me," I scream. "You will not do this to me."

"I think we're well past that option ... don't you?"

The question is rhetorical. He pulls down his pants with his free hand, exposing his hard throbbing erection. I can't not look. He spreads my legs apart with his own before yanking out my tampon and tossing it on the desk next to me. Holy fuck, he's serious! I briefly feel his thick cock nudging at my folds before he pushes in until he's buried to the hilt.

"Stop!" I plead, rejecting the rush of sensations pinging all over my body, trying desperately to ignore the tiny sparks igniting between my legs.

"Tell your greedy cunt to stop clenching my cock." He smirks as he leisurely begins to stroke.

The feeling is fucking phenomenal, but I know this is wrong. He groans as his pace quickens. He's moving faster and faster inside me now—adjusting his position and slamming into me as deep as possible. And oh God, it's working ... because everywhere he strokes, it feels like I'm being lifted into another reality ... one where it's okay to admit how good he feels inside me.

I can hear the breath leaving his lips as his full body weight presses against mine while he continues to thrust inside me more frantically now. Then he rakes his hands down my backside, causing every nerve ending in my body to alight with fire. Blood trickles between my thighs as I fight the buildup driving me toward an orgasm. God, why does he have to feel so fucking good inside me? The girth of him fills me like nobody else has ever

done before, and I can no longer fight it. I'm giving in to the animalistic lust he's evoking inside me!

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"Tell me you want this, Vasilisa." His voice is a harsh growl now. "Tell me..." he orders, his eyes looking into mine as though he's lost in a sordid sex haze.

"Oh God!" I groan, feeling the beginnings of an orgasm. "Oh my God!" I buck wildly against the desk as it overtakes me. My world goes black as he slams into me one last time before I come around his cock.

He smiles victoriously, slamming his hips hard against mine as he grunts in ecstasy, thrusting then unloading his cum inside me. "Next time you come on my dick, it will be my name that comes out of your mouth—not God. From this point on, I will be the only man who will ever give you orgasms. Well, if I ever decide to give you the privilege again. That fuck was to prove a point."

"What point? You're an asshole," I say once he lets me up. His cock is still semi-hard and covered with blood ... my blood.

"I don't wish to fuck you either, sweetheart. That was a *disciplinary fuck* to show you who's in charge. Don't ever speak to what we're not going to do. I own you, and I can do with you what I please. The sooner you learn that, the better. Now clean yourself up. You're bleeding all over my floor." He picks up the used tampon from his desk and hands it over to me.

"I'm not putting that back in."

"I don't care what the fuck you do with it. Just take it with you." He looks toward the door. "Samuel, see that Vasilisa here gets to her room promptly and clean whatever trail of blood she tracks through the house."

Where the fuck did the butler come from and did he just watch this entire time? His lurker game is unmatched.

"Will do, sir," Samuel replies.

"You're dismissed," Kai says, turning to me.

I storm pass both him and Samuel. I don't wait for the escort. I head to my room and slam the door. I start the shower immediately. This has to be the most debased thing I've ever been a part of. His actions are twisted and sick.

I angrily strip off the remainder of my clothes before dropping them on the bathroom floor. I'm starting to fill the effects of the tequila. I've never felt so helpless and out of control in my entire life, yet I came so hard for him. Maybe I'm just as sick as he is. Maybe the tequila induced temporary insanity. What other reason he had to insist that I drink it. If the purpose was to get me drunk to fuck, he missed that mark by a few minutes. I'm slowly sliding to drunkville, but I was completely lucid for the *disciplinary fuck*. I step into the shower, leaving a disgusting trail of his cum mixed with my blood dripping down my legs.

"Fuck you, Kai ..." I whisper under my breath as the hot water begins to soothe my nerves. "I won't give you a chance to do that again." Even as the ambitious promise leaves my lips, my body isn't so sure. My pussy harbors a delicious ache as his girth is etched into my memory.

After a long hot shower to cleanse my shame, I get dressed into a clean pair of black yoga pants and matching crop tank top before I lie down on the bed. I'm thoroughly drained and emotionally spent. This entire arrangement is going to be very challenging. I've not been ready for the mental gymnastics I've endured thus far. How do you even fight against crazy? I welcome the sleep that gives me a reprieve. I was better off in isolation.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Vasilisa

I sense him before I see him. Even in the blanket darkness of the room, I can feel his presence hovering above me. "Time to get up," he announces, yanking the cover from my body.

"What the hell?" I grumble, trying to pull the cover back over me. My head throbs at the sudden movement.

"Hell is right, milseán. Now get up," he says, dragging me from the bed. He hands me a pair of sneakers. "And put these on. You have five minutes to pee and whatever else you need to do for that bleeding problem you have. Meet me at the front door. Don't make me come back up to get you. I will punish you for every minute you're late."

I'm still wearing the crop top and yoga pants I went to bed in. The sun hasn't even risen yet, and he's already unleashed the crazy. Where are we going at the ass crack of dawn? *Ugh*. I quickly pee and change my tampon. The flow is notably lighter now. I'm not wearing a watch, but I assume I made his ridiculous time restraint. As stated, he waits for me in the foyer by the front entrance.

"Where are we going?" I ask, holding my head as if the counter pressure will relieve the throbbing.

"Keep up," he says, taking off in a jog, but I just stand there.

Is he kidding me with this shit? I can barely tolerate standing right now, let alone running. He circles back around to me. "Get your ass moving now! I just added another mile to our run. This punishment is easy compared to what I will do if I have to repeat myself."

"I fucking hate you," I spit.

"Already noted. You've only said it a dozen times. Find a new comeback.

Now let's fucking go."

I grit my teeth and stomp behind him before transitioning into a slow jog. He said he was adding a mile to our run. I pray it's not much more than that. Suddenly, I'm riddled with an epiphany. This was the purpose of the tequila yesterday. He wanted me hungover for this evil plan of torture. *Fucking asshole*. I can't let him succeed. I will run until my legs give out. Although I feel like I'm going to die, my legs refuse to stop pumping even though my body hates me for doing so. As much as I despise this run, my hate for him is stronger and propels me forward.

Eventually, the numbing throb in my head subsides and the rhythm of my feet becomes a natural cadence of determination all on its own. That is, until Kai relents and slows his pace. Sweat covers every inch of my body as I try to catch my breath. Then the inevitable happens. I begin to puke on the side of the road. Dry heaves aren't far behind. In the early morning sun, it's scorching out and too early for this bullshit. He's punishing me with the run.

"Okay, shake it off. We're almost there," he says, stopping on top of a hill. He sets his hands on his hips and closes his eyes, breathing deeply while all I can do is flop over onto my back upon entering his radius and lie on the dewy grass next to the road, taking in big gulps of sweet oxygen to fill my lungs and try to regain control over my heavy breathing and heartbeat that are beyond erratic from exhaustion.

"That was only three miles. Thirty-eight minutes to complete is absurd, so get up before I add another mile."

I spring from the grass. "There is no way I have another mile in me," I plead.

"We'll see about that. Let's get breakfast," he says as he points toward the bottom of the hill.

A small diner comes into view. My stomach doesn't want to even think about food, but the rest of me doesn't want to think about a three-mile trek back to his estate either. The sun begins to rise as we walk down the hill.

The first rays of the morning sun peek through as we head down the hill in silence, casting a warm glow across the sky. The crisp, salty breeze is refreshing, signaling the proximity of the Pacific Ocean. I take a deep breath, savoring the scent of the sea mingling with hints of fresh coffee that I desperately need. Most of the world is still asleep, yet I've already tackled a three-mile run ... with a hangover.

As I gaze out toward the horizon, the sky begins to blush with soft hues

of pink and purple. The city's iconic landmarks, the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz Island, stand silhouetted against the emerging canvas of colors. The tranquil waters of the bay reflect the sky's ever-changing palette, creating a surreal mirage that dances before my eyes. Time seems to slow down as I witness the birth of a new day. The sun inches higher, casting golden rays across the water, illuminating the city's skyline in a breathtaking display. The skyscrapers and Victorian houses are bathed in warm light, their windows glistening like diamonds. It takes me a moment to notice that we've stopped walking, and Kai watches me take it all in.

"It was worth it, wasn't it? To see this spectacular sunrise?"

I could have watched the sun rise from the comfort of my room. Okay, maybe not. I would have still been asleep. I have to admit it feels good to get out of the house ... out of isolation, even if he tried to kill me with physical activity.

"The jury is still out," I reply stubbornly. "But yeah. This is definitely one of nature's beauties."

The seagulls soar above, their calls echoing in the distance, and the waves continue their rhythmic dance along the shoreline. The colors intensify, transforming the sky into a magnificent tapestry. Fiery oranges and vibrant yellows streak across the sky. I remain captivated by its beauty even once we're inside the diner. Kai orders us both an omelet with coffee in addition to a monstrous stack of pancakes that I have no plans to touch. I turn my attention back to the scenery outside while we wait for our order.

The bustling streets come alive with people. The sounds of car horns and conversations meld with the symphony of the awakening day, creating a harmonious cacophony of life.

"Did you get the point of this morning's lesson?" he quizzes.

"Other than you're evil and enjoy torturing me, you'll have to spell it out." Just then, the server sets down our food in front of us. She astutely guesses that the pancakes are for Kai. He waits until she leaves us before continuing. "I own you," he says. "In every facet imaginable. I own your pleasure. I own your pain. I own your happiness. I own your sadness. I own your anger and joy. Are you sensing the common denominator here?"

"Yes, your need for ownership," I deadpan.

"It's not a need, milseán. These are simple facts. I control which of your emotions are unleashed. This morning was about discipline and an exercise in obedience and expectations. Pleasure and pain are on opposite sides of the same coin, so you decide which side to experience."

"And the induced hangover?" I retort. "The three-mile run at the ass crack of dawn was punishment enough."

"Meh. Maybe. The headache and vomiting was a bonus for pissing me off. Think of that sensation next time you think to challenge me—operant conditioning per se."

"Operant what?"

"Conditioning," he clarifies. "It means to use rewards or punishment to modify behavior."

"Awww. Psychobabble. Have you ever thought about diagnosing yourself? Because I have a few ideas on which psychosis you'd fall into."

"Enlighten me," he encourages as he begins to eat his eggs.

"Well, really it's between two. Psychopath and sociopath."

"Hmm, interesting. Do you know the difference between the two?"

"Well, not really."

"Didn't think so. Eat your omelet, Vasilisa."

"Do you know? The difference, I mean?"

"Of course I do," he deadpans. "I don't make it a practice to use unfamiliar terminology."

I roll my eyes and take a bite of my omelet, trying to ignore the twist of anxiety in my stomach. Kai's words always have a way of getting under my skin, making me question everything I thought I knew about myself.

"The difference is that a psychopath lacks empathy and has the inability to experience guilt or remorse for their actions," he continues, his gaze never leaving mine. "Whereas a sociopath may still feel empathy or guilt, but they tend toward impulsive behavior and a lack of regard for societal norms."

"And which one do you think you fall into?" I ask, unable to stop myself.

Kai leans back in his seat, his expression thoughtful. "I suppose it depends on who you ask. Some might say I'm a psychopath, and others might argue in favor of sociopathy. I'm neither. I do what the fuck I want because I don't answer to anyone."

I can't help but feel a shiver run down my spine as his words sink in. Something is unsettling about the way he regards the world and his place in it. It makes me wonder just how far he's willing to go to assert his dominance.

As we finish our breakfast, I can't help but feel grateful for the reprieve from my room for a bit. Despite the early interruption of my sleep and literally being dragged from my bed, there's a sense of freedom in being out in the world, even if it's just for a little while and even if I have to share that moment with Kai.

But as we leave the diner and step back out into the cool morning air, I know that this moment of respite won't last for long. Kai's figurative grip on me is unyielding, and I'm not sure how much longer I can continue to live under his thumb.

For now, though, I'll do what I have to in order to help my family. And perhaps, with time, we could settle into a mutually beneficial compromise.

Kai and I walk back toward his estate in silence, the occasional honking of a car piercing through the quiet morning. I try to distract myself by taking in my surroundings —the colorful graffiti on the walls, the smell of freshly brewed coffee from nearby cafés, and the lively chatter of people walking by.

But my thoughts keep drifting back to Kai and his words. It's unnerving to think he believes he owns every aspect of my life and emotion. And even more unsettling to wonder what he'd do if I were to defy him.

As if sensing my unease, he turns to me. "Get out of your head, milseán. The severity of your punishment will depend on you. I won't do anything drastic unless you give me a reason to."

"Like what?" I ask warily.

"Like trying to escape," he replies calmly. "Or disobeying me in any way. You're smart enough to know where your boundaries lie. It's even more important to note that I will not tolerate a liar."

I nod, still unsure of what to make of his warnings. But I know better than to push him too far.

We continue walking in silence for a while longer before we reach his estate. As we enter through the gates, I feel a pang of anxiety. I'm headed back to my personal prison under his watchful eye.

"You can go back to your room now," Kai says, interrupting my thoughts. "I have some business to attend to."

I nod and turn to leave when he adds, "Don't forget what we talked about. Your behavior will determine what your future holds."

I wet my lips nervously and force myself to reply, "Yes, got it. Noted."

He smirks at my insistence on still being a smart-ass. He shakes his head. "So be it then."

I nearly shiver at the veiled threat, wondering if he derives pleasure from asserting his control over me like this. But I don't have much time to dwell on it before he's gone, and I'm left alone once again.

I take my time walking back up to my room, trying to gather my thoughts and emotions before I'm locked away once more. I know Samuel lurks around one of these corners, ensuring I head back to my room as ordered.

Once I'm safely locked inside, I try to distract myself with fantasies of a different life, anything to keep my mind off the suffocating feeling of once again being isolated in this room. But no matter how much I try to distract myself, my thoughts keep circling back to Kai and his warning. I can't shake off the feeling that I'm stuck in a game I'll never win. And even worse is the realization that he seems to be enjoying it all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A table of rowdy guys near me is obnoxiously loud as I'm out at dinner, just trying to get some alone time to collect my thoughts. There is so much shite to strategize to ensure everything falls into place with no hiccups for our clan. In our quest for power and revenge, I have to give myself to Vasilisa. I know I can't hold onto my anger for her attempts on Persephone's life, but I'm not ready to let it go. Even still, I can't deny the push and pull between us. We share a mutual hatred for one another, but our sexual chemistry is explosive. When I fucked her in my office yesterday, I told her it was a *disciplinary fuck* ... that I didn't take pleasure from it at all. The truth is, now that I've had a taste, I want more, and it has nothing to do with punishment. I'm not supposed to want her. She's just imperative to our plan—a cog in a wheel to strengthen our foothold in the underworld. It's my duty to do what I must to get revenge for our mother and father. The killer and all who are responsible will pay.

Another uproar blasts from the annoying group near me. Being so deep in thought, it startles me for a moment. Fucking-a, they are starting to get on my nerves. When all you ask for is a good meal and some peace, the universe wants to ruin it in every way. There is one good thing, though. My server is quite enjoyable to look at— a possible distraction from the weight I'm carrying. I can't say for certain that it's actually working, but she fills my mind with all of the things I could do with her. Her pretty innocent face, long brunette hair that's pinned up, and most importantly, her tits that she's flaunting with no bra and nipple piercings. And when I say those are an asset, they are a fucking asset. Yeah, I didn't pick this place for the greasy food. I'm 90 percent sure her tits are real, at least a double d, but with such perfect

shape. Full and round. The odds of finding a unicorn is higher than running into another pair of tits like this again. It so hard not to stare, but man, I am a sucker for nice boobs and nipple piercings. My dick hardens as it presses against my pants. I tell myself it's the server tits that have me hard and me not picturing what Vasilisa's tits would look like in comparison.

I'm not standing up anytime soon, so I sit here and try to regain control over my thoughts, stay focused on the mission, and maybe even recite the national anthem to go soft. But now I'm horny as fuck, and I want to relieve this built-up sexual tension. My dick can be quite insatiable, and I don't have Persephone to fuck anymore. I have several women at my disposal— a contact away in my iPhone. Yet it's the stubborn brunette back at my estate I want to bury myself in. This is a problem, but it's *tomorrow*'s problem. Tonight, I will throw our differences to the wind. We can go back to hating each other tomorrow, or tonight's fuck session can be coined as *hatred sex*. I don't really care either way. I pay my bill and head home to make my fiancée take care of this erection.

I find Vasilisa locked in my playroom, where I've asked Samuel to bring her to wait. I'll have to review my video footage later to enjoy her reaction at the sight of it. The layout and setup are no match for the one I have back in New York, but it's good enough for now. After learning that Vasilisa was the one who tried to kill Persephone, I wasn't sure that I'd ever bring her to that room. The purpose of constructing a playroom here was to eventually break my bride-to-be into my kinks if I had to be tied down to someone, but that plan soured upon meeting her.

"I better be here for you to bring me dinner because the only thing I'm doing in here is eating," she says with an attitude. "Your 'yes' man said you were on the way back from dinner when he escorted me to whatever this room is."

"Have you still not learned anything from your impromptu run this morning? Me fucking you doesn't give you rights to start demanding things around here. You'll need to prove your worth if you want me to keep generously feeding you."

"Prove my worth?" She scoffs. "What the fuck does that mean? What am I supposed to do from in here?"

"A man has needs, and since you're mine now, that duty will be yours full time. We don't even have to like each other."

"Uhhh. No," she stammers a bit, "nuhhh no, no chance."

"What did I say about telling me what you're not going to do or what I can't do? You aren't my first choice either, but luckily for you, I actually find you attractive. So I just need to ignore your piss-poor attitude." That jab was for her sake. The angrier she is, the better the sex will be when I make her submit anyway. I'm coming to find that I don't like easy submission. I prefer to take it.

"I know what you said. I didn't forget the lesson you tried to teach. My stance hasn't budged. I'm not going to fuck you, touch you, kiss you, or do anything with you voluntarily. Get over yourself and go jerk off under the covers like every other twelve-year-old does," she says as she eyes my massive erection.

"I told you what would happen. You're going to regret that disrespect." I turn toward the open door. "Gentlemen!" I anticipated that this continued stubbornness would be her reaction, so I already had enforcement on standby. I call for my henchmen who are doubling as my security at the moment.

Seamus and Barry walk in immediately. "Yes, boss?"

"Boys, cuff her up to the wall." Their presence is for the scare tactic.

Across from the bed in the center of the room are four cuffs built into the wall—like four corners of a rectangle. The two guys grab Vasilisa while she screams and attempts to fight their grip, which has little to no effect on my oversized men. She's forced against the wall, right arm stretched out above her head and cuffed into place. The left arm directed and locked in the same position.

"Would you like her ankles restrained too, sir?" Seamus asks me.

"Hmm..." I think about it for a moment. "I don't think it'll be necessary. As long as she plays well, that is." I glare at Vasilisa. She glares right back at me. It's a battle of wills, but unfortunately, she is outmatched.

"That's all for now, gentlemen. You can leave and shut the door on your way out."

I pace back and forth, examining this Russian beauty on my wall. She is clothed in a tank and shorts, completely vulnerable to do with as I please. The restraints have stripped her of any perceived power. Not that I need the restraints, but it's all about perception, and I want to emphasize who's in charge.

"We can make this as easy or as hard as you would like."

"You are sick, and I've figured it out. Of the two psychosis we discussed earlier, you're a psychopath. You have no remorse or empathy. Tying me up

to get sexual satisfaction is the only way a man like you will ever get some," she spits. She has no idea the plethora of pussy I have access to.

"That's such a naive thing to say. Delusional, really. But you are right that I am going to enjoy this."

I pull a switchblade from my pants pocket, open it up, and approach her. With every step, I can see her "I'm a badass" attitude shift from confidence to fear. She's not as tough as she puts out to be. Everyone has a breaking point, and today, I'll find hers.

"Wait, you're not seriously going to hurt me?" She panics. "I'm your investment ... you have to marry me. You can't hurt me!"

Now she is attempting to use my term "investment" in her favor when she has balked at it before. I see right through her tactics. I grab her tank at the neckline and yank it away from her body. When I raise my switchblade, her eyes and lips clench shut as the knife slices down the shirt till it's completely cut in half. Her black bra showing, I immediately pull that away as well and cut the middle connecting piece. The two sides of her shirt and bra now just hang from her shoulders, exposing her tits. Not as nice as the server's, but I'd give them a solid ten. She opens her eyes and lets out a breath of relief that I haven't stabbed or cut her.

"If you wanted me naked, you could have just said that," she says, her fear masked with sarcasm.

I put my hand around her throat and pin her to the wall. I glide the knife across her upper chest till I see a three-inch cut. Not deep enough to do any real harm, but enough to draw blood. I catch some of the blood dripping down her breast with my knife. Looking her in the eyes, I run my tongue along the blade, licking the blood off. I kind of enjoy its metallic taste.

A look of repulsion crosses her face. "You truly are sick. I can clearly see it now."

"You don't have the slightest idea," I enlighten her. "But you will. If I'm going to continue to claim you as mine, I have every intention to know how you think, how you react, how you taste in every way...what you like, what you desire, what you hate, and what you fear. And from that information I collect, I'll strip you of everything you want while I create a living nightmare from your fears. After all, isn't that the true definition of a psychopath? I might as well live up to it."

Pocketing my knife, I grab a towel from one of the racks next to us and put it over her head.

"Get me the fuck out of here, you sick fuck," she screams through the towel.

"We are going to need to do something about that attitude you have. You're just not learning."

I walk away long enough to retrieve a small bucket of water from the kitchen. She is bucking against the wall, trying to shake the towel off her head. She would have been successful had I taken a minute longer to return, but I just would have replaced it.

"You see, I can appreciate a strong-willed woman. I welcome it, in fact. Nothing is sexier than a woman who knows what she wants and goes for it. But the one thing I appreciate more is respect and submission — trust that I will lead. And so far, I can't say I have sensed either respect or submission from you. So today... you are going to learn what that means to me!"

I reach under her right arm, grab a handful of hair, and yank her head back as much as I can with the given angle. With her chin in the air, she lets out a scream. Simultaneously, I begin to pour water on the towel covering her face. Her screams transition into more of a gag and choking sounds. The water and towel combination creates a suction, preventing air from getting in, yet it fills her mouth with water each time she tries to gasp to get any oxygen. I continue to pour for about ten seconds before I stop. I ease up on her hair so she can catch her breath. She attempts to spit out words while gasping for air but is unsuccessful. I yank her hair back once again and pour more water. Only this time, I double the amount of time she's under. I let off, and she chokes up water from her lungs—teeter-tottering on the line of drowning. I pull off the towel. She is on the verge of hyperventilating. She can't speak or do anything besides focus on breathing. Much like when we first met in Persephone's apartment.

"This is rather entertaining, don't you think? I don't think we should be done just yet. I need to make sure the lesson sticks this time."

"No... please..." she pleads between breaths. "Kai, please, just... just do anything else but that."

"Don't worry, milseán. We will get there. Right now, we have to push your limits." I return the towel back over her face and begin pouring the rest of the water I have over it. There is a gurgling in her throat as her arms flail around. After another twenty-five seconds, I stop. I remove the towel aggressively and scream, "You will respect me and who I am!" while she comes to from near drowning.

Her head hangs down, and she remains silent besides her heavy breathing trying to catch her breath. I kiss her neck now that the lesson is over. My lips glide across her cheek till they meet hers. I press in with a passionate kiss. "Doesn't this thrill excite you? I know it does for me." Still no response. If she wants to keep calling me a psycho, I will oblige every single time.

I squeeze her tits and begin to suck on them. She really does have such an attractive body. This handful and darker nipples are right up my alley. I could stay here and keep playing with them but perhaps another time. I pull my knife out again. Using the blade, I catch the backside of the button to her shorts and with one stroke, the button cuts right off. Quickly, I unzip them, and even quicker, I drop them to her ankles along with her panties. Her pussy is clean shaven and thin-lipped. I lick her nipples again while I begin to rub her clit. Her body still hanging up against the wall, the heels of her feet pressed back against the wall, hips arched forward, and she lets out a little moan. This catches me by surprise, but solidifies my suspicions about her. I'd already figured out that adrenaline-inducing instances get her off, but thanks to her resiliency after my torture, I now know that she gets off on humiliation, degradation, and punishment as well. Does she even realize this? I look up at her face to be sure.

"Fuck, that was intense, but let's take that one out of your repertoire," she says with a defiant look in her eyes.

I'm taken aback by her desire to keep this going. Is she faking it, or is she really this crazy? Yet I'm the psycho one. No sane person would endure this experience and continue to provoke me. Yet here she is basically asking for more. This can't be for real, or am I imagining her receptiveness to my torture? No, she's definitely provoking me to continue. I think we might be equally as crazy. *Damn*, I'm kind of turned on more now.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

h, I'm figuring you out, sweetheart, and I think you're enjoying my *sick games* as you call them."

I lock lips with her again, pressing my body against hers, my fingers working their way to enter her. Just then, I feel something else. Doesn't seem normal at all. I keep feeling around trying to figure out what it is.

"That's my tampon you're fucking with."

"Your tampon? Still?" Honestly, I forgot that she was on her period yesterday when I fucked her.

"Yes, I'm still on my period," she retorts.

And I still don't care. I didn't yesterday, and I don't today, but if she thinks this is going to faze me one bit, she still has no idea who she's talking to. Many people might be grossed out, but I definitely am not one of them.

"That's perfectly fine ... a real man eats any time of the month."

I drop to my knees in front of her. I find the string and pull it right out, same as yesterday, tossing it across the room. Wasn't very difficult to take out. The weight of the saturated tampon pretty much made it want to come out. I stick my fingers inside her pussy, curling them like a cup in an attempt to scoop out most of the blood pooling at her entrance. I pull my fingers out, and three globs of blood are on them—clots. Whipping my hand, I fling the blood on the floor. I wipe the rest on my pants. Now that I've dealt with that barrier, it's time to get what I want. I grab her ass with both hands to pull her hips to my face. Between her legs, I lick her clit. She tried to stay quiet, most likely to pretend she wasn't enjoying it. But after like forty seconds, her hips began tilting and twisting, followed by a moan she didn't want to give in to.

"Oh fuck, babe," she says through her breath as her head falls back against the wall.

Looking up at her, I respond sarcastically, "So now I am your babe?"

"Shut your mouth and keep licking."

Even though I don't like her making any demands right now, I continue licking the fuck out of her pussy. Mostly because it's what I enjoy. I can feel her legs stiffen, hips jerking a bit, and her moans keep getting louder. The intensity builds till I have no doubt that she's about to...

"HOLY FUCK! DO NOT STOP, KAI!"

Just as I thought, she's about to come. I dig my face in and lick harder and faster. Her moans motivate me. Her pleasure is my pleasure right now. Finally, she screams, and her rigid body begins to soften. I keep licking her clit, seeing how long she can handle it.

"Fuck! Okay fuck, Kai. Stop one second. It's so sensitive. Kai!"

I lay off as she wishes and stand. She looks at my face. My chin has blood all over it. I can tell that's what she's looking at, but she doesn't say a thing. I walk to the en suite bathroom to wash my hands and face. I come back to Vasilisa's naked body still restrained on the wall.

"You ready to be released? Everything else I want with you requires you to be off that wall."

"You better be careful. If you let me off this wall right now, I might end up pleasing you more than you think."

"Am I supposed to have a problem with that?"

"Well, no. Not with that, specifically. But with the outcome, maybe."

"And what do you mean by 'the outcome'?"

"There's a good chance you'll actually fall in love with me. And we both know you have no intentions for that. But the world is a funny place where stranger things happen every day."

"Oh, hunny... no matter how much you want me to fall in love with you, there's no chance of that happening. This is all just a business deal that comes with benefits."

"You better hope so. It's easy for a lady to torture a man once he's fallen in love with her." She winks.

"That's definitely some wishful thinking, sweetheart," I retort as I begin releasing her wrists. "The only person who'll be experiencing any torture in this arrangement is you. But somehow, I think that's exactly what you want."

"Mmm, I can't wait to find out what else you have for me." She rubs her

wrist out from the pressure of them being hung up for so long.

"Right now, I'll just enjoy what you have for me. Turnabout is fair play."

She looks me up and down, staring right into my eyes before giving me a little smile. She walks right up to me, placing both hands on my biceps, and begins to push me backward. I take about seven steps back till I'm up against the foot of the bed. She pulls back on my arms to stop my motion. Her hands glide down my torso and start undoing my belt, my button, and then my zipper. She pulls down my pants and exposes my dick pressed against my thin underwear. Most of the time, I don't bother with any. At half mast, she can see the full outline and the head. She gives it a grab through the material, rubbing it a few times—feeling me grow harder in her hand while she kisses me. I let her take the lead for now.

"I know this is what you want." Dropping to her knees, she hooks the top of my underwear with her fingers and pulls them down with both hands. My stiff dick juts out once my underwear lowers past the tip. She grabs my cock by the base and looks up at me as if waiting for instructions.

"Go ahead," I order. "Be a good girl now and take my dick all the way back."

"You like having a good girl who listens in the bedroom too?"

"I like a combination. Sometimes I enjoy a 'make me' girl, and other times, I love hearing 'yes, Daddy.'"

"Well, I think we're well past the 'make me' portion, so I suppose this is where I say..." She looks at my dick and right back to me as she bites her lip, and with the cutest soft voice she has, Vasilisa continues. "Daddy... I'll take that whole cock just how you like it."

Her lips wrap around the head, giving it a few strokes before she opens her mouth to take it to the back of her throat. Her lips make it nearly all the way to the base on the first go, taking it like a champ. That's probably seven inches she just handled. On her second attempt, she takes it all the way. Fuck, it feels good having my head in her throat. She has me moaning softly. I was not expecting her to just go for it. Her eyes begin to water a tad, but that doesn't slow her down. She goes extra deep this time wiggling her head to find the best angle. Fuck me, I moan louder so she knows what she's doing is good work. This time, she gags, making herself cough. I fucking love when a girl makes herself gag on my dick. It's one of the sexiest things to experience for me. She sucks the head while stroking the shaft with one hand. She has every intention of pleasuring me fully till I come. And bloody hell, I'm so

close. My breathing is heavy, and I feel consumed by her mouth. She's amazing at sucking dick. If she's this amazing at fucking, this might be dangerous.

"I can't wait any longer. I need to fuck you." I raise her up from her knees and lead her to the bed in the center of the room.

"How do you want me?" she asks.

"On your side with your top leg forward."

She gets right into position and what a sight to look at—her beautiful ass just asking to be fucked. I climb onto the bed and grab her ass with one hand and begin rubbing her pussy with the other. She's so wet right now. She's either extremely turned on, or it's extra wet from her period. I look at my fingers and the blood is not as prevalent as before. Maybe her flow is beginning to taper off, but either way, I'm fucking her the way I've been longing to fuck her all night. I straddle both of my knees over her bottom leg and direct my dick right into her pussy. Her eyes shoot wide open, and she gasps. Grabbing her top hip and waist with both hands, I thrust myself into her and immediately start fucking her hard and fast. No build-up needed.

I like to fuck hard and fast. I squeeze her tits as I keep pumping myself into her. Both of us are breathing hard. Her hands grip anything she can find —the pillows, the sheets, her leg, or my ass. I can tell its a lot for her, yet exactly everything she wants.

"Rub yourself, milseán. You're going to come so hard."

As she rubs her clit, I watch her face contort with emotion. I begin rubbing her asshole with my thumb. It's such a sensitive area that it puckers with my stimulation, tying in with all the other sensations happening at once. I occasionally press my thumb in, just enough to the first joint ... just enough to take what she's feeling right now to the next level. Her eyes remain closed the entire time, but the moment I push in, she moans loudly followed with a "mmm, baby." This is the most that she's referred to me as baby, but I don't read anything into it other than it being in the heat of the moment. With every stroke, her pussy feels amazing on my dick. Her soft moans fill the room as I continue to finger her ass with double penetration.

"Oh my God, Kai! Keep fucking me hard and keep your finger in my ass," she vocalizes. "Holy shit, don't stop. Actually, go deeper."

I sink my thumb in her ass as deep as I can while I use that hand to hold on to her cheek to drive my dick hard into her.

"I'm going to come," she shouts. "Baby, I'm going to come ... FUCK!"

Her hand lunges out from between her legs and grips onto the sheets like she's about the rip them in half. I pull my thumb out of her ass and start squeezing her tits with the other hand. As soon as I sense her orgasm ending, I lock onto her hip again and begin thrusting faster than I ever have. I'm smacking her ass with enough force to leave a mark. We can go back to hating each other tomorrow, but right now, I'm obliterating this pussy. She tries to talk, but every syllable or word is broken up with breaths through her gritted teeth. Mostly turning into an "Ahhh... fffff... ahhh... ohhhh... gahhh..."

She bends her chest down and reaches between her legs. Surprisingly, she rubs my ballsack between her fingers. And all I can say is *wow* in my head. It feels so fucking good. Absolutely insane how euphoric this feels in a moment of such intensity. And fuck, I'm immediately about to come now.

"Wow, you're making me come," I let her know seconds before I pull out and squirt my cum on her ass. I've enjoyed this fuck session maybe just a bit too much, especially once I realized my little bride-to-be is a fucking masochist. An unexpected complement to my sadist nature. I just have to keep things in perspective. This is just a girl I have to marry, but at least she's great at pleasuring me. That's all it'll ever be. Nothing more.

I grab a towel and wipe my cum off her body. "Thanks for the sex ... it was good. Turns out you'll be at least useful for one thing." She doesn't really say anything, which is probably best because I don't want to start a conversation. I just needed to reiterate expectations before I leave. I turn around and walk out of the playroom, not bothering to cover up. I trust she will return to her room on her own. I will no longer insist she be locked up. She's earned that much.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Vasilisa

It the rise of the sun, it brings on a new day and regret. The word baby echoes in my mind over and over again. I called Kai baby several times during our throes of passion when he's been nothing but honest about me not meaning anything to him. I let myself be vulnerable and go with what I was feeling. I'm so confused. Even with him drawing blood from my chest and the waterboard punishment, I didn't offer an ounce of resistance when he wanted to fuck me. Instead, I craved him and every single dirty thing he wanted to do to me.

I hate that I showed my hand. Now he has the upper hand. Yes, he's always had the power but not over my mind. He didn't have my submission. I can't allow him to break me without giving nothing of himself. I need to find a way to reset things as they were before his office and before his playroom.

I test my doorknob and find it still unlocked. Perhaps we've at least turned the corner in that aspect. Is he letting me out of isolation? I guess there is only one way to find out. I need to clear my mind, and a swim in the pool sounds the way to go if I can find it. I don't have access to swimsuits, so there is no point in even changing.

It's still early, so the house is quiet. I slip out of my room as quietly as possible. I quickly descend the stairs and head toward the back of the mansion. I go through a maze of rooms until I eventually stumble upon a solarium housing the indoor pool.

I step into the solarium, and an immediate sense of tranquility washes over me. The floor-to-ceiling glass windows allow the sunlight to pour in. The air is filled with a subtle hint of chlorine, hinting at the crystal-clear pool that beckons me from the center. As I approach the pool, my eyes are drawn

to its mesmerizing blue hue. It sparkles under the natural light, inviting me to dive in and leave yesterday's regret behind. The pool stretches out before me, its length seemingly infinite. I can't help but imagine the countless laps I could swim in this aquatic haven.

The water shimmers with the reflection of the surrounding greenery that peeks through the windows, creating a serene backdrop. Lush potted plants line the edges of the solarium, bringing a touch of nature indoors. The gentle rustling of leaves adds a soothing soundtrack to my surroundings.

I dip my hand into the water, and it's cool to the touch. It feels refreshing, enticing me to fully immerse myself in its embrace. Without hesitation, I take a graceful dive, slicing through the water's surface. The pool engulfs me, wrapping me in its tranquil embrace. I glide through the water, feeling weightless and free. As I swim, I can't help but appreciate the meticulous design of the solarium. The sleek lines and minimalist aesthetics create a harmonious balance between nature and architecture.

I'm indulging in the moment of solitude, finding solace in the rhythmic strokes of my swim when a splash from the opposite side of the pool interrupts my thoughts. Kai's body glides through the water effortlessly as he swims toward where I now stand in the three-foot waters. Once his hand touches the edge, he emerges to the surface. Water drips down his bare torso as I stand here with my sleep tank and shorts clinging to my body.

"Morning," he says. "I see you've wasted no time taking advantage of your newfound freedom."

"My door was unlocked, so I figured it would be okay if I went for a swim."

"Yeah, you've earned that much. You worked hard to show why you deserved to be set free from isolation." He smirks.

"I didn't fuck you for my freedom, Kai. That was not me offering you my eternal submission on a silver platter," I retort, feeling my frustration grow. Just as I thought—it's still a game to him. A game he feels he has won.

"So why did you fuck me?" he challenges. "And don't say because I made you. Each time you've had my cock inside you, you've come alive with want and insatiable need. You've begged for me to fuck you harder. You've welcomed my thumb in your ass and my tongue against your bloody cunt."

"You're so arrogant."

"I am," he says bluntly. "But the answer you're trying to forgo is that you like me. I intrigue you. Each time I touch you, it's electric, and I've barely

scratched the surface of what I'm capable of inside and outside the bedroom. When you called me baby as I fucked you, I had my answer. Was it a slip of the tongue? I think not."

I can feel the blood rush to my face as the memory flashes before my eyes. I've been regretting that fucking word all morning.

"You babbled mindlessly while you came so hard for me," he taunts. "But now I know your secret."

"What secret? You keep alluding to now having some answer about me."

He wades through the water to get closer to me. He raises my chin so I'm forced to look him in the eyes, his grip bordering on painful. "At this very moment, your pussy is slick for me... so wet and ready."

"Get over yourself. That's not an answer," I reply as my breath hitches.

He pushes my back to the edge of the pool before he dips his hand under the water and quickly moves my shorts aside. I don't even have time to react before his fingers are inside me. I grab onto his biceps as he fingers me briefly before removing his hand. "Just as I thought. Your pussy is drenched for me, and it's not the pool. And I didn't feel a tampon, so I'm guessing your period has finished."

"I'm not wearing a tampon. I'm barely spotting now. Why are you so obsessed with my period?"

"I'm into blood play, but that's too advanced for your vanilla mind."

I fucking hate that word. Viktor accused me of being vanilla. "Fuck you. I'm not vanilla simply because I'm not into whatever twisted shit you're into. I fucked you because I needed some dick. It could have been anyone. I'm a slut, remember?"

"On the contrary, you're exactly what I'm into, and you don't even realize it. It's the reason your pussy is so wet for me right now. You're not the slut you wish for me to believe, Vasilisa. Although you have kinks you're unaware of, you're not without discernment. You must possess a certain level of attraction and trust to be vulnerable with your type of kink."

"My type of kink? What is it that you think I'm into?"

"You're a masochist, milseán. You derive pleasure from humiliation and pain. It's the reason your pussy becomes wet when I degrade you or cause you pain. I'm the man you've chosen to give that side of yourself to."

"Your psychosis is showing," I retort. "You are quite delusional. I'll show you just how wrong you are. Please just leave me the fuck alone. We can still get married, but you can fuck and play mind games with someone else. I will

masturbate before I willingly fuck you again."

I jump out of the pool and leave him standing there. "I see we're back at square one with your disrespect and ..."

I don't hear the rest of what he says. I stomp back to my room, not caring that I'm dripping water from my clothes throughout the house. He'll probably go back to locking me inside my room, but who cares. I start the shower and peel off the cold, wet clothes. I let the hot water run down my body as I work to calm my anger. I don't know if I'm angrier at him or myself. I hate feeling so out of control. It's one thing for him to have the power to dominate me. I can rationalize that as out of my hands. But I control my mind and how I allow him to make me feel. When did I allow him inside my head? I'm not some masochist, and the only way to prove that is to stay as far as I can from him, even if that means returning to isolation.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

lthough I sent for Vasilisa's belongings from her father's home a while back, I've been keeping them locked away in one of the other guest bedrooms. She originally packed up her things in preparation for being picked up the morning after her night out at the club, but due to her lack of self-preservation, that timeline got moved up. Until now, she's only been allowed the few sleepwear and lounge clothes I bought to put in her room. I allowed her to have toiletries to shower, feminine products, and basic linen for her bed. I feel that I have been more than generous, given how I initially felt about her. Although that resentment still lingers, the severity of it is starting to wane a bit. I thought she was finally ready to submit after fucking calling me Daddy in my playroom. But after being faced with her truth in the pool, she reverted to her self-sabotaging and disrespectful ways. It's her fucking security blanket. She doesn't believe she's a masochist, so I'll have to prove it. Tonight should be more than eye-opening. She wants to keep telling me to be with someone else ... well, tonight, she will get her wish. I've already asked Samuel earlier to tell her of my plans to take her to dinner tonight. Our first night out should be fun.

I rummage through her suitcase of things to find something for her to wear tonight. I can't help the laugh that escapes me. Someone has a sense of humor. *Perfect*. I'm sure these hideous garments are not part of her wardrobe. Every thing I pick up looks vintage or something you'd find at a consignment store—not her style at all. My guess is she wanted to embarrass me should she and I go out. She was never prepared to give this a fair go. Well, the joke's on her because I spot the perfect dress for tonight's occasion. It's nearly time.

I pull out the ugliest-looking fuchsia-pink prom dress. Its satin material is dated and looks like something from the seventies. She's making this almost too easy. I have my housemaid Andrea bring the dress to her room. She has thirty minutes to get ready and be escorted to join me in the limo at eight sharp.

Three minutes to the hour, a smile spreads across my face. The guest accompanying us takes a sip of champagne while we wait in the limo. The door opens, and I can hardly contain my laughter. A pissed-off Vasilisa stands in the open door of the car with her arms folded across her chest. Actually seeing her in the dress is better than I thought. There is no way she's actually worn this dress before.

The vibrant, eye-searing color assaults the senses, commanding attention in the most obnoxious way possible. The fabric itself is a cacophony of shiny satin and scratchy lace, a combination that should never have been allowed to exist on the same garment. The top half of the dress clings to her body like a second skin, accentuating every curve with sadistic glee. The bodice is a nightmare of frills and ruffles, as if someone had a surplus of fabric and no sense of taste. Each layer adds unnecessary bulk, and the embellishments are scattered haphazardly across the bodice. Rhinestones, sequins, and beads of all sizes and colors clash violently against the fuchsia backdrop, creating a visual assault.

"Don't just stand there. Get in," I direct.

She looks over at Eva snuggled up next to me, leaving the seat across from us open. Vasilisa doesn't comment. She simply rolls her eyes and gets into the car, exposing the back of the dress, which is equally hideous.

An oversized bow seems determined to swallow her entire upper body. It's an over-the-top display of excess that adds nothing but confusion to the overall disaster of a dress. The bow's flimsy satin fabric threatens to come undone at any moment, as if it, too, is desperately seeking an escape from this fashion atrocity. The skirt billows out from the waist in a frenzy of tulle and layers, each one more cringe-worthy than the last. She will be the center of attention tonight, for sure.

As we ride to La Petite Château, an upscale French restaurant that has a ridiculous waitlist to get reservations, I focus my attention on Eva. I hang onto her every word as she goes on and on about Fashion Week in Paris. She's an international model and has graced the covers of several well-known magazines. I sneak little glances at Vasilisa, whose focus is glued to the

window. She won't be able to ignore us for long.

The limo stops, and seconds later, our driver opens the door for us. I step out first so I can assist Eva out of the car. I attempt to assist Vasilisa out as well, but she refuses my hand. Instead, she struggles to get control of her dress to get out on her own. Once we're both in front of the entry, she stares Eva down from head to toe. Yes, the stark difference isn't even fair. Eva's gown is a masterpiece of design, a harmonious blend of sophistication and allure. Its sleek silhouette embraces her petite figure, hugging her in all the right places. The plunging neckline adds a touch of sensuality, while the backless design exudes confidence and elegance. My arm laces through Eva's as Vasilisa walks next to us.

"If this is supposed to be my punishment for what I said in the pool, I don't care," she says nonchalantly as we walk up to the podium to be seated.

"Only we haven't even started," I assure her.

As expected, every eye is on her as we are escorted to our table. She stares straight ahead, attempting to ignore the whispers and some laughter. Some people don't even wait for us to pass before they huddle together to make comments about the ridiculousness of her dress. We are seated with Vasilisa directly across from me and Eva at my side.

When the server arrives, I order for the table. I order a salad for Vasilisa and a four-course meal for Eva and me.

"So are you planning to starve me now? Your antics are getting a bit old. You're wasting your time with all of this," Vasilisa comments.

I smile at her, amused by her defiance. She has no idea of all the ways I have to break her. My efforts thus far have been child's play. "I have no intention of starving you. I have too many other ways to bend you to my will. But that's more of a show rather than tell kind of thing."

Vasilisa rolls her eyes. It's kind of her go-to when she's pissed. "I'm sure you do. And what's planned for tonight? Because I'm not getting it."

"That you will learn to respect and obey me," I reply firmly. "We've already discussed this."

She scoffs. "Never gonna happen. We already discussed that too. You've already tried to fuck the submission out of me." I'm guessing that last bit of detail was more for Eva than for me, but Eva knows the score and couldn't care less.

I lean forward, my voice low and menacing. "Oh, it will happen. One way or another."

The rest of the meal courses continue in this tense atmosphere, with Vasilisa refusing to eat her salad and Eva making small talk. She's fully aware that Vasilisa is betrothed to me, and she isn't fazed. As long as she gets to have a taste of my cock, she doesn't involve herself in my affairs. It's been a few months since our last fling, so she is eager for us to get back to my place. She's only in town for the night.

I can feel Vasilisa's eyes on us at all times, like she's trying to read what I could possibly have planned for her while simultaneously pretending she isn't jealous. I make a mental note to change up my *antics*, as she puts it— to keep her on her toes. She has been all but begging for me to step things up a notch, and I shall oblige.

I signal the server to bring us a bottle of wine and pour some into Eva's glass. As I do so, I lean in close to her and whisper in her ear, albeit loud enough for Vasilisa to hear, asking if she's hungry for my cock. She nods, a wicked grin spreading across her face. The tension in Vasilisa's face confirms her jealousy, yet she insists I fuck someone else and leave her alone.

The final course arrives, and we begin to indulge. Eva and I savor each taste of our crème brûlée while Vasilisa continues to pick at her salad with disdain. But as our night begins to wrap up, something shifts. Vasilisa grows more agitated, her eyes darting around the restaurant as if searching for something.

"What's wrong?" I ask, feigning concern.

"Nothing," she mutters, but her tone is strained.

I don't have to wait long to get my answer.

A tall, strikingly handsome man with sharp features approaches our table. His piercing blue eyes stare down at Vasilisa, and a confident smile plays on his lips. He appears to be alone.

"What a surprise to run into you here, Val. What on earth are you wearing?"

Vasilisa freezes for a moment, her face turning a shade of crimson. A mixture of surprise and embarrassment dances across her features. She looks away, avoiding direct eye contact with the rude newcomer who has failed to introduce himself to the table. I could intervene, but Vasilisa's obvious discomfort is more than I've been able to inspire thus far so I allow the interaction to continue. Her fingers fidget with the edge of her napkin as she shifts uncomfortably in her seat. It's evident that she recognizes him, but the reason behind her embarrassment remains a mystery. The atmosphere

becomes charged with tension.

"Oh, do excuse my manners," the guy says as if suddenly realizing Vasilisa is not at the table alone. "I'm Viktor Sokolov. Vasilisa and I go way back."

"Nice to meet you, Viktor. I'm Kai, and this is my date, Eva. We're all just having a nice evening out. Nice of you to stop by, though," I say, hinting for him to move along.

He takes the hint, but the quirk of his brow gives away his confusion. Vasilisa has yet to answer him. "We'll catch up later, Val. Please don't ever wear that dress again. You look ridiculous, but I'm sure your friends here have already told you that." He laughs as he disappears into a private section of the restaurant.

Vasilisa releases an exhale. Tears well in her eyes, but she wipes them with the back of her hands before they fall. This guy still has a serious effect on her, which is completely fucking ludicrous. Is she still pining over him after his rejection? I could have told him who I was to her or even invited him to join us to further enjoy her discomfort, but I want to punish her on my own terms—not with the assistance of some fucker who had plans to harm Persephone. Good to know he has shown his face back here in the States. It's better that he doesn't know who I am. It will make things much easier to end him. Since the attempt on her life, Persephone's father has beefed up her security and moved her back home, for now, to continue her studies online. She is safe, so I have other priorities first, but Viktor won't escape my wrath for even thinking he could harm her.

I clear my throat, effectively drawing Vasilisa's attention back to me. "I think it's time to go."

"Okay." No snappy remarks. She wraps her arms around herself as if to ward off the cold.

I signal the server to bring the check, and we get ready to leave. I grab Eva's hand and interlace my fingers with hers. She gives me a knowing smile, pretending to be oblivious to the absurdness between Vasilisa and me. She whispers in my ear with a twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

"I'm looking forward to getting you alone."

"I'm sure you are," I reply, my voice a low gruff. "But you don't have to wait."

I pull out several hundred-dollar bills from my wallet, enough to cover the bill and tip. "Keep the change," I tell the server, handing over the check holder.

My cock stiffens at the thought of Eva's stunning body hovering above mine, of her pleasuring me until I'm spent. I've all but given her the green light, so I know what's coming next. I can't wait to get my hands on those tits, to taste my fill of her. I need to be buried deep inside her. Eva loves an audience, so Vasilisa is invited to the show about to commence whether she likes it or not.

Eva and I follow Vasilisa out of the restaurant. She seems more embarrassed than when we came in—her false bravado has exited stage left. Her head is lowered as her heels click against the laminate flooring with haste to get back to the limo as fast as possible.

Once we're outside, Eva grabs my hand and winks at me. She leans in, her lips against my ear. "I can't wait to wrap my lips around your cock." She sticks her tongue out to lick my earlobe. "I'm craving you," she whispers before straightening up, her face flushed.

I grab her hand tightly and I lead her to the limo. It's been a while since I've fucked her. I think she deserves a night of good fucking after all she's endured. It's not just about pleasing her, though; it's about reminding Vasilisa of where her place is. She needs to see how much other women crave me and how much of a privilege it will be to be my wife ... to have my cock.

We get in the limo, and Eva immediately straddles me. She kisses me, sucking my lower lip. Her hand snakes around my neck, and she pulls my head down to hers, whispering in my ear once more. "I want you to fuck me, Kai. I want you to fuck me good. Hard."

I drop my gaze down to her legs, between her thighs. She has a black lace thong on. She pulls it to the side, revealing her pink slit. She spreads her pussy lips with her fingers, exposing her clit as she takes my hand and guides it between her legs. I run my finger along her wetness. She moans, and my cock throbs in my pants.

"Can the two of you at least wait until I'm out of the car?" Vasilisa grumbles. She sounds irritated. *Good*.

"Afraid not, sweetheart. Eva is a good little slut, and she loves an audience. I'm surprised she held out this long. Won't you be a good little fiancée and take my dick out for her?" My cock throbs even more at my savage command.

"Hell no. You two can fuck each other's brains out for all I care, but I don't want any part of your psycho games."

I lean forward and grab her wrist as my eyes meet hers. "Pull out my fucking cock right this second, or Eva won't be the person I fuck in the back of this limo. You will get your first introduction of my dick in that entitled, spoiled arse of yours. I haven't fucked you in the arse yet ...only my thumb."

"Fuck you," she spits.

"Gladly," I growl, ready to pounce.

"Fine," she says, crossing the car to sit on the same side with us. It's too late, but I will let her go through the motions. She will learn to react promptly when I give her a command. She reaches over one of Eva's bare thighs to free my cock, and I smirk.

Her delicate hand wraps around my girth as she frees me. "Stroke it," I instruct as I push Eva aside. She doesn't look happy but knows better than to voice her displeasure.

Vasilisa looks back and forth between us but does as I say. "Good girl," I whisper as she runs her grip up and down my length with just the right amount of pressure. I place my hand on her chin, tipping her head back and capturing her lips with mine to reward her reluctant submission, but only briefly.

I grab her hair, pulling her head back, as I glare into her eyes. "You want my cock, don't you, my little masochist pet?"

"No," she says, but the hitch in her voice gives away her lie. She's enjoying this more than she knows she should—more than I anticipated. "And I'm not a masochist!"

Her eyes widen as I grasp her waist, flipping over the monstrosity of her dress above her waist and pulling her to straddle my lap just as Eva had. I can smell her desire.

"Resistance will only make things worse, you filthy little whore," I growl at her.

She whimpers as I lower my hand, drawing it down between her thighs. Her wetness seeps through her satin thong. Her body shivers as I move the minuscule fabric aside and slip two fingers into her. She's hot, wet, and ready for me. My fingers work her, searching for her G-spot. As I find it, she lets out a loud moan. Her hips move against my hand. Her fingers curl into my thighs.

"Ah, good girl, you like that. Don't you?" I ask as I continue to fuck her with my fingers. I remove them just for a second, and then the tip of my cock presses against her entrance. She pushes her hips forward, trying to impale

herself on my cock, but I pull my cock away. "Not yet, sweetheart. You will have to beg for it or as you like to say—earn it."

"Please, God, Kai. I need to feel you inside me. Please fuck me," she says, her voice so desperate. I don't recognize the wanton woman in front of me. Gone is the defiant princess who swore she'd never fuck me again. In her place is my masochist pet that I just proved her to be.

"That's what I wanted to hear. I think I've proven my point," I say, giving her a dark smile as I push her off me and summon Eva to crawl back onto my lap. She's barely seated before I begin to bounce her on my cock. She screams out her pleasure, and I bring her to two orgasms before I pull out and release my own onto Vasilisa's thigh.

"Motherfucker," she yells. "I fucking hate you."

"Good." I smirk, using the tulle of her dress to wipe clean the tip of my dick.

I press the intercom and ask my driver to drop Eva off first. I'm done with tonight's lesson. A pissed-off Vasilisa follows suit and cleans my cum from her leg with her dress. She looks absolutely murderous, but tonight's humiliation and degradation couldn't have gone any better if I tried. She can keep lying to herself if she wishes. And to think, tonight's punishment doesn't even register on the scale of the shite I have planned for her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Vasilisa

I can't believe I actually fucking begged Kai to fuck me last night ... again. Especially after he made me watch that French chick throw herself at him all night. I blame Viktor. I wasn't expecting us to run into him or the feelings he still evokes within me. His rejection came surging back like a damn tsunami, and I needed to take some of my power back— I needed to prove to myself that I could be spontaneous and free like that Eva bimbo. I wanted to feel desired, even if only for a short limo ride. Kai used my desperation against me, making me feel like an even bigger fool than Viktor. He set out to prove that I get off on humiliation and pain. Two can play that game. He needs to remember that I'm not some ugly duckling. I may not hold a candle to his French Barbie, but I can get the attention of men ... well, some men, as long as they're not Viktor. My father has betrothed me to the worst jackass ever. Aside from his butler, there isn't any male staff here, so his security team will have to do. Samuel is twice my age, so I doubt Kai would buy that I'm actually interested in him. The hotness of his men, though, is a different story. One of the guys gets to play my babysitter today. Kai wants to play games ... so let the games begin!

Kai has stopped mandating that I be locked in my room, but today I've been let out of the house to spend time in the gardens—with supervision that is. I'm unsure if it's a one-time thing after last night's showdown, so I try to soak up as much of the sun's rays as possible. I just finished breakfast on the terrace, but the security guy standing about ten feet from me has yet to take his eyes off me. It may be just part of his job to ensure I don't try to escape, but there is a hint of something else too in the depths of his emerald eyes ... attraction maybe?

"Hi there," I say, turning in my chair and flashing him a flirtatious smile. "What's your name?"

"Uh, my name is Liam," he says, clearly caught off guard by my sudden attention.

"I'm Vasilisa," I reply, as I stand and venture a little closer. "Do you mind if I ask you something personal?"

"Uh, I guess not," he says, looking a little uncomfortable.

"Are you single?" I ask, twirling a loose strand of hair around my finger.

Liam chuckles nervously. "No, I'm afraid not. I have a girlfriend."

"Oh, that's a shame," I say, pouting a little. "I was hoping to get to know you better."

Liam shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "I'm flattered, Vasilisa, but I really shouldn't be talking with you. I'm here to do a job."

"I understand," I say, still smiling at him. "I won't keep you from your duties any longer. But just so you know, I think you're a very attractive man."

He calls another one of the security guys over his walkie-talkie, saying something about needing a break, but I think he wants to get away from me. I feel a little bit pleased with myself. I know that he will report back to Kai about our conversation, and I hope it makes him furious. I want Kai to feel exactly as I had last night.

The next security guy comes out to replace Liam, and I'm not at all disappointed. Liam was cute in a dorky not really my type kind of a way, but this guy I'm sure has melted more than a few panties. Tall and commanding, he stands with a confidence that would captivate anyone. His fiery-red hair cascades in messy waves to his shoulders, framing his chiseled face and drawing attention to his sexy blue eyes. I decide to give my flirtation a shot with him to see if I could get a bit further with him, unlike Liam. I start the conversation the same as I had with Liam, and he tells me that his name is Shane. He doesn't have a girlfriend.

"Nice to meet you, Shane," I say, smiling at him. "How's it going?" He nods curtly. "It's going fine, thank you for asking."

I can't stop staring at him. His Irish heritage is evident in his fair skin, which contrasts beautifully with his fiery hair. His freckles, scattered across his face, only enhance his rugged appeal, adding an element of playfulness to his otherwise striking presence. When he speaks, his voice carries a rich, melodic tone, tinged with a soft Irish lilt that leaves me hanging on every word.

"I was wondering if you could do me a favor," I say, stepping closer to him. "I've been held up in my room for a while. This is my first time getting a glimpse of the estate grounds. I was hoping you could show me around."

He looks at me skeptically. "I'm not sure that's a good idea, Vasilisa. Kai wouldn't like it if he found out I was neglecting my duties."

"Oh, come on," I say, leaning in a little closer. "It'll just be a quick walk. And I promise I won't tell anyone."

He hesitates for a moment, but then he nods. "All right, let's go."

As we walk around the grounds, I continue to flirt with him shamelessly. He's more responsive than Liam was, and I can tell that he's starting to enjoy our conversation. But just as I'm starting to feel like I'm making progress, Kai appears out of nowhere. He's clearly angry, and I have to rein in the smile that threatens to form on my lips.

"What the hell is going on here?" Kai questions, glaring at me.

"I was just showing Vasilisa around the grounds," Shane says, trying to smooth things over.

"That's not your job," Kai snaps. "Your job is to protect this estate and follow orders, not to play tour guide to Vasilisa."

"I'm sorry," I say, feigning innocence. "I just wanted to see the rest of the property."

The banter between Shane and I has been harmless thus far, but if his wrinkled brows are anything to go by, Kai is not buying it. *Good*. I was enjoying the attention.

Kai is a dominant man, used to getting his way. He's not used to being challenged, especially by me—a woman he'd probably rather strangle than marry. He only sees me as an *investment*, something to barter for more power, and my flirting with his security is a direct challenge to his authority. I can feel his anger simmering beneath the surface. He's been determined to teach me a lesson, to show me who's in charge. He wants to make me his pawn in this twisted game of Mafia politics, but I'm not one to back down easily. His antics last night were bullshit. A rush of adrenaline that comes with defying his expectations. It might be dangerous, but I won't deny that there is a thrill in the push.

Kai takes a step toward me, towering over me with his muscular frame. "You think you're so clever, Vasilisa. Playing games with my men like they're your little toys."

I raise my chin defiantly, refusing to back down. "I'm not playing games,

Kai. I'll save that for you. I'm just enjoying myself."

He grabs my arm roughly, his grip tightening like a vise. "I give you an inkling of freedom, and this is what you do with it—try to flirt with me men? Yes, Liam told me that you tried to come on to him. Leave my men the fuck alone. Understood?"

I nod, my heart racing with fear and excitement. "Yes, Kai."

He releases me, but the threat lingers in the air. I know he won't let me get away with this, that he'll find a way to make me pay for my defiance. But for now, I revel in the thrill of the challenge, knowing I've rattled him to the core.

"Get her back to her room and try not to fall for any more of her bullshite," he yells at Shane before storming off.

Shane nods, his expression unreadable. "Let's go, Vasilisa," he says, his voice oddly gentle.

As we walk back to my room, I can feel his eyes on me. I turn toward him, locking gazes with him. "I'm sorry if I got you into trouble with Kai. Are you okay? He's not going to fire you, is he?" I ask.

He hesitates for a moment, as if trying to find the right words. "Be careful," he says finally. "Kai is dangerous, and he won't hesitate to hurt you if he feels threatened."

I nod, understanding the warning. He doesn't answer whether his job is at risk. "Thank you, Shane. I appreciate your concern."

He nods back, his eyes still fixed on mine. "Just be careful," he repeats before waiting for me to enter my room. I can hear the locks engaging on the other side of the door. So we're back to the locks. Kai probably won't let me out again anytime soon.

I sigh, leaning against the door and looking around my room. It's bare and cold, much like I envision a prison. No television or decor to brighten up the space. I'm just about over the boredom. I can't leave this room let alone this estate without Kai's permission. I need to get word to my father somehow. Would he still expect me to marry Kai if he knew of his ill treatment of me? I'm trapped here, with no escape in sight, so how do I get in touch with my father or my brothers without a phone?

But then, an idea occurs to me. Maybe I could use Shane to my advantage. He seems different from the other men that Kai has surrounded himself with. Maybe he's not as loyal to Kai as he seems. Maybe I can convince him to help me escape or at least contact my family.

I sit down on the edge of the bed, my mind racing with possibilities. If I can just get Shane on my side, then maybe I can find a way out of this nightmare. If things are this bad before the wedding, I'd rather not stick around to see how much worse it will get. Let him marry Eva or Persephone. As I lie down on the bed, I close my eyes, trying to formulate a plan. As I drift off into a restless sleep, my mind continues to churn with ideas. How can I find a way to talk to Shane again? Ugh, I need another ally—Andie maybe. But I don't want to risk her job too. I'm already risking Shane's if he doesn't get fired after today's incident.

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THE NEXT MORNING, I WAKE UP EARLY, MY MIND STILL CONSUMED WITH thoughts of escape. I need to find a way to talk to Shane again, to gauge his loyalty to Kai and see if he can be persuaded to help me. But how do I do that without raising suspicion?

As I get dress in one of the jogger sets that have been placed in the drawers, I hear a soft knock on the door before I hear the locks disengaging. I pause, wondering who it could be? Who would knock? It's not like I have the means to open the door.

To my surprise, it's Shane. I guess it was a courtesy knock in case I wasn't dressed. He looks nervous, shifting from foot to foot as he stands in the center of my room with a tray of food.

To say I'm surprised is an understatement. "What are you doing here?" I ask, trying to keep my voice casual.

"I intercepted Andrea when she was heading up to bring you breakfast. I told her that I had orders to check on you and that I didn't mind bringing your food up," he says, holding up the tray in question.

"That was very sweet of you."

"Look, Kai may question you today. It's important that you don't tell him anything about our conversation such as me revealing I don't have a girlfriend. If he asks, just say that I didn't say much other than show you around."

I nod, understanding the gravity of our situation. "I won't say a word. I promise."

He lets out a relieved breath before setting the tray of food down on the

bed. "I don't want to see you get hurt, Vasilisa. Kai is just as ruthless as his brother, and he won't hesitate to do whatever it takes to keep you in line."

"I know," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "That's why I need your help. I need to find a way out of here, to contact my family."

He hesitates before slowly nodding. "I'll see what I can do. But you need to be patient. It won't be easy, and it won't be quick. But I'll do what I can to help you."

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, feeling a glimmer of hope. "Thank you, Shane. You have no idea how much this means to me."

"I do know. I may seem like one of Kai's men, but I'm not like them," he says, his eyes meeting mine. "I was brought on by one of his full-time men because he couldn't pull all of his security from his home in New York. I'll do what I can to help you, but you have to be careful. Kai is still watching, and if he finds out I'm helping you, we will be in danger."

"I understand," I say, nodding. "I'll be careful."

"Good," he says before turning to leave. "I'll see you later, Vasilisa."

As he closes the door behind him, I feel a sense of relief wash over me. I hear the locks on the other side, but for the first time since I've arrived at this estate, I feel like there might be a way out—a way to escape this nightmare and return to my old life. But it won't be easy, and I'll have to be careful. I can't let Kai find out what Shane and I are planning. I'll have to be patient and wait for Shane to make his move. But for now, I have a tray of food in front of me, and I'm starving. As I dig into the bacon, eggs, and toast, I can't help but feel grateful for his unexpected visit. Maybe there's hope for me yet, and maybe I won't have to marry Kai after all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Vasilisa

Shane's secret visit to my room was a huge mistake. I didn't know he left his post to talk to me. Samuel escorted me to Kai's office a few minutes ago. I had been summoned. I was surprised to see six of his security men standing around the room while a pissed-off Kai went off on a tangent. I only recognize Shane and Liam. I don't know the names of the others. From the yelling I walked in on, Shane was reported by one of the other men to be missing from the front of the estate. Kai reviewed the camera footage, showing him entering my room with a tray of food, but Shane managed to erase our discussion behind my closed door. I didn't even know cameras were in my room, but I should have figured. Good thing the conversation between Andie and I was nothing that could get her into trouble. What could have simply been explained away as him just volunteering to bring breakfast to check on me now looks even more suspicious. It appears more happened than just talking, especially after Kai's warning yesterday. Suddenly, his verbal lashings are directed at me.

"Is this all a game to you? I warned you yesterday, and you didn't listen." Kai snarls. "You think flirting with my security is going to make me jealous? Do you need a reminder of who you belong to?"

"I don't belong to anyone ... not yet anyway. You haven't put a ring on my finger yet, so until our wedding day, my father still has time to come to his senses—to find me another suitor," I spit. Someone Russian would be ideal, but I keep that afterthought to myself.

"Oh, that's what you've been hoping for?" He laughs. "You became mine to own the moment your father shook my hand. If he were to attempt to back out of our deal after I've already committed to this, he'd pay with his life."

My mouth goes slack. The venom in his voice leaves no doubt as to whether he is serious. I can feel that last grain of hope I've been holding on to slip through my fingers. "You're evil. How could anyone ever want to be with you? You haven't given me a single goddamn reason to even try."

"Good thing I don't care about giving you a reason. Who do you belong to, Vasilisa? Did you fuck Shane? Was that why he snuck into your room? Did you suck his cock? Is that why he tried to erase a segment of the footage before returning to his post?"

"Fuck you!" His accusations are wildly uncalled for.

He shakes his index finger at me as he tsks my response. "I think my men need a demonstration just to make sure there is no question to anyone in this fucking room about who you fucking belong to."

He stalks toward me until we are face-to-face, the tension in his breath all-consuming. He unzips his jeans, and my eyes shift downward. His already hardened cock springs free, jutting up toward his navel. He gives it a few strokes, and I can't look away. I can't believe he just pulled out his dick in a room filled with his security.

"Get on your goddamn knees," he instructs. "Show my men who you belong to."

"I'm not sucking your dick," I retort. "You're fucking crazy."

"It's time you learn some fucking manners. Either get on your knees and suck my cock like my personal slut or watch me kill the guard that betrayed me by trying to fuck you behind my back ... and that's if he didn't already succeed."

"You wouldn't," I reply, uncertain.

"Would you like to bet his life on it? I don't bluff, sweetheart."

I look between the guys standing to the side of us. My adrenaline surges. Suddenly, my plan to get underneath his skin or trying to escape by involving someone else doesn't seem like the brightest idea. I don't think he'd kill me, but I can't say the same for Shane. Reluctantly, I drop to my knees, feeling the weight of this déjà vu. My heart races as I wipe my hands on the cotton of my joggers.

"Who do you belong to?" he hisses.

"You," I mutter, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from saying something that will cost Shane his life. My gaze is glued to the floor. I can't look him in the eyes.

"Say it again," he demands. "I couldn't hear you. My men couldn't hear

you."

"I belong to you," I choke out.

"And this is how you show it?"

"I'm sorry," I say, hoping he won't actually make me go through with this. I opt for a bit of honesty. "I was trying to make you jealous, but it was stupid," I say.

"Too late for apologies, princess. You're going to learn that you can't unring the fucking bell once you ring that fucker, so your every move needs to be that of absolute certainty. Now open your mouth and do what I know you've been dying to do."

I know better than to argue with him. Last night in the limo taught me that as well as this office and his playroom. The conviction in his eyes warns that we're well past bargaining or mercy. I part my lips and he shoves his cock inside my mouth causing me to gag. I try to pull back, but he holds my head in place as he shoves his cock deeper. I try to stop gagging as tears fill my eyes.

"You're really doing bad at this," he remarks. "One would think this is the first time you've ever sucked cock, but you and I both know better. Suck my cock like you did in my playroom. Suck me like Shane's life depends on it."

"Okay," I say, never taking my mouth from around his dick.

His words are callous and harsh, so why does my pussy throb? Was he right about me? Am I just as fucked up as him? The audience alone should be intimidating, but instead, it spurs me on. The attention makes me want to succeed in making him come—not because he deserves a blow job from me, but because now I have something to prove. He wanted to shame me in front of his men, degrade me like he did in the limo, but I currently hold the power to make him come undone. I take him deeper while stroking him with my hand simultaneously. A groan slips past his lips, and I'm unable to refrain from the smile that forms on my lips.

"That's better," he says. "Now suck harder and make me come so I can shoot it down your throat."

His cock twitches in my mouth, so I suck harder and pump him with my hand. "Yeah, that's it. Show me what a naughty little masochist you can be."

I look up at him and suck even harder. His cock stiffens, and I know he's close. Just as I think he's going to come in my mouth like his dirty threat, he pulls out and shoots his cum onto my face. The creamy white substance is hot and thick. I open my mouth to speak, and he crams his cock back in. I can

feel my cheeks swell as he fucks my mouth relentlessly.

I take his cock as deep as I can again without gagging. I bob my head, licking and sucking at a pace that has him hardening in my mouth. Kai's breathing becomes raspy as he becomes more aroused and I can feel it when his balls tighten. His hand grips the strands of my hair, and he takes control thrusting his cock into my mouth in order to set the pace and depth he likes. His thighs tense, and he releases a deep grunt as he releases his liquid all over my lips and cheeks once more.

"That was even better than the first time," he says, his cock still in my mouth. He tugs at my hair until I release him with an audible pop.

He pulls his pants up and turns to face his security. His men aren't smiling, their expressions unreadable. "I've already explained to my future bride that she is not to entertain any man without my permission. If I see her with any of my men again, they will meet the same fate."

"As you wish, sir," they all answer in unison.

I foolishly think that he is threatening them with having to give him a blow job like I just did. He walks over to his desk and pulls open a drawer. When he pulls out a handgun, my stomach lurches. He walks back over to his men and point the barrel at Shane's head. A pregnant pause blankets the room as we wait with bated breath. He can't ... he won't. Fuck ... he never said he wouldn't.

A single shot rings through the silence as brain matter splatters on the wall behind Shane. His body immediately drops to the floor.

"Nooooooo!" I scream. "I did what you asked," I sob uncontrollably. I've yet to rise from my knees.

"Did you actually think I'd let him escape with his life after that betrayal? He tried to erase part of the fucking tape of going into your room. What other betrayal was he capable of? His demise is the real lesson here. The blow job just delayed the inevitable and gave that Judas a few more minutes on this earth. The lesson to all is don't fuck with me or poach on what's mine."

"This is all my fault," I keep repeating.

"You made a mistake with your games of seduction. Today's lesson is one you'll never forget."

"You murdered him," I say, my voice edged with disbelief.

"He was someone Liam trusted and brought into my employ? Should I end his life too?"

I dare not look over at Liam. "Please, no! I'm so sorry."

"I'm going to do something I rarely do and step out on blind faith. I won't hold Liam accountable for Shane's actions. I will reward him with his life for immediately coming to tell me of Shane's misstep yesterday, but let this be a lesson to all. I can't have people around me I can't trust. I expect my men to follow through with my rules even in my absence." Kai then turns his focus to me. "You wanted to see me jealous? I made sure that you would see what that looks like in ways you couldn't have ever imagined. I don't do jealousy ... I retaliate."

"He was your employee," I say, still in disbelief.

"He was a person who allowed himself to be lured by the temptation of your body. He should have known better. He knew the consequences."

"I did not want him to die for my actions," I say, dabbing the blood from my face.

"He was a grown man. You played with his mind, and his cock couldn't decipher between lust and duty. What happened was his fault, but you're an accessory. Now clean yourself up, or do you wish to wear my trophy for the rest of the day with my cum and his blood on your face?"

I look at my hands, covered in the essence of him. My mind is a jumbled mess of anger, remorse, regret, and sadness. I'm such a fool. I really believed he would spare Shane so I stroked his ego by sucking his cock in front of his men. I reveled in it.

"I did what you asked me to do," I say.

"You did," he agrees. "Now get off the floor before I make you suck my cock again for your useless empathy."

My knees are weak, but I manage to pull myself up. Shane's body remains slumped over on the floor.

"See that she gets to her room without fucking her and clean this mess up," he says to his men, speaking to no one in particular.

I'm escorted by one of Kai's men out of his office and to my room. I let out a heavy sigh, but I'm unsure of what to say for the chaos I caused. I wipe away the remaining tears as we reach my door. I'm truly rattled and heartbroken. My actions cause someone their life. I'm on my own now. I refused to get anyone else involved in my plan to get away from here. I can't marry Kai. I don't want this to be my life.

I step into my room and the unnamed security guy closes and locks the door behind me. I slide down the door on my side to the floor. I can't forget the image of Shane lying dead in his own blood or his brain matter splattered

against the wall.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I awake thirty minutes before my alarm sounds, and I groan. I talked to my brother, Lennon, last night to distract myself from what I was forced to do and what I now must do today. Shane wasn't one of my long time guys, but his deceit still got to me. I'd already updated Lennon on what Jacob told me and the shite with Callum, but he could sense that something else weighed on my mind. I made the mistake of verifying his suspicion by telling him it wasn't anything he needed to worry his Clan Chief head over. I ended the call, but an hour later, I get a text that he will be here in the morning and he's bringing our sister, Aisling, and his wife, Aurora. That's all it said. No reason given.

I shower and change into some trousers and a button-down shirt. After I'm dressed and ready for my brother's not so surprise visit, I head down to the opposite end of the hall to check in on Vasilisa. She was quite distraught over her role in getting Shane killed. When I unbolt the door, I find her in bed. She sits up with a start, but then attempts to hide her face when she sees it's me. Her eyes are bloodshot and dried tears stain her cheeks. A pang of something foreign slams within my chest.

"You can stop blaming yourself," I say. "Shane wasn't who he said he was."

I don't know why I feel the need to share this info with her, but if it's going to allow her to pull herself together before my brother arrives, I'll just fucking tell her.

"What do you mean?" she sits up more, attempting to control her sniffling. *Ugh*. For fuck's sake.

I take a seat on the edge of the bed. "After allowing someone into my

home that managed to betray me after a week of being in my employ, I had to figure out what I missed. I should have known better. Based on his résumé and exceptional references, he was not part of this underworld of corruption and crime. My job has always been to extract intel from people, so how did this guy slip through?"

"You said Liam referred him," she reminds me. "It was my fault. Not Shane's. Like you said, he was not from our world. Knowing how you were treating me probably messed with his conscience so he wanted to help me. It doesn't make him a bad person ... it makes him human."

She foolishly thinks that this is still about him sneaking into her room. Wait ... she said help her— not fuck her.

"What was he trying to help you with?" I growl. "What really happened between the two of you when he came into this room?"

"Nothing. We didn't have sex." She tries to deflect, realizing her slip of tongue.

"You didn't answer my goddamn question. What was he trying to help you with? He's fucking dead so you don't have to keep trying to protect him."

"Fine," she says jumping off the bed to put some distance between us. "At first, it started with me flirting with him to make you jealous since Liam ignored my attempts. But when he was escorting me to my room, he warned me that you were dangerous." My fists clench, but I rein in my anger so she can continue. "The next morning, he came by my room to ask that I not mention what we discussed when he was showing me around the grounds about you being dangerous and could hurt me. I asked him to help me get in contact with my brothers or my father. He said he would, but that was it. He died trying to warn and help me."

It's my turn to jump off the bed now. She watches as I pace the length of her bedroom.

"He was a liar, Vasilisa. I took all the documents he supplied at face value. Because Liam referred him, I didn't have a reason to look further. Liam has been with our family for over eight years. Surely, he wouldn't betray me." I sigh. "Shane was not his real name. His references and résumé checked out under that name, but the real Shane has been reported missing in Sacramento for a week now. So how was the 'impostor Shane' able to supply info to match this missing guy's info?"

Her mouth goes slack. "There has to be some explanation for that."

"And you're naive. I checked, and he has erased any footage that has him

on it, so why was he really here? Who sent him, and where the fuck is the real Shane?"

"What now?"

"Nothing for now. This discovery doesn't leave this fucking room. I only told you so you can stop beating yourself up about causing his death."

"But ..."

"But nothing. My brother, his wife, and my fucking sister will be here any moment now. I expect you to be on your best behavior. Act right and I may just let you back out into civilization," I say, referring to leaving her door unlocked again. "Shower and I will have Samuel bring you down once they arrive."

"Okay," she says. "That's very disappointing to hear about Shane, especially if he is behind someone's disappearance, but thank you for telling me."

"Uhhhh," I grunt. I don't bother locking her door on my way out, but I make sure Samuel is aware on the off chance she decides to do something stupid.

As I make my way down the hallway, I hear a car pulling up outside. My brother has arrived, and now that he's here, I know he will want to help with my Liam problem once I let him in on my suspicions. Lennon has always been more ruthless than me, but when it comes to protecting our clan or what's mine, we may be more evenly matched.

I make my way down the stairs and into the foyer, where I'm met by my sister, Aisling, and my sister-in-law, Aurora. Aisling hugs me before stepping back and giving me a once-over.

"You look like shite," she says bluntly.

I roll my eyes. "Thanks, darling sister. Always a pleasure to see you too."

She just laughs before she and the rest of the uninvited family follow me out to my indoor solarium with the pool. Due to today's overcast, it's a bit chilly outside, so I will have Samuel and the staff serve brunch in here. The women don't seem surprised when I pull my brother away for a chat. I tell them we will return shortly to join them for brunch, but they're already immersed in their admiration for this room.

When Lennon steps into my office, I close the door behind him. My house staff knows not to interrupt.

"Talk to me, brother. Last night you sounded off," Lennon says, getting straight to the point. I give him a recount of yesterday's events that led to me

killing Shane. "And the body?"

"I had my security dispose of it."

"Fuck, brother. You remember you were getting on to my arse not that long ago about trying to do things on my own. Never let anyone outside of family dispose of anything that can be tied back to us. We'll have to rectify that ASAP."

"Yeah, given the circumstances, I couldn't agree more. I don't know how deep the betrayal goes, but I think, at minimum, Liam is part of it."

Lennon goes over to my wet bar and pours himself a drink. "Shite, I need a drink for this mess. I can't believe this wasn't the first thing you told me last night. I knew something was wrong. Why do you suspect Liam?"

"Liam referred Shane for the job when I explained I didn't want to pull all of my men from New York. I still needed some to remain to keep watch of my other properties. He told me he knew a guy, and with the addition of him that we could make it work. He said he and Shane were longtime mates and worked a regular security job together about ten years ago. He doesn't know what I've managed to discover last night when I finally decided to dig deeper. The real Shane only went missing a week ago, which coincides with the hire of the impostor."

"Damn. That means Liam would've had to know he was an impostor. You don't have a longtime mate and not know what the fuck he looks like. This is worse than I thought."

"Yeah, because now I don't know the real reason for him bringing 'impostor Shane' here. The only info I have is that the impostor was talking shite about me to Vasilisa. Telling her that I'm dangerous and could hurt her if she wasn't careful."

I decide to join my brother for a drink. I fix myself two fingers neat of whiskey before we take a seat on the sofa.

"He was working on building her trust," Lennon says finally. "But the question is why? Nobody is supposed to know you're here or that you're arranging to marry into the Russian family."

"But if Liam has gone rogue, that may no longer hold true. Fuck, he's been with our family for over eight years. Our father trusted him. We trusted him."

"Fuck that sentimental bullshite. We took out half our clan for being disloyal. He will suffer the same fate."

"I'm not being sentimental. You forget I was there and an active

participant in that bloodbath. I will always do what is necessary, but not before I torture the truth out of him."

"Good. This needs to happen sooner than later. Every minute he is allowed to be on this earth is another minute he has to betray our family—our clan. And trust me, I plan to be right there when you get answers."

"Yeah. I didn't want to dump all of this on your plate. You have enough with being the new Clan Chief and all that comes with that. Not to mention, our continued search for our father's murderer."

"Bullshite, brother. I will always have your back and anything that affects you is clan business."

I nod in agreement, relieved to actually have my brother here even though I didn't invite him here. I wanted to show that I'm capable of handling things on my own. "I appreciate that," I acknowledge. It's good to know our brotherly telepathy transcends across states."

"Always, although we shouldn't need telepathy. We can't start keeping shite from each other. Especially not now. We're all we've got." He takes another sip of his drink before leaning back on the sofa. "So what's the plan?"

"First, we brunch with the ladies so they can meet Vasilisa, and then we head down to my security quarters to have a little one-on-one with Liam."

"Sounds like a plan," Lennon says, finishing off his drink. "So tell me about Vasilisa? How are the two of you faring?"

"What about her?" I ask, obviously deflecting.

"She's been here for a while now. Does she seem to be warming up to you or the ideal of marriage? I couldn't find much about her, but from what I hear, she is a real firecracker."

"She's definitely a firecracker and a true enigma."

"How so?"

"She has a hard exterior and tries to be so damn tough all the time. I already told you that she tried to throw my last principal over the balcony over some guy who rejected her. Sometimes I think she's bat shite crazy and other times a glimpse of her sensitive side filters through."

I don't share info about her kink. That would, in turn, be revealing mine—not exactly a conversation I want to be having with my brother.

"She sounds like Aurora when I first brought her into my home. You have your work cut out for you, brother." He laughs.

I chuckle, knowing Lennon is right. "Yeah, but I've never been one to back down from a challenge. I will break her in the end."

"That's what I'm afraid of," he says, teasingly. "You're underestimating the work it's going to take, but we can chat more on that later. You'll have to approach her differently. If it's just pure dominance, she is prepared for that ... hell, being the daughter of a Mafia boss prepared her for that. You will never get through to her by just being a dick. You have to give her a reason to submit," Lennon surmises.

"Her reason is that I own her." I chuckle. "Don't tell me marriage has already made you soft."

"Hell, no," he insists. "But don't say I didn't try to warn you. That was some solid advice."

We join in laughter before I finish my drink and make our way back to the solarium where the women are already enjoying brunch. Vasilisa catches my eye, and I can see the guarded expression on her face. I give her a reassuring smirk before taking my place at the head of the table. I forgot I asked Samuel to bring her down for brunch. The women already seem to be taking a liking to her.

We all chat and make small talk, but my mind is elsewhere. I can't wait to get this Liam situation sorted out and find out what he knows. I know Lennon is likely feeling the same. Neither of us is good at this small talk stuff, so we mostly let the women chat as they plan to take a dip in the pool.

After a while, the women excuse themselves to change into their swimsuits, but Vasilisa makes an excuse to head back up to her room for a bit. Lennon and I head down to the security quarters. We find Liam sitting in a chair, looking nervous. His eyes flicker to me and then to Lennon, and I can see the sweat beads on his forehead.

"Good morning, Liam," I say, taking a seat across from him. "How are you feeling today?" I want to see him squirm. If he was innocent, there would be no reason to.

"I'm fine, sir," he replies, his voice shaking slightly. "Nice to see you, Lennon. How long are you visiting for?"

I ask the few lingering security men who haven't taken their posts yet to give us the room.

"I want to ask you a few questions about Shane," I say, getting right down to business once they're gone. "How well did you know him?"

"I worked with him for a short bit about ten years ago," Liam replies, his eyes darting between me and Lennon. "I had no idea he would be stupid enough to make a move on Vasilisa," he reassures.

"And you didn't recognize him as an impostor?" Lennon asks, his voice cold.

"I...I hadn't seen him in a while," Liam stammers.

"That's funny," I say, leaning forward. "Because we have reason to believe that you were working with him recently. And that you knew he told Vasilisa that I am dangerous and could hurt her."

Liam's eyes widen in fear, and I can see the sweat on his forehead increasing.

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir. I would never betray the family like that," he says, trying to maintain his composure.

"You're lying, Liam," I say, my voice just as cold as my brother's. "And I don't take kindly to liars. In fact, there isn't anything that I hate worse than a liar."

With a nod to Lennon, we both make our way closer over to him. He tries to back away, but we grab him by the arms, pulling him to his feet.

"Now, let's try this again," I say, my hand gripping his chin tightly. "What do you know about Shane, and why did you betray the family?"

Liam's eyes are widen with fear as he speaks, telling us everything.

"The guy you killed is Jack," he says, turning to me. "He's Shane's younger brother. Shane was reported missing by his girlfriend, but he's not. He's on the run from some cartel he owes money to."

"And so why did you fucking present Jack to me as Shane?"

"I've known Jack just as long as I've known Shane. He's taken a few bouncer gigs for clubs and has always been reliable. You needed one more security guy, and he needed a job. He'd reached out looking for work, and coincidentally, I was here in California. It was his idea to use his brother's identity to look better on paper to secure the job. At the time, I didn't see much harm in it. I was just trying to look out for my mate's little brother while Shane was on the run."

"First of all, there is never any such thing as coincidences. What did you tell him about why I'm here?"

"I told him that you're a dangerous man and not to mess with you," Liam admits, looking down in shame. "I thought it would keep him in line and make sure he didn't do anything stupid that would jeopardize the job."

I let out a sigh of frustration. This was not what I wanted to hear. I release his chin before giving him a firm shove back into the chair.

"You should have known better. You have no idea what kind of situation

you've put us all in," I say, shaking my head. "Do you realize the jeopardy you've put on our plans?"

"I'm sorry," he says, his voice cracking with emotion. "I never intended for things to get this out of hand. I just wanted to help Jack."

"Helping someone doesn't mean betraying the family," Lennon says, his voice equally as cold as before. He looks at me, and I nod my head in agreement. It's clear that Liam isn't a threat, but he is still responsible for his actions.

"We can't let this go unpunished," Lennon says firmly.

I nod my agreement, turning back to Liam.

"You know the consequences of your betrayal," I say, my voice firm and unyielding. "You will be stripped of your position and excommunicated from the clan."

Liam's face pales at my words, but he nods his head in understanding.

"I accept your punishment," he says quietly. "I only ask that you spare my family. They had nothing to do with this."

Liam has two older brothers who are a part of Lennon's security back in New York.

"We'll take that into consideration," I say. "They'll be an insurance policy. Should your story not check out or if you betray us further, they will pay the price. You'll be escorted out of here immediately. Consider yourself lucky that we're not taking more drastic measures."

I summon my men to return to escort him off the property. Someone can take him his belongings later.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ow that that's settled, how are you doing? I mean really ... and not just with this whole Liam and Shane fiasco," Lennon asks once it's just the two of us in the security office.

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be? We did what needed to be done and still managed to be fair. He left here with his life."

"There has been so much to endure in such a short amount of time," Lennon surmises. "We lost our father in the most horrendous way possible, and then you had to immediately step up as Clan Captain to fill my shoes. I know this wasn't the life you imagined. Your body count is on the rise, and I just wanted to do a mental welfare check in with you."

"So that's why you're really here?" My voice rises. "You somehow think I can't handle things, so you saw it fit to fly here to ensure I'm not having a mental breakdown. We already discussed this on the day of your wedding. It's the reason I didn't tell you about the Shane and Liam situation. I don't need your doubts."

"I don't doubt what you're capable of, brother, but I will never not look out for you. I've had years to be groomed for this shite. You were thrown in the deep end," he retorts, taking a cleansing breath. "I know you want to do right by our family, but it's okay to be angry. If you don't deal with it, it will consume you and prevent you from forming any sort of connection with Vasilisa."

"I don't need to form a bond with her. She just needs to do as I say and stay out of my way."

I attempt to exit the room, but Lennon steps in front of the door. I'm so over this conversation.

"You fucked your last principal, didn't you?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"That wasn't a no, and it has everything to do with your current lack of progress with Vasilisa. You're still holding on to the fact that she tried to kill your precious Persephone. But if she is going to be your wife, you have to let that go."

"Are you done now?"

"Not quite. She's young, Kai. You've never allowed love in, so you have no idea the stupid shite people will do for it. She's likely never experienced it. Her mother died when she was eight. All she had was her brothers, father, and tough love," he explains. "She needs someone to groom her the proper way—someone to teach her how to submit. She needs to be able to trust you in order to let herself be that vulnerable with you. And for that to happen, you will have to share a part of yourself. Something other than just dominance."

Unbeknownst to him and Vasilisa, she's already given me her trust when she allowed herself to be vulnerable enough to share her kink with me. She's just not ready to see it or admit it. Only then will I have her unconditional submission.

"Why does your advice sound like the regurgitated shite I told you to gain traction with Aurora?"

"Because it is." He laughs, some of the seriousness dissipating. "I'm paraphrasing a bit, but you get my point. It was great advice that worked, so use it."

"I hear you," I say, not making any promises.

"That's all I can ask for. If you plan to follow through with the wedding, things would be much simpler if the two of you weren't enemies. You will need to be able to trust her too, and you have to give trust to receive trust."

"Let's go check on the women," I suggest. "I've endured enough philosophy to last me a lifetime." I laugh.

"We'll be out of your hair by morning," he promises. "I just wanted to check in on my Clan Captain. I'll be heading over to Los Angles tomorrow to check on my estate there before we fly back to New York. Just keep me apprised of any new activity regarding Liam. No more keeping things from me."

"You have my word."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Vasilisa

here is a brief knock on my door before it's pushed open, and the two women from brunch, Aurora and Aisling, enter. "We decided not to go for a swim," Aurora informs.

"Yeah, we wanted to spend more time getting to know you while the guys are having their chat."

We talked some over brunch, but other than my name and where I'm from, we mostly talked about their flight here and about Aurora's honeymoon in the Maldives. They're aware that I'm betrothed to Kai.

They look around my bare room as I take a seat on the floor. I gesture for them to join me. "Sorry, my room isn't quite finished yet."

"No apologies necessary," Aurora speaks up, taking a seat next to me on the carpet. Aisling joins her. "Lennon pulled the same crap with me. My guess is that you're not quite behaving yourself yet. Am I right?"

"If you're referring to submitting, then you'd be correct." I laugh.

"Yeah, I got minimum clothes other than joggers in the beginning, and I was confined to my room until he knew he could trust me not to run off. He had his men abduct me." She laughs as she shares the memory of how things started with her and Lennon.

"I came on my own," I admit, which is sort of true. I had begrudgingly agreed to this arrangement. Kai just rescued and took me a day early. I had to endure a few days in a shitty warehouse cell, but I don't disclose those details. "But I can't say that I'm happy about it. Sorry, Aisling, but your brother is kind of a dominating asshole."

"No offense taken. I'm well aware. You should try growing up with them. They're overprotective, but they mean well," Aisling says.

"I agree. Once Lennon was able to let me in and see me as more than some obligation or arrangement, things between us really soared. He's both loving and protective. I get to experience a side of him that he rarely shows the rest of the world," Aurora shares.

As much as I try to mask it, I'm envious of the love that Aurora has found with Lennon. I can't imagine being in love, especially not with someone like Kai. But then again, I don't really know him yet. Maybe there's more to him than the cold and ruthless man who calls me an *investment*.

Aisling notices the shift in my mood and reaches out to gently pat my arm. "Don't worry, Kai may seem intimidating at first, but he's a good man. He'll come around, but that will require you to let him in. You two will get past this challenging phase."

"I hope so," I say with a small smile, though deep down I'm not so sure.

"I know so," Aurora chimes in, her own smile wide and genuine. "But enough about the men. Let's talk about us girls. Tell us about your family and what you like to do for fun... well before now."

And with that simple prompt, we begin to bond over our varying interests and aspirations. For a moment, I forget all about the complicated situation I find myself in and just enjoy the company of these two women who have gone out of their way to reassure me and make me feel like one of them.

As the day wears on, we continue to chat comfortably on my bedroom floor. Aurora and Aisling are so easy to talk to that I find myself opening up, sharing more about myself than I thought I would. I talk about how my mother died when I was eight and how my brothers and father essentially raised me. I share that I'm interested in studying law, and they don't ridicule me for it. They share some book titles of some spicy romance books that I may want to try, and I'm intrigued. I learn that Aisling has taken over their family restaurant and that Aurora is helping to add some modern flair without extinguishing the traditions that make it unique.

As we chat, I start to feel more at ease around them. They don't judge me or make me feel like an outsider. They treat me as if we're already friends, not just some girl who's been thrust into this complicated situation with their brother and brother-in-law.

Eventually, the conversation does turn back to Kai and Lennon. Aurora looks at me curiously and asks, "So what do you think of Kai so far, other than he's a dominating asshole? Are you at least attracted to him?"

I take a deep breath before answering. "Honestly, I don't really know

yet," I say with a shrug. "He's definitely insanely hot, but he's also intimidating. There's something intriguing about him. I think he has a lot of layers that I haven't uncovered yet, but I'm just not sure if he'll let me uncover them."

Aurora nods in agreement. "That's exactly how I felt about Lennon when we first met. He was so closed off and hard to read, but once he started to trust me, he revealed so much more of himself. My heart never stood a chance with him."

She leans forward, her expression serious. "Just be careful, okay? These men can be protective and caring, but they don't make it easy to access that part of them. You have to have blind faith here and submit. If you insist on fighting Kai at every turn, it will be just that much longer for the two of you to get to a better place. If Kai is anything like Lennon, he's stubborn and will get his way in the end."

I nod in agreement, silently thanking her for the advice. It's just easier said than done.

The door to my room abruptly opens, and Kai strides in. Those whiskey-colored eyes immediately find mine, narrowing slightly at the sight of me sitting on the floor with Aurora and Aisling. He stands there looking just as imposing as ever. But there's something different about him too, something softer in his expression that catches me off guard.

"Lennon told me that you guys came straight here from the plane. Figured you may want to get some rest and then freshen up before dinner later," he says to the two women. "Samuel can show you to the guest rooms if you ladies are done chatting."

"Doesn't sound like a bad idea," Aisling agrees. "I could use a short nap." "Same," Aurora says as she stands up and helps Aisling up.

"Lennon has already beat you to it," Kai informs Aurora. "He just went to lie down a few minutes ago. We went to join you ladies in the solarium, but Samuel informed us that the two of you were here in Vasilisa's room, so we decided to let you be."

"It was nice meeting you both," I say as they prepare to leave. "Thank you for coming by my room to chat."

Kai turns to me. "This isn't goodbye. You'll see them again later. We're heading out to dinner tonight, so be ready to go by seven sharp. Andrea will bring by something for you to wear."

My mind drifts to the last dinner outing, but I simply nod. As the door

closes behind them, I'm left alone with Kai. The room feels suddenly smaller, and my heart beats faster in anticipation. I'm not sure what to expect from him, especially after our last encounter.

"Come with me," he says, his voice low and commanding.

Without a word, I stand and follow him out of the room. We walk down the long hallway in silence, but the tension between us is palpable. Finally, we reach what I'm guessing is his room, and he opens the door. He gestures for me to enter.

I step inside and take a quick scan of the room. It's much larger than my own, with expensive-looking furnishings and decorations that scream luxury. But despite the opulence of it all, there's a raw masculinity to it that makes me feel both excited and uneasy at the same time.

Kai shuts the door behind us and turns to face me. His eyes are dark with lust as he strides toward me. Suddenly, I feel like prey caught in his predator's gaze.

"You've been talking about me," he says as he stops inches away from me.

"I haven't been talking about you," I say defensively, trying to maintain my distance from him.

But Kai doesn't let it go. He grabs my wrist roughly and pulls me closer to him until we're chest to chest. His other hand snakes around my waist possessively.

"I don't like liars," he says through gritted teeth. "I can forgive a lot of things, but not that."

His words send a shiver down my spine. But at the same time, the way he's holding me so close feels intoxicatingly forbidden. My body betrays me as the heat between us intensifies, my own desire beginning to burn brightly.

"I wasn't lying," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "We were just talking about you briefly, but not in a bad way. We talked about your brother Lennon too."

He studies me for a long moment before finally releasing me. I step back, feeling relieved but disappointed at the sudden loss of his touch.

"Well, I didn't ask about my brother," he says with a smirk. "Don't be late for dinner."

He turns and walks toward his closet, leaving me feeling frustrated and confused. Is this how it's going to be between us? A constant push and pull of desire and anger? I can already tell he's not easy to please, let alone love. But

something about him draws me in, making me want to stay despite his broodiness.

Resigned to my fate, whatever it may be, I begin to walk toward the door to return to my room. But before I can reach it, Kai turns around and stops me with his hand on my shoulder.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asks with a low growl.

I turn to look up at him, confused. "Back to my room?"

"This is your room now until I say otherwise," he informs. "Now get some rest while you still can. Andrea will bring some things that I bought for you in here. I've moved some of my things aside to make room."

I have so many questions, but he steps around me and leaves me standing here as he exits. I'm left alone in his room, feeling a myriad of emotions that I can't quite place. A small part of me feels excited about staying in his room, being so close to him all the time. But at the same time, a nagging feeling in my mind tells me to be cautious around him and not to let my guard down.

As I begin to explore the room, I can't help but notice how different it is from my own. The bed is bigger, for one thing, with luxurious satin sheets and plush pillows. The furniture is all dark wood and leather, giving the entire room a masculine feel. I crawl into bed and snuggle into the sheets that smell like him. It doesn't take me long to fall asleep. This is probably the best rest I've had so far.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

iven Lennon's suggestion, I decided to put in more effort with Vasilisa. Maybe as her future husband, it is my responsibility to groom her to submit. She's already exposed her feelings to me, so I will take the time to help her understand her kink as well as introduce her to mine. My sexual appetite is insatiable, and I don't do vanilla. Where my duties as Clan Captain are new to me and require continuous adjusting, that's only one aspect of who I am. My kink is just as much of my identity as being a Mafia heir. If we're to wed, Vasilisa needs to know both versions of me. I won't apologize for my desires or suppress them. Given our very first introduction in Persephone's apartment and what she was there to do, I don't know if I can completely forgive her, but I'm willing to give her an opportunity to redeem herself. Tonight I'm taking her to Club Luxe—the most sought-after sex club with a waitlist for membership years long. They have clubs all over the world, but none are advertised. You have to know someone and be invited to apply. Even then, you're in for a wait to be officially accepted. Depending on your membership tier, you're granted access to any of their clubs, hence how I'm able to get into their San Francisco location.

As I lead Vasilisa into Club Luxe, I can feel her nerves radiating off her. I anticipated as much. This scene can be overwhelming for someone who's never had their eyes opened to the world of sex, where nearly anything goes. Vasilisa is far from innocent. Aside from the wild shite we've done in private, she's allowed me to finger fuck her and given me a blow job, both with and without an audience. She was not only aroused by the experience, she thrived on it. Tonight, I want to see how she fares with watching instead of being watched. Does she have both voyeur and exhibitionist tendencies

like me?

The club is dimly lit, with red velvet curtains draped over the walls. We venture into the next section of the club that is a bit more risqué than the front section intended to ease beginners into the scene. The air is thick with the scent of sex and sweat. People are scattered throughout the room, engaged in various acts of debauchery. A woman is tied to a wooden cross, her body being whipped by a man in a leather mask. A couple is having sex on a bed in the corner while a group of people watch and masturbate. In the center of the room is a large circle of people engaging in an orgy.

I lead Vasilisa toward the bar, where a bartender with a shaved head and thick build pours drinks.

"Can I help you?" he asks.

"Do you have any liquid courage?" she responds.

"Sure thing. How many shots of tequila would you like?"

He smiles at me knowingly. "Three shots," I answer for her.

He places the three shots in front of us, and I push them toward her.

"This is all you," I inform her.

"Not six this time?" she jokes. "Are you going to do one?"

"I don't need liquid courage." I smirk.

"Touché," she replies. "Can I get a chaser?"

"Chasers are for pussies," I retort. "Besides, after you get the first one down, the other two should be a breeze."

"I remember." She slams all three shots in succession. "Hopefully, there is no running in the morning."

"Not this time," I reassure her.

"Good."

"Let me add two tequila waters," I say to the bartender. "Don't worry. We'll sip on these," I say when her eyes widen at me ordering more drinks.

"So you're going to drink one?"

"Yes. I will drink one of these. Are you ready?" I ask, placing my hand on her lower back. This is the nicest I've been toward her outside of fucking. Hopefully, the tequila will allow me to be more in the moment here with her without being distracted by all the reasons I've resented her.

She nods, and I guide her farther into the room. I hand the bartender a few hundred-dollar bills and indicate for him to keep the tequila waters coming. We're in for the long haul, so we'll need to pace ourselves. I need to be alert and attentive to ensure she has a good experience, but I also need her relaxed

and lucid—not inebriated.

I guide her to a private booth lit by candlelight but with a view of the entire room. We take a seat and sip on our drinks as she slowly scans the room. One particular scene captures her attention.

A tall man with dark hair, a muscular build, and a beard stands in front of an X-cross. A blonde is tied to the cross with her ass facing the audience. The man flicks his tongue over her red ass and runs his hand over her smooth skin. He's making a show of teasing her, preparing her for the fuck she's about to receive.

"Is this some sort of extended foreplay?" she asks.

"Something like that."

"Her ass is an angry red. Can't believe people actually get off on being spanked."

"This club ... or any sex club, is a judge-free zone. People have different kinks. None is right or wrong. That's the beauty of this place—society norms have no place here."

She turns slightly in her seat and faces me. "And what is your kink besides the blood play you mentioned and your obsession with my period?"

"I'm not sure you're ready for that conversation. We haven't even been here an hour," I joke.

"Quite the contrary," she insists. "The tequila is definitely doing its job. I feel relaxed and want to know about your world. Who's the man behind the brooding, ruthless Mafia exterior? Just rip the Band-Aid off."

Her interest is definitely piqued, so I do as she has so eloquently asked ... I rip the Band-Aid off.

I gaze back into her searching eyes. "I'm into domination, erotic asphyxiation, bondage, discipline and punishment, voyeurism, exhibitionism, blood play, and sadism."

"Wow, that's a mouthful," she responds, slowly rubbing her hand over her throat.

"That's what she said."

She lets out the loudest laugh, but then shrinks back into the darkness when she gets the attention from some of the club members. "Sorry," she says, still fighting to regain her composure. "Since when do you have a sense of humor? You've got jokes. That retort was spot-on."

"There is a lot you don't know about me." I smirk. "But you will."

She takes a generous sip of her tequila. "I have to be honest. I don't know

what most things mean in your laundry list of kinks, but you said sadism. Is that like me being a masochist?"

It's not lost on me that she is finally admitting that she may be a masochist. "Sort of, but it's the opposite."

"It means you get off on handing out the humiliation and pain, whereas I like being on the receiving end," she says confidently.

"Exactly. Now you're starting to understand. I don't expect you to learn everything in one night. Tonight is mostly about observing and indulging in the vibe." I turn her chin to refocus on the scene before us. The woman on the cross is being fucked now.

"Wow. He's really giving it to her."

I lean in close to her ear. "Are you wet?" I whisper.

"No," she lies.

"You're lying."

She runs her tongue over her lips.

"Do you want me to find out?" I smirk.

"How will you do that?"

"Like this." I slide off the seat and sink to my knees. She looks around the room, but no one has noticed us. They are too caught up in the scene in front of them or their own activities. She sinks lower in her seat as I tug on her dress. I slowly push the fabric up inch by inch, taking my time to reveal more of her thighs and then her red lace underwear.

I stare at the elastic band before hooking a finger under it and slowly pulling it down to expose her pussy.

"Oh shit," she moans as I push aside her thong and see how very wet she is for the scene she just witnessed. "Someone could see us," she warns breathlessly.

"Have never stopped us before," I retort firmly and lean in to run my tongue over her clit.

Her taste is always better than anything I have ever had before—no metallic taste of blood this time, but just a hint of saltiness at her nub, which makes my cock ache with need even further as it strains painfully against the denim of my jeans. Fuck it, I think to myself, throwing caution to the wind and pulling open my fly with one hand while my other descends between her legs so I can continue tasting this endless fountain of delicious pussy juice. I stroke my cock as I eat her with fervor. We have an audience now, and I want them to hear how loudly I can make her come.

"Oh!" She gasps as her legs start to quiver. "Shit. Oh, shit!" she moans as my tongue hits her clit. She spreads her legs wider so that I can get a better angle on eating her cunt as it throbs beneath my lips and tongue.

Her cries are soon drowned out by the groans of the people watching us as her thighs quiver a little more fiercely and then release their tension in a sudden surge that flows through her body and makes her shiver from head to toe.

"Fuck! Kai!" she pants as she screams out my name. "I'm coming so hard for you."

I plunge my fingers into her soaking wet pussy as I give her clit a light tug and keep licking around it, flicking over the top of it with a firm tongue. "That's it. Come for me like a good girl."

"Holy fuck," she moans, throwing her head back as she continues to ride my face and fingers. Her muscles contract even harder as she rides out her orgasm.

"Damn, sweetheart. That was fucking hot. You put on quite the show," I whisper roughly against her clit as I look up at the people staring back at us and shudder as a wave of pride courses through me at how well she just played to them. My little exhibitionist.

"I wasn't planning on doing anything other than watching tonight and introducing you to the scene, but you've made my cock so hard with that performance," I admit as I tuck my hard dick back into my pants. "I want to move us on to the last and final room. My cock wants a taste of that ass. Do you think you can handle that?"

She pushes a strand of hair behind her ear as she sits up and pulls her dress down, still working to regain her composure. I get up off my knees and rejoin her on the sofa.

"Other than your thumb, I've never had anal, but I'm not opposed to it." She finishes the rest of her drink and gives me a small wink. "Just give me a second to use the ladies' room, and then I'll be ready for whatever tonight brings."

I smack her ass as she gets up. "See you when you get back. We will do as much or as little as you want tonight. Tonight is about you."

And it is. Maybe Lennon was really on to something. Maybe this is exactly what we both needed to move forward ... to find common ground.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Vasilisa

A ai offered to bring us to the next section of the club after giving me my best orgasm to date. Although he hasn't pushed for us to explore any of the kinks he mentioned, venturing farther into the club has to mean exposure to even more advanced debauchery. He wants to fuck me in the ass, and although that will be a first, I'm ready. Tonight feels like we're finally progressing toward something besides the push and pull we're normally consumed with. I excused myself for the briefest moments to freshen up, pee, and call upon the liquid courage aiding me thus far.

Just as I exit the stall, two tall men grab me, one blond and one redhead. Both are decently good looking. I don't put up much of a fight because I foolishly think Kai has sent them —that these men are part of some scene in which we're about to be active participants. My mouth is quickly taped. It isn't until I'm dragged down a narrow hall and out the side of the club into an alley that doubt begins to creep in. An ominous, old white van is backed up to the door, waiting. I'm pushed into the interior.

The inside exudes an air of unease and foreboding, a place where nightmares could be born. A chill runs down my spine, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The dim lighting cast eerie shadows on the walls, enhancing the sense of dread that permeates the air. Where's Kai? The redhead wastes no time zip-tying my ankles together and my arms behind my back. I begin to squirm, but it only earns me an elbow to the ribs.

"Stay fucking still, cunt! Or you won't like the consequences."

The space within the van is cramped and claustrophobic, with barely enough room to move. The walls are covered in a worn, tattered black fabric, stained and discolored over time, hinting at a grim history. The uneven floor creaks ominously under each step, echoing the van's dark secrets.

I try to scream, but the tape muffles my attempts. There were no windows that I could see. The lack of natural light intensifies the gloom, leaving only a single flickering bulb hanging from the ceiling, casting long, distorted shadows across the van. Its erratic illumination creates an unsettling strobe effect, making it difficult to discern the true nature of the van's contents.

The atmosphere is suffocating, as if the very air itself holds a malevolent presence. The scent of musk and decay hangs heavily, mingling with an underlying stench of something far more sinister. It is a smell that speaks of confinement, fear, and despair—a smell that sends more shivers down my spine. This isn't my first time being restrained in a space like this, but somehow a lot scarier. The men exit the van, and I strain to hear what they're saying. What are their plans for me? And is this in relation to my father or to Kai? Both men lead lives that would warrant such vengeance.

Along the walls, various restraints and shackles are bolted, their rusted chains adding to the sense of imprisonment. Hooks and racks hold an assortment of grim tools, their purpose unclear but undoubtedly meant for pain and suffering. I don't feel like a masochist at this moment. The sight of them makes me thankful for the mere zip ties the men chose to restrain me, but each object is a macabre testament to the van's horrifying purpose.

I cling closer to the back door of the van as my eyes roam the cramped space. I see a stained mattress in the corner. Its frayed edges and worn-out springs hint at countless nights of torment. The sheets are disheveled and stained, evoking a sense of dread and recalling the unfortunate souls who had been confined here, their screams swallowed by the van's soundproofed walls.

This interior seems to hold infinite hidden compartments, each harboring its own malevolent secrets. The thought of what could be concealed within them is enough to make bile rise in my throat. The darkness thrives, and the unknown lurks in every shadowy recess.

I fall against the locked door as the van lurches forward. We're moving ... leaving the club. My mind races with terror, wondering what fate awaits me at the end of this journey. The men remain silent as they drive, their eyes focused on the road ahead. I strain to see where we're going, but grime covers the glass separating the back from the front of the van and offers no view of the outside world.

As we continue, my thoughts turn to Kai. Was he involved in this? Had

he led me into a trap? The reason for his sudden cordialness? Or was this some other twisted plot altogether? My heart pounds in my chest as I realize I may never know the answers to these questions.

Suddenly, the van comes to a screeching halt. The sound echoes through the enclosed space, sending my nerves further into overdrive. The redhead turns around to face me, his eyes gleaming with malice.

"Time to get out," he sneers.

The blond opens the back of the van, revealing a dark, deserted alleyway. My stomach drops as I realize this is where they plan to take me. I try to squirm away as they grab my arms and pull me out of the van, but their grip is too strong.

The alley smells of garbage and filth, with rats scurrying along the walls and dumpsters overflowing with trash. It's a place where no one would want to be caught alone, especially not with these two men. They push me toward an old metal door at the end of the alley. My heart races as we approach it, wondering what horrors lay ahead on the other side. One of them knocks on the door, three sharp raps that echo through the narrow space.

A moment later, it swings open, and a figure steps out from the darkness. It's a woman, tall and pale with jet-black hair that falls in loose waves around her shoulders. She's dressed in nothing but a tight black dress that hugs every curve of her body.

"Welcome," she purrs, her voice low and sultry. "I've been expecting you."

My mind races as I try to make sense of the situation. Who is this woman? What does she want with me? And why did these men bring me here?

The woman steps aside and gestures for us to enter. Reluctantly, I take a small step forward, my heart pounding with fear and anticipation. The impatient men drag me inside, and the door slams shut behind us with an ominous thud.

I find myself in a room, similar to the van but on a grander scale. The walls are lined with metal chains and shackles, and various tools hang from hooks and racks scattered throughout the space. In the center of the room stands a large wooden table, stained with what appears to be dried blood. The woman motions for us to approach the table, and my captors shove me forward until I'm standing before it. The woman circles me, her eyes tracing every inch of my body.

"Such a pretty little thing," she murmurs, running her fingers through my hair. "It would be such a shame to waste you, but unfortunately, you only have until I'm given the word."

My mind swirls with fear and confusion as I stare up at her. Who is she? What does she want from me?

Suddenly, I feel a sharp pain at the base of my skull, and everything goes black.

When I come to, I'm lying on the wooden table, my arms and legs bound by heavy chains. The woman stands at the foot of the table, her black dress now replaced with a blood-stained apron.

"Welcome back," she says with a smile. "I hope you slept well."

I struggle against my restraints, but they hold me fast. The woman leans over me, her breath hot against my ear.

"You see," she continues, "you're going to be a star in my little show. You're going to be the main attraction, and I promise it will be a performance to die for."

A wave of dread washes over me as I realize what she means. She's going to kill me and make a spectacle of it.

But why? What have I done to deserve this?

As if reading my thoughts, the woman speaks again.

"Don't worry," she says. "It's not personal. It's just business."

She disappears from view, and I hear the sound of metal grinding against metal. When she returns, she's holding a large bone saw in one hand and a scalpel in the other.

"Now then," she says with a smirk. "Shall we begin?"

"Wait," the blond speaks up. "I just got a call. He wants us to hold but keep the live stream running. Her father is arranging to get the money now. Once we have it, you may proceed however you wish."

So all of this is because of my father? Why am I not surprised? A lone tear escapes and runs down my cheek. I hate visible signs of weakness, but I'm unable to wipe it away. More tears fall from mere frustration.

"Well, in the meantime, I have shit I can be doing. I'm not going to babysit her for the cameras while she cries. It's pathetic," the woman scoffs.

She turns and exits the room, and the two men who took me follow her out. I'm thankful for the reprieve, however long it may last. If these are my last moments, I want this chance to reflect on my life without an audience. I never imagined that this would be how it all ends.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

he first twenty minutes pass, and I assume there may be a line for the ladies' room. Tonight's clientele is way more than I'm used to at the New York club, even for a Saturday night. Another ten minutes go by and I question if I'd given an inkling of trust too soon. Did Vasilisa just bail on me ... use this opportunity to run back to her father?

My hackles rise at the potential of another betrayal. This will not end well for her or her family. *Goddammit*. I push away from the table and begin my search through the club before my murderous thoughts consume me. Did she head straight to the innermost section of the club where I told her we were going next? It's not likely, but I scan the area anyway so that I may disregard it as a possibility. It takes me an additional twenty minutes to search the rest of the club. She's not here. I check my phone and don't have any waiting messages or missed calls. She doesn't have my number or a phone because we didn't get that far in this trial of a truce. She just fucking obliterated any chance of that, and I will never be able to trust her now.

She had to know that I'd go straight to her father's place. Sacramento is about an hour and a half from here. She's had almost an hour head start. She can't be this naive. Her father no longer has a say or a right to protect her from me. He gave her to me the second he shook my hand. He and his Bratva had our alliance and protection from that very moment. If he tries to abed her, I will bring down the wrath upon his entire syndicate.

I head to retrieve my car from valet, my mind ablaze with thoughts of betrayal and retribution. As soon as the lanky guy opens my car door for me, I quickly get inside. The car is still purring. I pass him a hundred-dollar bill before I peel away from the curb. The darkened streets blur by as I push my

Bugatti within the city limits, my anger fueling my determination. Once I reach the highway, I open her up to nearly her top speed.

I pick up my phone to warn Lennon of the shite storm brewing and how this night may play out if her family tries to back out of our arrangement. My phone rings through the speaker of the car before I can prompt a voice command to call my brother. It's Vladimir... Vasilisa's father.

"You better be calling to tell me that you're prepared to hand your daughter over to me when I get there," I bark before he gets a single syllable out.

"She's not here, Kai," he says, his voice frantic.

"Bullshite. If she's not there yet, then she's on her way. My guess is that she already reached out to you. Otherwise, how would you know that she's not currently with me? What other reason would you have to call? I'm on my way to fucking Sacramento now."

"She's been taken," he says shakenly. "I was calling you to confirm that she wasn't with you. I got a warning call a few minutes ago demanding that I fork over ten million dollars and any claim that I have over businesses here. They want access to my not so legal operations as well as the businesses that I have an understanding with."

My fucking pulse quickens. Is this tied to the Liam and Shane shite? Shane is on the run, is this his way of extorting money to pay his debt? I don't have time to weigh out all the possible scenarios. Did I just fuck up again by letting Liam go?

"Where are you now?" I ask, trying to think logically. Vengeance will have to take a short seat. I need to find Vasilisa now.

"I'm in my bedroom. Not sure who sent them, but I have two American goons standing guard until morning. They took my phone and scanned for all electronics to confiscate, but they missed my burner phone. I'm buying time. I told them I had to wait until morning to gain access to withdraw from my safety deposit box. They took me at my word after making me open my home safe, which was my dummy safe."

"Smart thinking. I can use the stalled time to try to find where they're holding Vasilisa."

"Yes. It's the reason I called you. Please find her, Kai."

"Try to give me as much time as you can without getting her killed. For right now, we have a marginal upper hand. Let's try to keep it that way. Turn the burner off in case they run another scan. Just know it's being handled."

"Should I make a call to some of my most trusted men? They've already managed to take out my men at the estate, but they took my phone so I couldn't reach my sons or the rest of my Bratva—or call the police," he says as an afterthought.

"Fuck no!" I all but yell. "There are no 'most trusted men' right now. Trust nobody. They're using Americans to hide their affiliations, but if they were able to easily subdue your security, you're definitely looking at an inside job. Just turn the fucking burner off. We don't need any additional obstacles."

I click off without saying anything further. I know firsthand about inside jobs and betrayal, and this reeks of it. I call Lennon. Shite is about to go down.

"What the actual fuck, brother? It's nearly one in the morning. Do you have a lead that can't wait?"

"Vasilisa was taken."

"Shite," he says, the grogginess disappearing from his voice. "When? Where? From your estate?"

"Two hours ago ... from a club," I reply. "Shite is spiraling right now."

I quickly run through tonight's turn of events with him. "I'm fueling up the private jet, and I'm on my way. In fucking hindsight, we shouldn't have let Liam go so easily. I will put some of our men on it to track him down. Any leads so far?" Lennon asks.

"No. Vladimir didn't have anything. I'm turning around and heading back to the club to see if I can retrieve some footage."

"Keep me posted. I'm on my way, and I'm bringing backup."

It only takes me thirty minutes to arrive back at the club. I instruct the same valet guy not to move my car—that I'd be right out. Once inside, I demand to speak with management. A short, robust guy with graying hair combed over his bald spot appears. I provide a CliffsNotes version of tonight's fucking disaster and demand to see their recorded footage.

"I wish I could be of more service, but due to the nature of the club, privacy is of the utmost importance."

"Fuck their privacy. A woman was taken from your club, and you're not concerned? I'm sure that will bode well for publicity. I will rain down on this place, and you won't get any business," I yell. Some of the clientele in the club are starting to take notice. My anger is starting to boil over, but I adjust my approach. "I'm not asking for all of your footage. Just the part where Vasilisa got taken. It was about two hours ago," I growl.

The manager looks like he's about to refuse again, but then he seems to think better of it. "Alright, alright. Follow me," he grumbles, leading me to a back room with a computer and multiple screens.

He starts clicking away at the keyboard until the camera footage comes up on the screen. I see a white van in the alley backed up to the side door. Vasilisa is mostly hidden by the open back door of the van, but I catch a brief glimpse of her just as she is being shoved in. The side of the van reads Stevenson Plumbing, but I'm sure the name is fictitious.

"Can you zoom in on the license plate?" I ask as the screen shows the van driving away. I'm not holding my breath that it's registered, but I'm not leaving a single stone unturned.

The manager nods and makes some adjustments before we can see the plate clearly. I snap a photo with my phone before thanking him and leaving the room.

I pull out my own burner phone and dial Jacob back in New York. "I need you to get as much information as you can on this license plate number ASAP," I say, immediately reading off the combination of letters and numbers when he answers.

"On it, Kai," he says without hesitation.

I have nothing to go on and the wait to hear back from Jacob is nerve wracking. Guilt gnaws at me for assuming the worst—assuming that Vasilisa betrayed me and used my efforts to run. Only thing that brings me a little reprieve is knowing they won't kill her as long as they're still waiting for their ransom, but the clock on her life is ticking.

Finally, my phone rings, and it's Jacob. "What did you find?" I ask, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice.

"The business name is fictitious, as I'm sure you suspected, but the stolen plate belongs to a rental van. The company is based in Sacramento. The license plate was reported stolen two days ago. The idiot was caught on tape removing the plates from the rental by a man named Jack Briggs."

"Any other information on him?"

"I'm cross-referencing his identity in our databases now for other crimes he may have committed."

"Yeah, do that and keep me posted." I hang up and start pacing. Jack Briggs. It could be a fake name, but it's something to go on.

I decide to head to my estate and call Lennon back. I need to know if he has any solid leads on Liam. Unfortunately, he fills me in on what little

progress they've made. "We've got eyes on Liam's usual spots but no sign of him yet."

I fill him in on what I discovered at the club, including the discovery of the license plate as well as locking down the name of the man responsible. "Jacob traced it back to a rental company in Sacramento," I say, taking a deep breath. "Hold on a sec, he's calling me back."

"That was quick. What have you got?" I ask Jacob, hoping he has a new lead.

"I ran the Jack Briggs alias in our database from my laptop. I was able to triangulate a few properties that he's been associated with. Of the three, one is located in Sacramento and one is located in San Francisco. I'm sending you the addresses now. I hope this helps."

"It's a huge help. Thank you for being expeditious with this. It's very time sensitive."

"No problem, man. I'll let you know when I get more leads on your pops."

I hang up the phone with Jacob and immediately call my brother back. "What's your ETA? I have a good lead on where Vasilisa is being held." I tell him of the two locations Jacob sent, but given how quickly Vladimir got the call and how close the San Francisco address is to the club, my best guess is that they're holding her there.

"I'm still quite a bit away. I'll touch down in San Francisco around five in the morning. That's still before the banks open and before Vladimir would be expected to retrieve money from his safety deposit box. And if she is not at the first location, we'd still have time to make it to the second location before banking hours."

"You have a point," I agree. "How many of our soldiers are you bringing with you?"

"Including me, we will have a small army of ten."

"Okay, I just arrived back at my estate. I have my five remaining men here, so including me, that will bump up our numbers to sixteen. That will have to do. I can't involve Vladimir's men at all. I don't know which of them I could trust. Our surprise attack is the only advantage we have."

"I couldn't agree more. We can't risk anyone giving these fuckers a headsup we're coming. Do you want to divide and conquer?"

"What do you mean? Send eight men to the Sacramento address in case we get it wrong the first time?"

"Yeah, two birds, one stone."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea. We're going in blind, so we have no idea what opposition we'll meet with their numbers. Our odds are the greatest with sixteen."

"That's one way to look at it," Lennon says. "But our surprise attack may tip them off if we get it wrong. I'm sure they're running a feed to all of their locations. They would have at least an hour to move her before we could drive to the second address. We can't fly because the trip to and from the hangar would add even more time."

"Fuck! You're right."

"I will have our pilot drop me and one of our soldiers off to meet up with you before bringing the remaining eight men to the address we provide. They will hold and be our eyes while we attack the first location. If she isn't there, we will give them the green light to charge forward—no waiting. They will falsely assume they have a short window to move ... and won't expect an immediate second attack."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I nod even though he can't see me over the phone, feeling the weight of the situation settle heavily on my shoulders. "Okay, let's do it. I hope she's at the first address. It would make things a whole lot less complicated."

"Couldn't agree more, but we'll prepare for both scenarios," he promises before hanging up.

I SPEND THE NEXT FEW HOURS PREPARING MYSELF MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY for what's to come. I gather my tactical gear and brief my men on the plan. I open my laptop and download the schematics for both addresses so we know the warehouse layouts beforehand.

We load up into our vehicles and drive in silence to the San Francisco address just before five. As we near the destination, my heart races as adrenaline floods my veins. This is it. I hope for zero casualties ... for my men anyway. We plan to decimate every single motherfucker in that building —no hesitation. Once we have Vasilisa back safe, because there is no alternative, she will need to learn to defend herself to give her the best odds of survival in our underworld.

WE PARK A FEW BLOCKS AWAY FROM THE LOCATION, AND ONCE LENNON AND our extra man arrive, we wait the hour until the soldiers for the second address send word that they're in position. Once given the green light, we begin our approach on foot, moving with stealth and precision. As we near the building, I can see the tension etched into every muscle of my men's faces.

WE REACH THE ENTRANCE, AND I NOD TO LENNON, WHO TAKES POINT, readying his weapon. With one swift motion, he kicks the door open, and we flood inside, guns ready.

The room appears empty, but then several shots ring through the air as someone fires at us from behind a stack of crates.

WE RETURN FIRE, MOVING QUICKLY TO TAKE COVER AS BULLETS ECHO through the air. My heart pounds in my chest as I try to pinpoint our enemy's location. Several more shots join in as we take out men left and right. I've lost a tally of the body count. We move from room to room, never ceasing fire. The warehouse is dimly lit, so our night-vision goggles give us an added advantage in addition to our thermal-imaging sensor. Their body heat gives us their location in hiding.

Suddenly, a feminine scream cuts through the chaos. My adrenaline soars. I'd know that voice anywhere. Its nuance is engrained into my brain.

"Vasilisa!" I shout so that she can keep screaming, guiding me to where she is being kept. I charge forward in the direction of her cry.

"Vasilisa!" I shout again, this time getting closer. My shoulder slams into a man's abdomen, and I twist my weapon to fire. My goggles' vision is muddled with his blood, but I make out the silhouette of another one

of our enemies who falls to his doom from a shot above us. A hand latches on violently to my neck, but I quickly swing my weapon behind me and squeeze the trigger—taking him down before he can squeeze even tighter and crush my windpipe. Someone releases gas, but we're prepared. I don't see Lennon. However, I know he can hold his own.

I REACH INTO MY VEST AND PULL OUT A GAS MASK BEFORE INHALING DEEPLY—causing my chest to rise and fall immensely as the adrenaline threatens to take over. I'm nearly out of breath by the time I pull open the door, seeing her at last.

She's lying on a wooden table in four point restraints. I waste no time in freeing her. I need to find a way out of here without bringing her through the gunfire. God forbid a stray bullet ruin our efforts to rescue her. I wrap her in my arms and spin us away from the camera that may be still live streaming.

"Thank you for finding me," she tries to say, but her words are barely coherent due to her distress.

The Gas now fills this room, and I don't have a mask for her. I quickly remove mine and place it over her face before running to the nearest window. I bust out the glass with the butt of my gun and clear the shards as best as I can. After consuming a few breaths of fresh air, I look around to see what I could use for padding. Fuck! There's nothing. I stand Vasilisa on her feet long enough to climb halfway out the window. With my arse on the windowsill, I reach for Vasilisa to pull her onto my lap.

Once I have her secured, I jump down the single story, cradling her tight. My steel-toed boots crunch against the glass beneath my feet. I have

just enough time to push her back against the building before shots ring out the window from which we just came. I return fire, hitting the guy right between the eyes. I scoop Vasilisa over my shoulders and make a run toward where we're parked.

She sniffles but nods her understanding. When I return, I spot Lennon and some of our men running toward me as sirens sound in the near distance.

"We have to go," he says, his voice urgent. I count, and we're missing two men. "They didn't make it," he says, answering my unspoken question.

WE PILE INTO THE SUBURBAN AND SPEED OFF. VASILISA FINALLY ALLOWS herself to get off the floor and onto the back seat. As we drive, I can feel her trembling with fear and shock next to me. A foreign feeling aches in my chest seeing her so vulnerable. I want to comfort her, but right now we need to get out of this area and make sure we're not being followed. Once we're at a safe distance, I relax a bit. Lennon is already calling the other men to tell them to abort ... that we have Vasilisa.

"Are you hurt?" I ask, assessing her for any injuries.

SHE SHAKES HER HEAD, TEARS STREAMING DOWN HER FACE. "No, JUST scared," she admits in a tremulous voice. "That woman was going to saw me into pieces. I think they have my father."

I LOOK INTO HER EYES AND GIVE THE ONLY COMFORT THAT I'M CAPABLE OF. "You're safe now," I promise. "Lennon is already sending the men we have in Sacramento to rescue your father."

SHE LOOKS AT ME WITH WIDE EYES FILLED WITH GRATITUDE AND SOMETHING else that I can't quite place. It's like she's seeing me for the first time, really seeing me. And I can't help but feel a flicker of something deep inside me in response. I won't read too much into it. Emotions are high right now.

As we journey back to my estate to await word on Vasilisa's father, my mind races with tonight's events. The loss of two of our men weighs heavily on me, as does the fact Vasilisa was taken in the first place. Someone set us up, and we won't stop until we find out who. Within the hour, we are told that our men in Sacramento have subdued the few men that were left to sit on Vladimir. He's safe for now, but he will need to beef up his security. He needs answers as much as we do. Without knowing who the enemy is, they can be lying in wait within his domain. Now that he knows his daughter is safe, he is going off grid for a few days with Vasilisa's brothers.

We pull up to my estate. Vasilisa is waking up just before we do. When she reaches for her seat belt, I release it for her. My body aches with the need to hold her again, but tonight is not the night for that. As if to protest, my cock throbs in its confines, begging for more than just to hold her. I need to reset things back to the way they were before she was taken. I need her to look at me the way she does, not knowing she's giving away the feelings she has developed for me. I pat her hand that rests in mine and quickly withdraw, knowing that contact with her will only lead to other things . . . things that will lead to activities she isn't ready for. I can't be a douche with her tonight.

She fastens her gaze on mine. Her eyes are sleepy with fatigue, yet they still burn my soul with their intensity.

"THANK YOU, KAI," SHE SAYS SOFTLY. "FOR RESCUING ME YET AGAIN. AND for rescuing my father."

I NOD. "GO TO SLEEP." SHE IS OUT BEFORE SHE CAN SAY ANOTHER WORD.

My throat tightens as I watch her in the dim lights of the Suburban. It's been so long since I've felt anything close to love or desire for someone other than Persephone. But even though this feels different, I'm not ready to put a label on it yet. I find myself feeling very protective of Vasilisa and want nothing else but to keep her safe— from everything and anything that may bring harm to her. Yet, for how I feel about her, a part of me still knows so little about her —like her childhood, but I intend to dig deeper. It's almost imperative now to know everything about her past to ensure I can protect her future. Maybe I can even get answers on her sister's death if that will provide her closure once and for all.

As our suburban pulls up to the circular drive of my estate, I can't help but feel the weight of responsibility on my shoulders for both Vasilisa and her father. We pledged our alliance to their family, and it's up to me and my clan to keep them safe. Once we come to a stop, I lift Vasilisa out of the SUV in a fireman's carry and bring her to my bedroom—one I haven't shared with her up to this point. I gave her the room initially to be strategic by having her consumed with thoughts of me. She wouldn't be able to look around that room and not be reminded of me. I took the guest room next door.

[&]quot;Get some rest," I tell her as she stirs. I tuck her into my bed.

"We'll talk more tomorrow."

She nods sleepily and curls up under the blankets. I watch her for a moment longer before turning to leave the room. I make my way down the hallway, my mind drifting back to the events of the night. We were able to rescue her but at a cost. Two of our men are dead, and there's still no word on who set us up. The fucked-up thing is that we had no time to retrieve their bodies before the police came. I make my way down to my office, where Lennon and our men that was with us at the San Francisco address are waiting. Our men from the Sacramento location are en route to join us here.

"Anything?" I ask as soon as I enter the room. Lennon shakes his head. "Nothing yet. We've been looking into everyone that may have had a motive, but so far, no leads. We still haven't located Liam. We have no idea if Vasilisa's abduction is Russian related or someone trying to block our efforts of marrying into their family to strengthen our numbers."

I GRIT MY TEETH IN FRUSTRATION. "WE HAVE TO KEEP DIGGING. OUR retribution is time sensitive. The ransom request was likely a ploy to throw us off track. Of course they wanted the money and connections too, but by using Americans, they didn't want it traced back to any syndicate in particular."

LENNON NODS IN AGREEMENT. "EXACTLY!"

We're discussing our next move, but my mind keeps wandering back to Vasilisa. The way she looked at me in the Suburban, the way her body fit perfectly in my arms ... I shake my head to clear my thoughts. Things are changing between us, and it's a distraction right now.

The NIGHT WEARS ON, AND WE CONTINUE DISCUSSING HOW WE CAN investigate. When our other men arrive, I take a break and check on her. I make my way back up to my bedroom and find her still sound asleep. I sit by her bedside and watch her for a moment. Her features are peaceful in the soft glow of the moonlight filtering through the window. With all that she's endured tonight, I'm glad she's able to rest.

Suddenly, she stirs again and opens her eyes, looking up at me with a mix of confusion and gratitude.

"What are you doing in here?" she asks softly. "You never stay."

"I just wanted to check on you," I reply, my voice low.

She smiles faintly and reaches out to touch my hand. "Okay. Just knowing you're here makes me feel safe."

I cover her hand with mine and feel a jolt of electricity shoot through me at our contact. If I have anything to do with it, she'll never be this vulnerable again. She needs to learn how to protect herself in the event I'm not around.

I LEAN CLOSER TO HER AND BRUSH A STRAND OF HAIR AWAY FROM HER FACE. As I do, her hand moves to my cheek. The touch of her fingers is like fire on my skin, and it takes every ounce of willpower in me not to take her into my arms.

"You don't have to worry," I tell her softly. "You're safe now."

She smiles again and closes her eyes, her hand falling away from My cheek. For a moment, I just watch her sleep, taking in every detail of her features. She's beautiful even when she's asleep, and I can't deny the attraction or the foreign feeling that holds me captive every time I see her petite frame in my bed.

But now is not the time for those thoughts. We have work to do, and until we find out who set us up, there can be no distractions.

I STAND AND LEAN OVER HER TO PRESS A SOFT KISS TO HER FOREHEAD.

"You're safe," I whisper again before turning to leave the room. I think I need to hear those words just as much as she does.

I HEAD DOWN TO MY OFFICE, WHERE WE'RE FACED WITH MORE QUESTIONS than answers. "We found Liam," Lennon shouts as soon as I re-enter.

My attention snaps to Lennon immediately. "Where is he?" I ask, my tone clipped.

"He's being held by some of Vladimir's Bratva," Lennon says grimly. "They've gone rogue and want to make a deal."

I CLENCH MY JAW, KNOWING THAT NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE ENEMY ARE NEVER

easy or straightforward. "What's their offer?"

"They want us to hand over Vasilisa," Lennon says, his expression dark. "My guess is that their betrayal was intended to thwart Valdmir's efforts to let someone who isn't Russian marry into their organization."

THEY'VE SADLY MISCALCULATED THEIR LEVERAGE. LIAM WAS ONE OF OUR own until he betrayed us. Hell, this could still be an act of betrayal. He may be working with them. His fate is a lot better off with them if that's the case.

"We need more information," Lennon says finally. " Not that we'd ever give those fuckers what they want, but to see if Liam is in on this with them."

"Exactly," I second. My gut is that this whole thing with Liam and Shane is too coincidental, and I don't believe in coincidences."

I pull out my burner phone to contact Vladimir on the one our men gave him to keep him updated. I tell him he has a mutiny on his hands, but I'm unsure how many of his men are involved. When some of our men tried to take this same approach, we had mass casualties on our hands ... and from our hands. You have to sever the head of the snake before it has an opportunity to do more damage.

"You need to find out who is involved," I say into the speaker. "If you think your core members are safe, then it's possible they targeted this endeavor knowing one of us would step forward to help."

"I'M ON IT," VLADIMIR RESPONDS THROUGH THE PHONE.

I end my call and look up at Lennon. "We can't rely on Vladimir to find out who was behind this."

"Agreed," Lennon states. "The only way we're going to know for sure is if we rescue Liam to question him ourselves."

I NOD IN AGREEMENT. "We'll have to move fast. The longer we wait, the more likely they are to kill him to keep him quiet."

Lennon nods, and we quickly start strategizing our plan of attack. We'll need to assemble our men once again, but it's risky. We can't afford to lose any more men.

As we go over our plan, my mind keeps drifting back to Vasilisa. I can't help but worry about her safety and what might happen if we fail. We need to wrap this up as quickly as possible so we can focus on keeping her safe.

"We need to move now," Lennon says, his voice firm.

WE NEVER GET OUT OF THE DOOR. THE NEXT CALL WE GET IS THAT LIAM HAS been executed. We're too late. It's their move, and we can only wait to see what that will be because one thing is for certain. There will be another move.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Vasilisa

I scream out into the darkness, sitting up with a start. It takes me a moment to realize I'm safe. I'm in Kai's bed where he left me. Of course I knew he wouldn't stay. He, his brother, and their men have been in his office all night, likely trying to decipher who was behind my abduction and their attempt to extort my father. The clock on the nightstand reads a little after four. The sun has yet to rise.

I draw my knees up to my chest and begin to rock. My nightmare seems so real. My sister was there, and I was back at Club Luxe. She was trying to show me something. My heart begins to race, and my breathing becomes erratic.

Kai barges through the door. "Is everything alright? Samuel came by the office and reported he heard you screaming."

I don't answer. I can't breathe. Realization pierces through the fog from last night, and it's too much. Tears begin to stream down my eyes. Kai turns on the light and pulls me onto his lap. "Talk to me, Vasilisa. What is it?"

"Vikkkkkkktorrr," I manage to get out.

"What about him?" I can feel his muscles tense around me.

I work to bring my breathing under control. It's been a long time since I've had a panic attack. Lennon bursts through the door.

"Is everything all right?" he asks Kai.

"I don't know," Kai admits as I'm still rocking in his arms. "She said Viktor's name, but that's all I've been able to get out of her."

"She's hyperventilating. I think she's having a panic attack," Lennon assesses. "Look at me, Vasilisa. Slow down your breathing. Take some slow deep breaths. You're safe."

Lennon demonstrates how he wants me to breathe in and out, and I try. I really try, but I'm struggling to calm myself down.

"Fuck this," Kai says. He lays me back on the bed, and at first, I think he's going to leave me there.

He crawls on top of me and pulls me into his arms before he begins to kiss me. It's awkward at first with my rapid breathing, but he doesn't relent. He deepens the kiss as he wraps my legs around his waist. I can feel his hardness pressed against me. "Breathe for me, baby," he whispers at the shell of my ear, his breath a soft caress. He returns to kissing me, and my core ignites. The feeling is too intimate.

"Or that." Lennon laughs. "I'll see you back in the office."

Did he just call me baby? I can feel my breathing begin to slow. "There you go, baby. Listen to my voice. I've got you. You're safe," he says, his voice more soothing than I've ever heard.

I pull him tighter and begin to cry. Full-on cry. I believe him. My tears are not from fear ... they're from recognizing my heart officially belongs to him, and I'm ready to trust him to keep me safe. They're tears of relief that I can let go of all the weight I've been holding on to.

Kai continues to hold me as I cry until I finally calm down. He brushes my hair away from my face and kisses my forehead. "You're okay now, milseán," he whispers.

I nod, feeling emotionally exhausted but also strangely reassured. "Thank you," I manage to say.

He sits up and pulls me with him, his eyes searching mine. "Did you have a nightmare?"

"I did," I admit. "But a memory too. My sister was in my dream, and I was back at Club Luxe, but she helped me remember something important."

"What did you remember?"

"Viktor was there. He saw me get taken, and he didn't stop the men. He was in the corridor when they threw me in the van."

"What? Are you sure? You're just saying this now?"

"It was a flash. I wasn't even sure that it was him. At first, I thought the men were participants in a scene you were setting up for us. Only in my dream, I can see Viktor as clear as day. That short glimpse before is engrained into my memory now. It was him, Kai."

Kai's jaw twitches, and I know he's trying to keep his composure. "I'll take care of it," he says, voice low and dangerous. "I won't let anyone hurt

you again."

"Kai," I say softly, catching his attention. "What are you going to do?"

"First, I'm going to verify, for your peace of mind, that he was actually at the club. And when I do, I'm going to find him," he says firmly. "If he was in on your abduction, that means he's also working with your father's men who have gone rogue."

"Wait. My father's men participated in this?"

"Yes. They wanted to ensure that your father didn't form an alliance with us. They were trying to prevent us from getting married."

"This was some simple abduction mission," I tell him. "The woman there was told she could kill me after they got their money from my father. That means that Viktor would have been okay with that plan."

"I will get to the bottom of this," he promises. "Just know that you're safe. Try to go back to sleep. I have lots planned for you later this morning."

"Plans?"

"You'll see. Get some rest."

He places the cover back over me before exiting the room. I wasn't sure that I could go back to sleep after that discovery, but I feel my eyes begin to grow heavy. I don't fight it. I let the sleep take me under.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I spend the first part of the morning filling in Lennon and the guys of what Vasilisa revealed to me. I need to be sure that Viktor was actually there to tie in his involvement with Vladimir's men, but his fate remains the same. He spoke of harming Persephone, so the plan was always to kill him, just now with even more justification. I doubt the manager of Club Luxe would voluntarily give me access to anymore footage, so we'll just have to take it. Seamus knows a guy who is an expert at hacking, so I've given him the task of getting me that footage. I also need whatever info I can get on the death of Vasilisa's twin, so I call Jacob. Not all of his means are above board, but if I can start a side investigation of who killed her sister, that may give her some closure. It would be the final piece to put her acts against Persephone behind us. While Jacob and Seamus work to do what they do best, I head out to meet Vasilisa in the gardens of my estate. It's not as vast as the grounds of her father's estate, but it's plenty big for this lesson.

As I stand before Vasilisa, her eyes fill with determination and a hint of trepidation. Real or not, as my future wife, it is my duty to teach her the skills necessary to protect herself, even against the most formidable opponents. She will never be someone's easy target again. I need to know that she could hold her own in my absence. We stand in the center of my estate grounds, surrounded by tall trees and the soft whisper of the wind. The sun casts dappled shadows upon the ground, as if nature itself is eager to witness this pivotal turn in our lives of me actually helping her. I walk her through some defensive stances before expecting a return demonstration in a minute.

"Are you ready?" I ask, my voice steady but firm. She nods, her hands fidgeting with nervous anticipation. I take a deep breath, trying to calm the

storm of ambivalent emotions within me. She tried to hurt someone I care about, yet I've finally been able to move past that. I vowed to give her a second chance, so this is our new start. I want her to be prepared. I can't shield her from the harsh realities of the underworld— the risks that come with being married to a man like me.

I walk toward her, our eyes lock in an unspoken understanding. I raise my arm, signaling her to take the defensive stance I just demonstrated. "Remember, the key to self-defense is confidence and awareness," I say, my voice resonating with conviction. "You must be aware of your surroundings and trust in your abilities."

I begin by teaching her the basic footwork, emphasizing the importance of maintaining balance and staying light on her feet. We move in synchrony, our steps echoing each other's as if we were destined to dance this deadly waltz together. With each passing moment, her confidence grows, her movements becoming more fluid and purposeful.

Next, I introduce her to the concept of blocking and parrying. I show her how to position her arms and hands to deflect incoming strikes, explaining the importance of timing and precision. She mimics my actions, her determination shining through her focused gaze. She is a quick learner, absorbing every technique like a parched desert absorbing the rain.

Then comes the time to teach her offensive maneuvers. I demonstrate a series of strikes—punches, kicks, and elbow strikes—and explain the vulnerable areas of the human body. Her eyes widen with realization as she comprehends the impact of a well-placed blow. She practices relentlessly, her fists hitting the air with a newfound strength.

Brute force alone is not enough to ensure her safety. I guide her toward understanding the power of her voice, teaching her how to project authority and instill fear in potential attackers. We practice shouting commands and rehearse scenarios where she must assert herself against an aggressive opponent.

As the training session progresses, I introduce weapons into the equation. I show her how to handle a knife, emphasizing the importance of control and accuracy. She listens attentively, her eyes fixed on my every move. Together, we engage in simulated combat.

Throughout the lesson, I constantly remind her of the importance of mental fortitude and staying calm under pressure. I want her to understand that strength comes not just from physical prowess but also from the depths of her determination.

Finally, as the sun begins its descent, we reach the culmination of our training. Vasilisa stands before me, sweat trickling down her brow, her chest heaving with exertion. But there is something else in her eyes, a glimmer I have not seen before. It's a sense of pride, a newfound confidence that comes from knowing she is capable of being more than just a princess.

"Thank you," she whispers, her voice hoarse from the training. "I have to admit that I wouldn't have guessed that this is what you meant when you said you had plans for me, but I'm glad we spent the day doing this. It helps to know that I can rely on myself too. I don't have to be a victim, so again ... thank you."

I nod. I know her appreciation is genuine. "You did well, Vasilisa. You have the potential to be a formidable opponent should some arsehole corner you again."

She mimics my nod, a sense of accomplishment in her eyes. "Yeah, I feel for the person who mistakes me as an easy target."

I chuckle, slightly amused by the return of her sassiness. "That's right," I encourage. "But remember, this is just the beginning. Self-defense is a lifelong journey, and it requires dedication and practice."

"I understand. Rome wasn't built in one day, right?"

"Yeah, something like that."

We make our way back toward my estate, the evening breeze carrying the scent of blooming flowers. As we walk, I can't help but feel a change in Vasilisa—a change in our forced relationship. It's been transforming for a while now, but it's even more prevalent today. Despite our rocky start, she is beginning to prove that with a little discipline from me and the separation from a family that has always coddled her, she has the potential to be a woman of substance.

"Can I ask you something?" she says, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

"Maybe," I reply, my own uncertainty rearing its head.

"I was wondering ... why did you really agree to marry me, and will I ever get a ring?" she asks, her eyes searching mine for an answer. "I get the appeal from my father's perspective, but not yours. Why not marry an Irish woman, or anyone else for that matter? Why me? What does your family stand to gain from ours?"

"That's not something I wish to get into at the moment. We've had a successful day. Let's not tarnish it with the veil of our obligations."

"So I'm an obligation?"

"Yes. We're an obligation to each other for different reasons, but still out of duty. We have a chance to make this arrangement something we both can live with, but that truth isn't going anywhere, so it's best we let it lie where it be."

Her shoulders drop with disappointment, but she doesn't push further. That one question has officially overshadowed the productiveness of our day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A couple of days go by before we get the call. Lennon and our men are still here at my estate, nobody willing to go back home until this shite with Viktor is resolved. We have too many loose ends for comfort, but finally Seamus has news. We all gather in my office at seven in the morning, ready to do whatever is necessary.

"Viktor was definitely there that night at Club Luxe," Seamus begins. "In fact, he owns that location. The two men who abducted Vasilisa were seen on tape talking to Viktor ten minutes prior."

"Vladimir said that they demanded money and his connections. This was never about Vasilisa. They were going to dispose of her," I growl. "Viktor is now heir to the Sokolov Bratva in Russia. My guess is that they want to extinguish Vladimir's Mikhailov Bratva to rule here in the States, starting on his turf."

"That was my exact thoughts, brother," Lennon agrees. "And he was using the pretense of blocking you from marrying Vasilisa to get Vladimir's own men on board."

"That or they were willing to jump ship to be in favor with the new Russian power. Either way, they all need to pay with their life," I point out.

"Exactly. This alliance was important to our numbers. If Viktor manages to snuff the Mikhailov Bratva out, that could be problematic for us. Their reach with Moscow alone would possibly hold rein here. That's not good for us or the Italians."

"Let's get these motherfuckers before they get us. No torture ... no questioning," I say.

My phone rings, and I see that it's Jacob. I hold up my finger and excuse

myself from the room. "What do you got?" I ask, skipping the small talk.

"I've been looking into the murder of Margo Mikhailov. This is way beyond my jurisdiction, so I've had to pull in one of my connections that can access files without leaving a footprint," he informs.

"Get to it, Jacob," I say impatiently. We have other matters to take care of, so I don't need him drawing this out. I'm already aware that most of the shite he gets for me is not by legal means.

"Are you fucking this girl?"

"You know better than to ask questions like that, Jacob," I warn. "How is that fucking relevant?"

"I just wanted to know how involved you were with her. I need to know if she has a birthmark that looks like the state of Florida on top of her right foot?"

"Jacob," I growl.

"Okay, fine. My source and I have combed through birth records, newspaper clippings, the autopsy report, and basically anything related to the twins, Vasilisa and Margo, to find a motive. We initially investigated if Margo's death was Mafia-related—some sort of retaliation to her father.

"And?"

"And we didn't get that far yet, but we did stumble upon a discrepancy with the twins."

"Okay. I'm still waiting for you to get to the point." I growl.

"We were able to pull baby photos as well as childhood pics of the identical twins growing up. In every photo, Vasilisa has always had this distinguishing birthmark. In the autopsy photo, there is no birthmark."

I feel like I've been punched in the gut. My mind races as I try to process Jacob's words. "What are you suggesting?" I ask, my voice low.

"I'm saying I think it's actually Margo who's alive, not Vasilisa. The only way to be sure is if you check for that birthmark on her foot. If it's there, you have your answer. I don't have the why yet."

"Okay, let me know when you get more."

I end the call before he has an opportunity to say anything else. I take a deep breath, trying to calm the storm brewing inside me. I don't need to check for the fucking birthmark because I've seen it. Lennon steps outside the office, just as I'm about to storm upstairs to snatch the liar in my midst.

"I'm fucking surrounded by betrayal," I yell at Lennon.

"Not here, brother."

He grabs my arm and walks us toward the front gate of my estate. He tells my guard standing there to take a break.

"She's been lying to me this entire fucking time," I start. "Vasilisa is not even her real fucking name."

"Calm down, Kai. Start from the beginning. Who did you just talk to?"

I tell him that I was looking into Vasilisa's sister murder to try to get closure for her, but what was uncovered instead. "She knows how much I despise liars. She's had plenty of time to come clean with me. I've been nothing but nice and considerate with her these past couple of days."

"I know how upset you must feel, but take a moment to consider another perspective. It's been a week, if that, of the two of you being in a decent place. You didn't exactly foster an environment to share something like that," He pats me on the back. "Before you blow up and the trust and progress you've managed along with it, seek to understand, brother. Give her a safe space to tell you the truth before you condemn her."

"Fuck!" I say, blowing off a frustrated breath. "When did you become the voice of reason?"

"When I had to take our father's reins. I can no longer let anger lead me. I have to think of all perspectives for the sake of our clan. You have every right to feel how you feel, especially with all the betrayal around you lately. Just make sure she's not dealing with the consequence of others who have disappointed you."

"You're right. Come on ... let's check on this other shite storm."

We return to the office where our men wait for us. Their eyes are fixed on me, waiting for me to break the news, but I keep my discovery about Vasilisa between Lennon and I for now. "That was a personal call," I inform. "There is nothing new regarding Viktor. We need to locate him and the rogue members of the Mikhailov Bratva and end them," I say bluntly.

"This is our headquarters until the mission is accomplished," Lennon says, speaking to the room. He looks over at me. "Take care of what you need to, brother. I will alert you when it's time."

That's my cue to handle things with Vasilisa ... well fucking Margo. I hope she chooses the truth, but I know I have to lead with trust so there is no excuse for her to lie to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I intercept Andrea bringing Vasilisa's breakfast and take the tray from her. I told her to ensure that nobody interrupts us. When I enter my room, Vasilisa emerges from my en suite bathroom with a towel wrapped around her damp body and one secured around her hair.

"Morning," she says, chipper than I'm feeling at the moment.

"Morning," I greet, careful to keep the edge from my voice. "I brought you breakfast."

"Thank you. I am pretty starving. Any fight lessons today?"

"No, I'm here for a different reason. We need to talk."

"Oh," she says, pausing mid-step. "What about?"

I can see the worry in the wrinkle of her brow. I think back to what Lennon said about providing a safe space for her to be honest with me.

I start by telling her about Viktor, and that she was right. She did see him at the club. I inform her of our suspicion that he was looking to eliminate her family so he could have that power and that the men of the Mikhailov Bratva that went rogue was looking to jump ship.

"I can't believe this. How could Viktor betray our family like this or our men? This is going to gut my father. He's done his wrong doings, but he's tried to make amends. Only he's failed at every turn."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying there is so much you don't know, but I feel like I can trust you. I'm just afraid I may hurt my family, but if what you say and Viktor is behind this, my silence doesn't matter."

"You can trust me, Vasilisa. This room is a safe space. We've entered into this unspoken truce. Let me help you and your family if I can."

She takes a seat on the bed and removes the towel from her head, her eyes focused on the floor. "I'm not Vasilisa, Kai. I'm actually Margo. I know you hate liars, but I couldn't reveal this before now."

"I know, Margo," I reply, relieved that I didn't have to confront her about it or, worse yet, have her lie in response.

"Wait ... how?"

"I have someone looking into your past. I wanted to get you closure as a wedding present. The birthmark gave you away," I say pointing at her right foot.

"Shit. Yes, I think Viktor figured it out too," she curses.

"Start from the beginning," I suggest.

She tells me that much of her past is like she described it before with the separate private schools for her and her twin. As Margo, she was the more outspoken one and the one people gravitated to. Persephone was her best friend, but at times, she could tell that Persie resented all the attention people would show her. She knew her friend secretly liked her boyfriend Viktor, because she would change anytime he was around ... sometimes trying to flirt with him in front of her. One day while visiting Persie, she hadn't returned home from a dance recital. Her father used this window of opportunity to force himself on her. He said that if she told, he had enough dirt on her father to ensure he went away for life.

My nostrils flare as I watch her be a dejected shell of herself as she relives her story. I want to fucking punch something, and I haven't even heard it all yet. She continues to say that he started to demand she come over when he knew Persie would be away. He took her virginity, something she hadn't even shared with Viktor. Meanwhile, as she was stuck being molested by Persie's father, her friend was using her absence to try to get closer to Viktor. One day she came home early and caught Margo coming out of her father's bedroom. She blamed Margo for being a slut and started the rumors about her friend being a promiscuous whore. Viktor refused to believe it at first, but when he learned that she had become pregnant, he beat her until she miscarried. All the rumors made sense because Margo couldn't tell him the truth about Persie's father without endangering her own father. She had lost her best friend and now she was losing Viktor.

Persie's father would not stop even after she had lost the baby and hid it from her family. She threatened to tell everyone, saying that she saved some of his DNA from when he last came in her. He sent men to rape and kill her to cover his tracks and to keep her quiet. Only those he hired didn't know she was a twin. Nobody knew except Viktor and his mother. Her sister Vasilisa was killed because of her.

"First and foremost, I'm so sorry you had to endure any of that. Your hatred for Persephone makes sense now. It also makes more sense why she fell for you being Margo. Because you are Margo."

"She didn't know that it was her father who tried to have me killed. She fell for the story shared in the news that I was raped by some unknown assailants and murdered as a Mafia retaliation. But she did suspect her father was raping me. She was angry and blamed me. Her mother had left him years ago, and he was using my body at will. Most of her guilt stemmed from that."

I take a seat on the bed next to her and lift her chin. "That wasn't your fault. You were just a kid. I get your anger now."

"Viktor moved back to Moscow very shortly after that when his father became Mafia boss so he didn't realize it was actually my sister who was murdered."

She explains that her father and her brothers knew. With their lack of power in contrast to the reach of power Persie's father had, they had to lay low. Her father vowed that he would never stop looking for ways to bring the senator down, but in the interim, it was best if the senator believed his secrets died with her. If he knew he didn't succeed, he would try again. Later, the public realized Margo had a twin, but like the rest of the world, Persie's father believed she was in fact Vasilisa and wasn't a threat. She tried to kill Persie for revenge. It was never about Viktor. Even though she did hear him say he wanted to take out everyone who had to do with Margo's death, that was from his own guilt.

"You said your father has tried to make amends. What did he do?" I probe, trying to put all the pieces together.

"When my sister and brothers were much younger, we lived in Moscow. Our father was hungry for more power," she explains, finally able to look at me. "He came to the States to establish his own Bratva here. Viktor's mom wanted to escape his dad. He wasn't a very nice man. She was friends with my Mom, so our family allowed her to escape to the US with us. She was undocumented and worked as one of our house staff. My parents helped get her papers and right to stay here. They also paid for Viktor to attend private school with me. Vasilisa went to a different school. When Viktor's mother fell ill with cancer, she reached out to his father to send for him. She didn't

want to leave him alone in this world without being close to family. Days after she died, his father sent for him to take his rightful place as heir. Viktor has always blamed my father for taking his mother from her home. He didn't feel that it was my father's right to intervene. The rest of the Russian families were in agreement. My father had crossed the line and was an outcast for his actions. Viktor only recently tried to make amends with my father, suddenly stating that he appreciates the education and everything my father tried to do to help him and his mother."

"He had an ulterior motive," I retort. "He now had some power and wanted to steal what little your father had left. He has been positioning himself to take over all this time."

"I think you're right," she agrees. "What now?"

"You know I can't let him live, right?"

It's ironic that I was initially planning to end his life because he was a threat to Persephone as long as he's on this earth. Now his life will end because of the threat he is to Margo.

"I know," she responds solemnly. "I don't know when he figured it out, but if he knew I was Margo, why still try to kill me? If he was planning vengeance for me ... I don't understand."

"His need for greed superseded any remaining feelings he had for you as teenagers. It's likely in his eyes that you no longer deserved saving in all of this because you let him think you were dead. It's possible he knew the truth when he rejected your father's betrothal."

"Well, he's dead to me now so do what you must. I won't be shedding any tears for him. The power has gone to his head. He is not the boy I grew up with. The boy I fell ..."

"In love with," I finish for her. Her head drops again as she nods. "It's okay to say it. He was your first love."

"It doesn't feel right saying it now," she admits.

"Why not?"

"Because ..." she says with a long pause. "I think I've fallen in love with you."

"You think?" I taunt, unsure of what else to say.

"I know. I love you, Kai. And I'm not even sure when I fell for you. I know my baggage is a lot to take in, so I'm not expecting to hear it back. I just don't want you to leave this room without knowing the truth. It's my truth. I'm not a liar."

I stand from the bed and open her towel. I peruse her body like it's the very first time.

"Let's start over," I suggest. "Hello, Margo. Nice to meet you. You have very nice tits."

Her head falls back in laughter, the heaviness of our conversation immediately dissipating.

"I needed that," she admits. "Nice to meet you, Kai. That's quite the introduction."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Margo

H is hands grip my thighs, and with one slow thrust, he buries himself inside me. After that reintroduction, we both needed a reset. I need him to fuck me as Margo. Not me pretending to be my dead twin. My secret is out, both secrets, and I know I can trust him with it. I told him that I love him. No more hiding. My walls stretch to take every delicious inch of his cock, and I shiver in ecstasy. He looks into my eyes and gives me a moment to adjust to the sensation of him filling me. In anticipation, I begin to lift my hips, but he presses me back down against the mattress. His lips find mine and his tongue explores my mouth as his hips grind against me. The friction on an already aroused clit causes me to whimper with need.

He breaks the kiss and finds that tender spot below my earlobe, running his warm tongue along it until he reaches my lips again. As we kiss and grind our bodies together, he places his hands on my ass, helping me ride him. My insides tighten as another orgasm bubbles just below the surface. My insides start to squeeze him rhythmically in time with our thrusts...the faster the pace, the more the pressure builds until soon, I'm coming undone.

"So fucking good, milseán. You feel so good; you drive me crazy." Chills race through my body at the growl in his voice. "I love how hard you come for me."

Tingles run up and down my spine as he changes the angle of his strokes slightly and begins pounding into me again in a steady rhythm. His movements are long and deep, hitting all that pleasure sensitive nerve endings where it counts most. His grunts fill my ears while I mewl uncontrollably at each stroke.

"Are you going to come for me again? Are you ready?" he whispers hotly

into my ear as he pounds into me harder and faster now, pushing us toward release. "You're so wet for me, baby," he groans against my neck before taking my mouth in a searing kiss. Our tongues tangle as we chase our orgasms.

"Please! I'm so close," I beg.

"That's it, Margo, let go," he hisses through clenched teeth.

I can feel the tingle starting at my toes. I'm coiled tightly, and it feels like I'm flying. I'm so incredibly turned on as he relentlessly pounds into me with a force I've never experienced before. Once he reaches a certain spot, I cry out, "Oh fuck!" I begin to unravel, and I try to hold on to my sanity as he repeatedly hits that place. I'm panting out my pleasure, and he's moaning in my ear.

"Come on my cock, baby. I want to feel it," he growls. His voice causes me to scream, and the orgasm I was trying to release explodes like a volcanic eruption. My orgasm is so intense that my body actually spasms, I convulse, and even his erection pulsates. I'm drowning in pleasure and cling tightly to him as I ride out the storm. He continues thrusting, and I can feel his cock get even harder, and the grip on my hips gets tighter. He's moaning and the sounds are almost pained. He digs his fingers into my hips as he thrusts into me faster. The thrusts become erratic, and I feel he's about to explode. His face contorts as he roars.

"That's my girl," he groans, and I feel him swell. He continues his pounding pace until he explodes inside me. He's so deep inside me that I can feel his release as it shoots from his cock. He cries out as he thrusts into me once more and holds his position. He grinds his hips into me, and I feel him throb. It sends a fresh wave of sensation through my body, and I moan loudly. His hips grind against me as he pumps me full of his cum. He's breathing hard, and I run my hands through his hair. I love the feeling of him still inside me.

"Holy shite," he mutters. He pulls me closer, and I can feel him squirting inside me. He pulls out, and I feel the warm liquid spilling out of me and running down my thigh.

"That was incredible," he whispers.

"Yes," I breathe.

"You're quite insatiable for my cock."

"You're one to talk," I quip.

He laughs.

- "What?" I question.
- "I think you and I can both use a shower," he replies wickedly.
- "Oh yeah?"
- "Mm-hmm, and afterward, I think I'd like to make lunch."
- "What do you mean, after?" I ask curiously. "I've worked up an appetite now." I giggle.

He gets up from the bed and picks me up off it. He carries me to the bathroom and deposits me in front of the shower. He wears a huge grin as he lifts me onto my feet and runs his hands gently up my legs to cup my ass while he brushes his lips along mine tenderly. His hand makes its way down between us and over my pussy. His fingers move slowly until they find where he made me come so forcefully a few minutes ago. One lone finger slips inside me as his thumb works my clit in gentle circles. He pulls away from our kiss and whispers against my lips, "You're such a good little pet, but I love the way you worship my cock."

"Glad you approve." I wink.

He tugs lightly on my hair and turns me around with his finger still inside me. Once I'm facing the shower, he slaps both ass cheeks firmly before turning to wash himself off. Once he's done, he leaves the bathroom, softly closing the door behind him.

That was such an epic fuck, but I won't read too much into it. I told him how I feel, but I also unleashed a tsunami of shit on him. For now, it's just fucking ... perhaps our version of "getting to know each other" before the wedding. At least I think there's still going to be a wedding. Either way, I feel like the weight that I've been carrying has been finally lifted. I can't wait to see where things go from here.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I pull up in front of the jewelers, already ready to get this over with. Margo and I have managed to make significant progress, but admittedly, this part still gives me the hives. It's uncharted territory for me. I exit my Bugatti Chiron and round the front of the car to assist Margo out of the car. She smoothes down the front of her body con dress before stepping onto the curb. I hold the door open for her, letting her enter first. As we step inside, the ambiance of elegance is apparent. The soft, warm lighting accentuates the sparkle of precious gems, casting an enticing glow over the displays. The air carries a delicate scent of perfume.

A saleswoman approaches us with a welcoming smile. Her demeanor exudes professionalism, yet there's a gleam in her eyes that she tries to pass off as nonchalant. Her posture shifts ... she's attracted to me.

"Welcome to Haute Joaillerie. Shopping for anything special today?"

"We're getting married in a couple of months," I reply, managing to hide my impatience.

"Oh, wonderful. Congratulations. Let me show you some of our lovely diamonds," she beams as she attempts to guide us toward a showcase filled with exquisite rings.

"Actually, is Daniel here? I was told to meet him here at four," I interrupt, no doubt spoiling her chance at an obscene commission.

"Kai, you made it," Daniel says, appearing from the back. "Sorry, I was preparing some pieces for you to take a look at. Follow me," he says as he leads me to a private section of the store. Margo is close on my heels.

As we enter the room, I note that this is likely where he gives personal service to his big spenders. Not that anything in this place is cheap. Soft light

emanates from multiple sources, casting shadows that add depth to the room.

"Please, have a seat." Daniel gestures toward the plush chairs arranged before him." Given our conversation over the phone, I have some pieces I believe you'll love," he beams.

He walks over to one of the safes, unlocks it with his fingerprint, and carefully lifts out a black velvet tray containing a few stunning diamond chokers also known as a collar. He carries it over to us and holds it out for us to see.

The diamonds are brilliant, and the collars each exude impeccable craftsmanship.

"Those are chokers," Margo points out. "I thought we were shopping for rings."

"I don't do rings, sweetheart. I do ownership. Once the chosen choker is placed upon your neck, it will symbolize that you have been collared."

"What does that even mean?"

"It means pick a choker you like, and let's save the dominant lesson for a more appropriate time. I'm pretty sure Daniel here just wants to get paid so we can get the hell out of his store. He's not interested in hearing the whole breakdown of the lifestyle or how I plan to fuck you wearing nothing but the goddamn choker."

Daniel swallows the lump that forms in his throat. "Why don't I give you two a moment to decide. I'll give you some privacy," he insists as he backs out of the door.

"I thought you were bringing me here to pick out a ring," Margo pouts. Yes, she is back to her sassy self. She can't help herself.

"I never gave you that impression. You mentioned that we were engaged, yet you didn't have a ring. You wanted a societal token that would show the world that you're taken—that you're off the market. Well, a collar is that token. It shows that you have been claimed ... owned. Any man stupid enough to forsake that ownership will pay with his life."

"Nothing is ever normal with you, is it?" She laughs.

"Have I ever given you the impression that anything about me is normal?" I deadpan.

"You have a point there," she agrees with a smirk. "These are so beautiful, but I couldn't imagine wearing this all the time ... showering with it ... sleeping with it on.

"This particular collar will be specifically for the wedding and then on

outings when the appropriate attire warrants it. Your day collar will be less intrusive and intended to be worn at all times in the absence of your diamond one."

She runs her fingers over the delicate diamonds, admiring their sparkle. "Which one do you like?"

"I think you should pick the one that catches your eye," I tell her. "It's going to be around your neck after all."

She studies the chokers for a few minutes before pointing at the one in the middle. Of course it has the most diamonds. "I like this one. It's bold but still elegant."

"Excellent choice," Daniel agrees, reappearing just in time to see what Margo has chosen. "That beauty is an astonishing ten carats."

He hands me the choker so I can secure it on her neck. I'm quite sure the price tag will be monstrous.

"It's beautiful," Margo admits as she admires its brilliance in the handheld mirror Daniel passed to her.

"It will have a beautiful price tag too," I grumble as I remove the collar from her neck to be boxed up. Daniel leads us back out front.

The woman whose name I didn't bother getting when we arrived stands behind the register to finalize my purchase. She runs my platinum card for sixty-nine thousand dollars. How fitting.

"Lucky girl," the saleswoman says as she winks in Margo's direction.

"You have no idea" Margo laughs.

"Thank you for your business," Daniel says, bowing slightly. I give him a slight chin lift.

"Let's go," I say, taking Margo's arm and leading her out of the store and back into the warm sunlight outside.

She looks up at me, her expression more serious now. "What exactly does this collar mean? You keep saying it shows ownership, but what does that entail?"

"The simplicity of it is as I've said before. It means you belong to me," I say. "It's your version of a wedding ring."

"Will you wear one too?"

"Fuck, no!" This ownership is not reciprocal.

"Well, without a collar, how will women know who you belong to?"

"Get in the car, Margo," I instruct as I open the passenger car door for her. For fuck's sake, I liked it better before our truce. Not really, but she is way more enthusiastic about this whole ordeal than I am. I don't need all the formalities of it all. "Your vanilla is showing."

She visibly tenses up at the word vanilla. Her head drops, and she gets into the car without another word.

I take a few deep breaths and make my way to the driver's side door. I have never claimed anyone in an official capacity before. I like to fuck, explore kinks, and avoid anything resembling commitment. Persephone was the closest I've gotten to feeling anything for a woman outside of fucking.

"This is all fucking new for me too, and I'm not ready to dwell on it," I finally say. "I don't do commitment."

"You don't do a lot of things," she mumbles.

As we drive through the city, she doesn't say much. She glances out the window, but I can only assume she is mulling over what exactly she is getting herself into. She's already expressed that she loved me, and that's weighing heavily on me too because I've yet to dissect my own feelings.

"Who is Margo?" I ask, breaking the silence.

"What?" She startles. "What do you mean?" Her gaze snaps to mine.

"Who are you at your core? You've been living in your sister's shadow for a while now, but what do you value ... what defines you?"

She visibly relaxes, and her shoulders drop. "I don't know."

"What do you mean that you don't know?"

"It means that my entire life, I was told what to value. I've never been allowed to just be."

Her answer is disturbing. While I expect her to be submissive and obey, I'm not interested in being with a robot. "Okay, let me ask this a different way. What do you enjoy doing? If you had endless freedom and were not bound to me by duty, what would you be doing?"

"I've always been groomed to marry and serve my husband, so any personal ambitions were never an option, but if I could have studied anything, it would have been law."

"Why law?" I ask as I change lanes. "I don't picture that for you at all."

"Probably because my family has always been on the other side of it. I could be of more value than just some Mafia heir's wife. No offense." She continues to stare out of the window.

"None taken. Why limit yourself? You could do both," I point out.

This draws her attention from the window. "Do both as in study law and be a wife to a Mafia heir?"

"Why not?"

"Because I never knew it was an option."

"Maybe not with dickface Viktor, but I have no objections ... well, within reason."

"What is within reason?" she presses.

"You'd have to master the wife part first, as in submission and the ability to obey. I need to be able to trust you when you're not in my presence."

A smile spreads across her face. "You'd let me go to law school?"

"Well, classes are needed before then and the whole acceptance into law school bit, but I'm willing to make an effort for this arrangement to be palatable for us both."

"And what about my motorcycle?" She grins. The excitement in her voice is more pronounced than it's ever been.

"What motorcycle?"

"I have a Ducati back at my father's estate. I bought it after selling some of my mother's old jewelry. My father was livid. He let me keep it, but he hates when I ride, so I don't get to take it out much."

"So let me get this straight," I say, shaking my head. "You're a princess wannabe assassin who rides a Ducati and wants to study law. Yeah, that sounds logical to me ... not like an identity crisis at all."

"I'm not a wannabe assassin, but everything else sounds about right." And the eye roll is back. I actually kind of enjoy our banter. "So can I?"

"Can you what?"

"Ride my bike?"

"We'll see. Everything doesn't need to be decided today. You and I have a long way to go with this truce, but this is the first step."

"Where are we headed?" she asks, noticing we're nearing Baker Beach for the first time.

"One of my favorite spots," I say without giving too much away.

As we park, leave our shoes in the car, and head down to the water, the iconic Golden Gate Bridge comes into view. As we stand on the beach's soft sand, the cool breeze gently caresses my face as the sun begins its descent into the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. The sky is painted with hues of orange and pink, creating a breathtaking spectacle. I take a deep breath, savoring the salty scent of the sea and the faint aroma of distant bonfires.

As I gaze westward, the waves crash against the shore, their rhythmic melody providing a soothing soundtrack to the natural symphony unfolding

with each wave. The golden rays of the sun cast elongated shadows on the beach, and the sand glows with a warm, inviting radiance.

"This is where I come to think and reset," I admit offhandedly. "Well, not this beach per se, but any beach. In New York, I frequented Coney Island or Long Island Beach when I wished to take a moment to escape it all. Preferably at night."

"Why the beach and why at night?" she asks, genuinely curious.

"For starters, there is less of a crowd at night. But also there is something about looking into the vastness of the dark sea—something so tranquil, soothing, and beautiful that has the ability to kill you within its depths if taken for granted."

"That isn't dark and twisted at all," she jokes, taking a page from my script to her earlier. "But I get it. Riding my motorcycle does that for me. At that moment, nothing else exists."

I nod in understanding. Maybe we're not so different in that regard. I turn my attention back to the tranquility before us. A flock of seagulls gracefully soar through the sky, their wings outstretched, dancing in harmony with the fading sunlight. Their calls echo in the distance, harmonizing with the crashing waves. I watch as they dip and dive, seemingly carefree and content, as if they, too, are drawn to the beauty of this tranquil evening.

Its glow intensifies as the sun dips lower, casting an ethereal light across the entire horizon. The clouds that dot the sky are transformed into majestic strokes of fiery orange and vibrant pink, creating a breathtaking canvas above me. I'm immersed in the kaleidoscope of colors, and Margo looks to be appreciating the view as well.

The sand beneath my feet feels cool and soft, a soothing contrast to the lingering warmth in the air. I grab Margo's hand and begin to walk along the shoreline, leaving footprints quickly erased by the gentle ebb and flow of the tide. The last rays of sunlight stretch across the water, casting shimmering reflections that dance and twinkle like diamonds. We walk a good stretch of the beach before heading back toward the car, her fingers still interlaced with mine. I don't want to read too much into today's efforts other than maybe things don't have to be miserable. We reach my car just as darkness descends.

"We're going to get sand all over your car," she frets.

"Don't worry about it. I'll get it detailed," I say as I open the door for her.

Today was the start of something with Margo, not Vasilisa. Not quite sure what, but we'll see what tomorrow brings.

My phone rings just as I get inside the car. It's Lennon. Viktor and the rogue men of Vladimir's Bratva have been found. Unfortunately for them, they're foolishly meeting in one place. Unbeknownst to them, whatever they're planning now will never come to fruition. It's time for my second bloodbath as Clan Captain—time to lay these motherfuckers to rest!

EPILOGUE

Margo

A s I step into the lush gardens of my father's estate, a gentle breeze caresses my face, carrying with it the sweet fragrance of blooming flowers. The air is filled with anticipation and excitement, two adjectives I never thought would be used to describe my obligation to marry Kai. The lush greenery and vibrant blooms serve as a picturesque backdrop for this momentous occasion.

Our ceremony will take place in a secluded corner of the garden, where a charming gazebo stands adorned with delicate white drapes billowing in the wind. The soft, ethereal fabric dances gracefully, reflecting the sunlight and casting an enchanting glow upon the area. The gazebo is embellished with intricate floral arrangements, combining an array of pastel hues from roses to orchids. The flowers seem to whisper their blessings as they sway in harmony with the gentle breeze.

The seating area for the guests is equally stunning. Elegant white chairs with satin bows are arranged in perfect rows, framing the aisle like pearls on a necklace. I take a seat in one of the chairs to take it all in from their perspective. I can't believe the day is finally here. Everything is so beautiful and perfect. An exquisite display of fresh petals line the aisle leading to the gazebo. The petals create a vibrant tapestry of more colors, ranging from pale pinks to deep purples, leading my gaze toward the magnificent archway at the end of the aisle.

The archway, a true work of art, stands tall and majestic, cascading with foliage and, you guessed it ... more flowers. Nature's vibrant palette covers the arch, intertwining delicate blossoms and verdant leaves. The archway becomes a portal of beauty, symbolizing the union about to take place within

its embrace—the joining of two families.

"What are you doing out here?" my father asks, taking me by surprise. "Your wedding is in a couple of hours. Figured you'd be taking as much time as you could to get ready."

I stand and smile at my father before getting one last look at the stunning scenery before the ceremony. "I just needed a moment to breathe and take it all in," I say, my voice soft and filled with emotion.

My father nods before taking a deep breath himself. "It is quite breathtaking," he agrees, his eyes scanning the garden. "Your mother would have loved this."

I feel a pang in my heart at the mention of my mother. Of course the very thought has crossed my mind. I push the sadness aside, focusing on the present moment. I don't want to think about how different life would have been with her and my sister still alive to be here for this day.

"I'm nervous," I admit, feeling a knot begin to form in my stomach.

He places a reassuring hand on mine. "That's normal, sweetheart. But you'll be fine. You and Kai have managed to make huge strides in such a short time. I see the love and protectiveness he has for you, and I'm eternally grateful that love gets to be with the real you ... Margo. It's in his eyes. Knowing this makes it easier for me to give my blessings."

I nod, taking comfort in his words. I know he's right. Kai and I have come a long way since that first day in Persephone's apartment. Our relationship is not perfect, but all my truths are out in the open now. Things can only soar from here. I wouldn't have chosen the Mafia life, but it's my reality, and I'm thankful to have Kai to navigate this life with.

"Thank you for everything, and I'm not just talking about helping to create the fairy-tale wedding of my dreams," I joke. "I'm going to head back inside to get ready. I think I'm already slightly late for hair and makeup."

My father gives me a tender kiss on the forehead. "Anything for you, sweetheart. Yes, go and get ready. The guests will start to arrive any moment now."

As I make my way toward my old bedroom, now converted to the bridal suite, my mind races with nerves and excitement. I can hear the sounds of hair dryers and makeup brushes clinking against the vanity as I approach the room. My bridesmaids are my two best friends, Zara and Abbey, who I've known for a few years, and three of our housemaids, who I've known half my life. They didn't bat an eyelash when I shared my truth with them. They

accept me as Margo. They're already in full swing, getting dolled up for the big day. Kai has my three brothers as well as two of his brothers, Lennon and Callum, for his groomsmen.

"Girl, you're going to look amazing!" Zara exclaims as I enter, causing all of them to turn to me with eyes wide open in admiration.

"You're going to be the most beautiful bride ever," Abbey chimes in. "You're already glowing."

I smile at their compliments, feeling a sense of ease. These girls have been my rock even without truly knowing my family's sordid history or my true identity. I'm grateful for them and the normalcy they provide.

As my hair gets styled and my makeup applied, my thoughts drift off to Kai. Soon, he will be standing at the end of that aisle, waiting for me. The beautiful, ruthless heir who eventually let down his guard to let me in. Hate and love are truly opposite sides of the same coin. He managed to steal my heart, and I can't even pinpoint the moment, but I'm irrevocably his.

Before I know it, it's time for me to put on my dress and the most important piece of all—my collar. As I slip into the gown, I take a deep breath to steel my nerves. I slip the elegant wedding dress over my shoulders, feeling the weight of the fabric settle against my body. The ivory satin drapes beautifully, hugging my curves in all the right places. The strapless sweetheart neckline showcases my collarbones, while the intricate lace embroidery cascades down the bodice, creating a stunning contrast against the smoothness of the satin.

As I turn to the side, my breath catches in my throat at the sight of the lovely train. It unfurls behind me like a river of silk, covered with the same intricate lace pattern on the bodice. I can't help but feel like an actual princess floating on a cloud of tulle and satin. A giggle slips as I think back to the ugly prom dress Kai made me wear to dinner once. It had a lot of tulle and satin too.

A knock interrupts my thoughts. "It's time," my father says, his voice carrying through the door.

The music begins to play, signaling the start of the processional. On cue, my father loops his arm through mine to begin the escort to my husband-to-be. As I walk down the aisle to Kai, nothing seems more important than what's behind this moment: our future together. With each step forward, the memories of our trials fade into the background, and there is only us, finally coming together forever.

When I finally reach him at the archway, everything around us seems to stop except for each other. The look that passes between us is electrifying. My heart swells with emotion as I take in his handsome face, his whiskeycolored eyes holding me captive.

"You look perfect," he whispers, his gaze never leaving mine.

A blush creeps up my cheeks at his words. "You don't look so bad yourself," I compliment, our banter still intact.

Kai takes my hand in his, the contact sending a jolt of electricity throughout my body. The pastor begins to speak, his words a blur as I focus on Kai's face. It feels like it's just him and me at this moment, our growing love transcending everything else around us.

"Do you, Margo, take Kai to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?"

The words of the vows echo in my mind as I declare my love and commitment to Kai. The ring exchange follows, Kai's fingers shaking slightly as he slides the diamond-encrusted band onto my finger. I do the same for him, feeling a sense of completeness as our hands entwine together. Our rings are costume and for the ceremony purposes only. We will get tattoos on our ring fingers instead. In the meantime, this ten-carat choker slash collar is Kai's true declaration of ownership, not the rings. The guests don't need to know that. To them, it's a lovely piece of jewelry for my big day. A knowing smile passes between Kai and me.

As the pastor pronounces us husband and wife, a surge of joy rushes through me. Kai leans in for a slow, passionate kiss that leaves me breathless. When we finally break apart, our eyes lock onto each other's.

"I love you," he murmurs against my lips.

I'm fucking speechless. My reply nearly gets caught in my throat. Although I've felt it before now, this is the first time Kai has verbalized those three words to me. "I love you too," I whisper back. My life as Mrs. Margo Gallagher is already off to a perfect start.



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PROLOGUE ~ PHOENIX

The dancing lights shining down on me are hot as fuck. My shirt clings to my chest from the sweat. My guys are going hard on the guitar and drums while I deliver these "Have Faith in Me" lyrics. We're on fire tonight! We rock Club Luxe every weekend, and it never gets old. "So, cling to what you know and never let go..." I make sure to make eye contact with the women standing front and center as I sing because one of them will be my conquest tonight. The eye contact personalizes the experience for them. *Or so they think*. We're on the second verse when I spot her. I don't know how I missed her comehither eyes or that rack. Even with the lights in my eyes, I can see this sexy brunette with double D cleavage spilling over her midriff top and a skirt so short it barely covers her ass. I wink at her, and she blushes. The women to her right and her left blush too because they mistakenly think that wink was aimed for them. I'm sure they'd be down for a foursome, but this last set has me spent. I'm not in the mood to pleasure three women tonight. No, the sexy brunette is the lucky winner. I pull my shirt off over my head and watch as her eyes narrow. That telltale sign has sealed her fate. She will be on my cock before the bar closes.

Our gig for tonight is finally finished. I'm sitting in this makeshift backstage area designated for us by the bar. The room is a pretty decent size, so I can't complain. Not to mention, the owner, Steve, has tricked this room out with black and white leather sofas and other contemporary shit we don't need. All

we need is a place to change and store our equipment, but he goes the extra mile to ensure we keep coming back. We fill the house every weekend with mostly horny women, thus bringing in the men too. It's a win-win. My thoughts are cut short by a timid knock on the door. Bandmates, Killian and Ren, have already left for an after-party with two chicks. Asher was the first to leave. He said something about grabbing a few things from the store before his stepsister arrived tomorrow. It's after midnight, but okay. The only person who it could be is my pussy for tonight. I had already given the green light to club security to let the brunette through if she came sniffing around backstage. I was beginning to think she wouldn't show—afraid of the possible rejection. Who am I kidding? I'm sure she is aware of her assets and how to work them. Women like that always get what they want. She is in for a surprise, though, because so do I. When she crosses the threshold of this room, I run the show.

My sexual appetite is unparalleled, and so are my desires. Not every woman is privy to my tastes—I'm selective in that regard. I will have to see how this one behaves. If she submits, I'll tilt her world on its fucking axis. If she needs persuasion, I'll let her suck my cock before I show her the door. Those are the terms I live by.

Opening the door, I'm greeted with a wicked smile. Her intentions are written all over her face. "Hi," she says coyly. I'm not fooled by the innocent act, though.

"Come in. What is your name, sweetheart?" I step aside to let her in. The security guy gives me a thumbs-up before I close the door behind her.

"Shannon," she purrs. My eyes are drawn to her red lipstick with thoughts of those lips wrapped around my dick. "Nice dressing room," she adds.

"Thanks. So, what's on your mind, *Shannon?*" I ask, getting straight to the reason for her visit. I've never been one for pleasantries.

"Excuse me? What do you mean?"

"The reason you've come to my dressing room?" I can see she's trying to hold on to this coy act, but I'm not having it.

"Oh...well. I wanted to meet you. The other guys are great. I've been coming here for a while, but tonight was the first time I had a chance to be so close to the stage," she replies. *Such bullshit*. I hate liars and women who come back here, only to play innocent.

If you want to fuck me, own that shit. That I can respect. I can smell how wet she is for me, yet she wants to hold on to this illusion of being a good girl. I'm about to shatter this little game she thinks she's playing.

"Nice meeting you, Shannon, but what I really want is to be sucked off. So, the way I see it, if you've gotten what you've come for, then there is the door. If you want to get me off, then get on your knees." I watch as hesitation crosses her face. She's probably not used to men being so blunt. Instead, she's used to them being wrapped around her finger. Her hesitation only lasts for a second before a smile crosses those lips. She drops to her knees, and her submission is enough to make me hard. I stroke my cock a few times, so she can watch it grow through my jeans. Her salivation is confirming everything I thought about her. *Good girl, my ass.* I take my dick out and rub it across her lips to tease her. She opens her mouth to take me in, but I pull back. *My show.*

"I say when, sweetheart," I tell her. I tease her a little more until a bead of pre-cum forms at the tip of my dick. She greedily licks it all up. "Open," I command. She does as I say with enthusiasm, so I let her take me to the back of her throat. *Holy shit*. Doesn't she have a gag reflex?

Her expertise at sucking me off has definitely given away that she is not new to this. Fuck, she is amazing. She bobs up and down on my length, and I can feel the tingling in my balls. I'm so close. I grab her by the hair to guide her for a few strokes before I try to pull her away. She refuses to be separated from my dick. I explode in her mouth, and she doesn't even flinch. She continues sucking and licking until she has every last drop. I let my shit throb for a few seconds while I watch the look of satisfaction on her face. I wasn't planning on fucking her, but she's earned it.

"Stand up and take that skirt off." She quickly stands and does as I say. This one is a quick learner. I reach over and pull her shirt underneath her tits. Damn, they're completely suckable, but I need to make this quick. The bar will be closing soon, and I need to be out of here before then.

"The panties, too?" she asks.

"Nope." I turn her around and bend her over the counter. Grabbing a condom from my pocket, I slide it on before pulling her panties to the side. Just as I thought. No priming needed because she's so wet. I slam into her, and she cries out in ecstasy. I fuck her hard and fast as her knees buckle. I knew this one would like it rough.

"Fuck, yes!" she screams. "Fuck me harder!" After I pound into her a few more times, she's coming all over my dick. The clench of her pussy is enough to pull me over the edge with her. After I'm done, I peel the condom off.

"Thanks, Shannon. It was really nice meeting you." I wink. She smiles and begins grabbing her skirt and fixing her clothes. She knows her time has come to an end. I go into the bathroom adjacent from our dressing room to clean up a bit, and when I come back, she is gone. Asher has already taken the rest of my stuff back to the lake house with him, so I don't have anything to pack up. I grab my helmet from the corner and make my way outside to my bike. We play here again tomorrow night.



CHAPTER ONE ~ HARLOW

This is ludicrous. Possibly the worst idea I've had yet. I've spent the past few years making sure I was invisible to the opposite sex, and now I'm going to live with four men for the summer. My stepbrother, Asher, has invited me to stay with him and his bandmates at their lake house before classes start this fall. We haven't seen each other in a few years and have only kept in touch by phone. I really miss Asher, but I question whether I can really go through with this. On the one hand, it is a chance of a lifetime. I will get to observe the journey of his band as they strive to get a record deal. If I'm going to be a music journalist, I need to know every aspect of the music business—not just the glamorous illusion, but also the road to fame. On the other hand, I'm awkward around men. To think about being around four of them absolutely petrifies me. Gah, why do I have to be such a chickenshit? I know Asher won't let these guys do anything to me. He's said so himself. They're all man whores, I'm sure. Their band name, Phoenix Rising, is probably synonymous with rising from some random's bed rather than from ashes. Either way, if I'm going to be successful in the business, I need to find a way to prohibit my past from crippling me. This just may be the therapy I need—a push out of my comfort zone.

I stand here at the curb of the arrival section of Birmingham Airport. Asher

should be here at any moment to pick me up. My nerves are all over the place. I clutch my hot pink luggage tightly to redirect my focus. My luggage is the most colorful possession that I have. Black is my usual color of choice. From my baggy jeans to my black nail polish, everything I wear is black. The darkness matches my soul and my past. It keeps people away from me, especially men. I don't trust them. The only person to penetrate my fuck-off shield is Irelyn. She is my best friend and my complete opposite. We met at the community college I just transferred from, and from day one, she refused to be ignored. She didn't stop until she broke down my defenses. She thinks I'm just a cynic, but she only knows the lies that I told her to explain why I am the way that I am. The pink luggage was a gift from her, and a rebellious attempt to protest my black obsession. Whatever. A sleek, black Escalade pulls to a stop in front of me, interrupting my thoughts. Asher steps out of the SUV, and I swear he has hit a growth spurt. I don't remember him being so tall. He comes around the back of the SUV as he runs his hands through his blond hair. His cerulean blue eyes crinkle, and a frown creases his brows as he takes me in.

"What the hell happened to my baby sister?" he jokes. There is an underlying seriousness in his tone. I've always had brunette hair, but now my waist-length tresses are blue-black from my home dye job. I'm told my hair makes my gray eyes look freakish. My hair is my veil to hide when I don't want to be seen. I'm not the girl he remembers from three years ago.

"What do you mean? It's still me," I chide. He begins putting my suitcases in the back as he shakes his head.

"Still you, but Gothified." He chuckles. "My princess has turned into Goth Barbie," he teases. Princess was the nickname he had for me before our parents separated, and Mom moved on to husband number three.

"Hush, you still love me. And Gothified is not even a word."

"Of course it is. I just need to get used to your new look." He closes the trunk and opens the passenger door for me. He is still the sweet guy I remember. Even though he is a little taller now, he's still lean like a swimmer. With his charm, I bet all the women swoon over him, but I don't want to think about him in that way. I want to keep my sweet image of my stepbrother pure. Hopefully, he's not a whore magnet like most guys in a band. Okay, to be fair, I don't know any guys in any band—all I know is what I see on TV.

"You're late, brother. This look is not new. This has been me since you left," I point out.

"Whatever, Goth girl, let's get you to your new home for the summer."

~

With three levels and a deck that leads to the lake, this place is a dream. The main level is on the second floor, where I am now. The bedrooms are on the first and third floors. The furnishing and décor are contemporary and don't look like the home of rockers. Leave it to Mr. Nolan, Asher's dad, to spare no expense for these guys. That trait is what attracted my mom to him until she got greedy and went for a bigger fish. I think my favorite is the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room, which let in all the natural light. The only thing missing is having Irelyn here with me. She is visiting family instead, and then she'll be transferring to the University of Alabama with me in the fall. I'm walking around the state-of-the-art kitchen and admiring the cherry wood cabinetry when the other bandmates arrive downstairs.

"The guys are here," Asher says excitedly. He hops up from the sofa and heads to go meet them and to clue them in that I'm here, I'm sure. The guys come upstairs in a boisterous manner, bantering about whom was going to put away the groceries they just bought. Asher introduces them to me, and I must say, my first impression is that they aren't as bad as I originally thought they'd be. So it seems. Killian Andrews is their lead guitarist, whereas Asher is the bass guitarist. Like my brother, Killian has shoulder-length hair, but his is brown like his chocolate eyes. Ren Lowry is their drummer. He has a black Mohawk and seems to be the only one who rivals my Gothness, as my brother would say. I'm digging his all-black attire. He gives me a slight chin lift as a greeting.

The guys are all welcoming. They don't appear to be judging me for the way I look. I get that a lot, but it's kind of the point. I'm just about to ask who their singer is when he comes up the stairs. *Holy shit balls*. I wasn't ready. I hear Asher introducing him as Phoenix, but I'm speechless. Phoenix looks me up and down and smirks. I bet he gets this reaction from women all the time, but this is different. I don't fawn over men. They're not even on my radar. My heart quickens, and I work to swallow the lump in my throat. My

nerves have kicked into overdrive. This feeling is foreign to me. This guy is so far from what you would expect as a singer of a rock band that it is unreal. He stands about six inches taller than my five-foot-four frame and is built like a fucking tank. The name Phoenix is so fitting for him. He is simply gorgeous. His shirt hugs his chest like a second skin, and I can see every etch of muscle. The tattoo sleeve on his left arm is an intricate work of art and draws your eyes even more to his fit physique. From his goatee to his perfectly styled short hair, he is perfection. His angled facial features are chiseled beauty. The fucker knows it, too. I can tell this one is going to be trouble. He arches an eyebrow in question, waiting for me to say something.

"Hi. Nice to meet you," I manage to say without getting tongue-tied. Geesh, I feel like an idiot. He is just a good-looking guy. *Get it together*. "Where is my room?" I ask, turning toward Asher. I'm going to have to stay far away from this Phoenix guy. The others seem nice enough, but my gut is telling me that he is trouble with a capital T.

"The guys and I discussed it. You can take the master bedroom on the third floor," Asher says. A look passes between him and Phoenix before he grabs my luggage to take them upstairs. Phoenix follows us up the stairs.

"They discussed it," he comments. "That was my room. I got booted to the room next door, so don't think you're going to get that bathroom all to yourself," he informs. I don't want to come in taking over their space, so I just nod and look away as we pass the only other bedroom on this floor.

"There are two more bathrooms in the house, Phoenix," Asher chastises.

"Yeah, but I want to use that one. That is the only master bathroom and the only one with a rain shower. Don't worry; I won't bother your *princess*. She is not my speed anyway." Phoenix smirks. Asher's face hardens, and I know he is getting ready to put his foot down. The last thing I want is to cause problems on my first day here. I can't believe he told them he calls me princess, but like Phoenix just confirmed, I'm not his type anyway. I grab Asher's arm to shush him.

"It's fine. Really. I'm sure he and I can set up some sort of schedule. We're

the only two rooms up here, so it's no problem," I assure.

"Whatever. You don't have to agree to that. You're the only female in the house and should have your privacy—"

"Don't make this awkward," I plead, cutting off his rant. I look over at Phoenix, and his smugness is revolting. He didn't win. I just don't want any special privileges or to upset the balance of the house.

"Fine. One complaint and he's out," Asher promises.

"I've yet to have a woman complain about anything that concerns me." Phoenix winks. He leaves the room chuckling.

"Fuck," Asher groans as he leaves the room with him.

I take a look around the room now that I'm alone. This bedroom is huge. It has a sitting area as well as doors that lead to a balcony overlooking the lake. More floor-to-ceiling windows compliment the space. The four-poster bed looks inviting until I imagine all the kinky sex that has taken place in it. I shudder at the thought as I walk into the en suite bathroom. Somehow, I knew it would be a dream. I can see why Phoenix didn't want to give it up. The rustic travertine tiled shower, encased in glass, could fit like ten people. I see the rain shower that he spoke about next to a regular showerhead. It even has a bench in there. *Interesting*. The Jacuzzi tub sitting off to the side of the shower is the icing on the cake. I know where I'll be spending a lot of my time. I love to soak and read. Well, more like an escape into a different realm of reality and pretend I'm the heroine who gets the happily ever after—not the dysfunctional life I have.

First, I guess I'll unpack. The walk-in closet within the master bath is massive. I flip the light on and am shocked to already see men's clothing hung up and sneakers lining the wall. So, it appears he hasn't cleared the space yet, or does he want to share the closet, too? It's definitely big enough. It's almost big enough to be a sixth bedroom. *Whatever*. I'll just grab my favorite romance novel and read for now. I push the suitcases against the

opposite wall as his shoes and grab my book out of my bag. I walk back into the bedroom and curl up into the oversize chair next to the window. I'm not getting in that bed until I change the sheets—just in case.

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CHAPTER TWO ~ PHOENIX

The guys are discussing what songs we're going to cover tonight from the band, I Prevail. Honestly, I'm tired of singing other people's shit, but our music is not ready yet. We only have one original song that we perform, titled "Something to Believe In." I write all of our music, and that song has special meaning since it's the first one I started working on. It has significance to my past, but the guys just think it is a badass song. We don't play it every set, but when we do, we play it to close the night, and it brings down the fucking house every time. The topic changes to what after-hours club they plan on hitting up tonight after our show, and I smile as I think about Asher's "princess" upstairs.

I've overheard him call her that nickname. It was odd as shit, to say the least, to hear the word come out of a grown man's mouth. Imagine my surprise when this princess arrives dressed from head to toe in black, looking as dark as my soul. I see the Goth image, but something is amiss. I just can't put my finger on it yet. I saw the instant attraction she had for me, yet she chose to pretend otherwise. The shift of her eyes toward the ground when I speak to her gives her away. I'd kill to know what thoughts ran through her mind. What she must think of me? I'm very aware of how most women see me. They want any opportunity to fuck me, and some even want to "tame the bad boy." *Fucking hysterical*. Not her, though. I can tell little Miss Harlow is planning on staying the hell away from me. Too bad it's a challenge I'm willing to accept even though she's not really my type.

I got a peek at what she really desires, and I plan on opening her up. I bet she has a hot body under all those baggy clothes. Those piercing gray eyes of hers got my attention. It's going to be fun exploring the rest of her. Asher has warned us all off her, so she will have to come to me, but she will. She will

submit. In the end, they all do. Yup, my summer just got a little more interesting.

I watch as she comes downstairs. Apparently, she is coming to tonight's gig. This should be fun. I hope she'll be in the front row. She is in for a treat. I have a special performance just for her. This will be the real test. She looks around nervously, and I almost feel sorry for her. *Almost*.

"Ready for tonight, princess?" I ask cheekily as we load the Escalade with our equipment.

"Don't call me that," Harlow whisper hisses. Hmm, so she has some bite. I don't mind. Even better.

"Why not? Asher calls you that. You don't like it?"

"It's condescending when you say it," she points out.

"It isn't meant to be." I smirk. "It's just so fitting," I continue while gesturing toward her all-black appearance. She huffs and walks around to the other side of the SUV.

So the goal is not to get under her skin. No, I want to get under something else completely. The more she resists me, the harder my dick gets. This feeling is foreign to me. Women usually make this shit too easy. I won't lie and say it isn't great to have my pick of pussy, but a challenge may be just what I need for a change of pace. I have to be careful not to get too involved, though. The last thing I need is to have her fall in love with me. Asher really would kick my ass if I break his sister's heart. No. Get in and get out. That's the challenge. My dick accepts.

RUTHLESS HEIR PLAYLIST

Beautiful Crime ~ Tamer

Dangerous Hands ~ Austin Giorgio

Under the Influence (Violin) ~ Joel Sunny

Watch Me Burn ~ Michele Morrone

White Flag~ D.A.N.

The Drug ~ Nation Haven

Man or Monster~ Sam Tinnesz, Zayde Wolf

Running Up That Hill ~Kate Bush

Monsters ~ Ruelle

Closer (Violin) ∼ Ember trio

Scars∼ Boy Epic

Waste ~ Kxllswxtch

War of Hearts ∼ Ruelle

Available for Me~ Hailey Knox

Wicked Games ~ Chris Issak

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Phoenix Rising: Issue #2

Phoenix Rising: Issue #3

Reckless Ambition: Issue #1

Reckless Ambition: Issue #2

Reckless Ambition: Issue #3

The Playboy's Lair Duet

Silas: A Playboy's Lair Novel - Part One

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Forbidden Attraction ~ Book #1

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<u>Unforbidden ~ Book #3</u>

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Mister English

<u>Peppermint Mocha Love: A Christmas Novella</u> (written as S. Renee' ... co-authored with R.L. Harmon)

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Quantum Entanglement: Part One

Quantum Entanglement: Part Two

Quantum Entanglement: Part Three

ABOUT S.R. WATSON

USA Today Bestselling Author, S. R. Watson, is a Texas native who currently resides in Washington with her children. She grew up reading the Sweet Valley series (Twins, High, & University) among others. Her passion for writing began in high school and continued even after earning her nursing degree and becoming an operating room registered nurse. Discovering the Twilight series and 50 Shades Trilogy, inspired her to finally share her own stories.

S. R. Watson published her first book in 2014.

When S. R. Watson is not writing, or working as an OR nurse manager, she loves to read and binge watch her favorite shows.

















ABOUT RYAN STACKS

USA Today Bestselling Author, Ryan Stacks, is a Walla Walla, WA native who currently reside in Utah with his wife Anna. Most would consider him a jack of all trades. His first love is wrestling and he's wrestled his entire life. In addition to his talents on the mat, Ryan has many achievements. He's a published international cover model and he released his first book, Peppermint Mocha Love with SR Watson in December 2017. For this novella, he debuted as both an author and cover photographer. Ryan Stacks has partnered with S.R. Watson to create many more stories that'll take you for a ride.

When Ryan Stacks is not writing, he spends his time making fun TikToks, traveling, being active with the youth in his community by coaching wrestling, and helping in Young Life as a leader. In addition to his commitment to the community, Ryan has taken his fitness career to new highs as a men's physique competitor - placing top 3 at the national level.















