

BOOK TWO IN THE  
*babes* BRATVA SERIES

*Sinful*  
**INTENTIONS**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**SHANDI BOYES**

# **SINFUL INTENTIONS**

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**AN AGE GAP MAFIA ROMANCE**

SHANDI BOYES

# CONTENTS

Foreword

Also by Shandi Boyes

Want to stay in touch?

1. Alek
2. Anastasia
3. Alek
4. Anastasia
5. Alek
6. Anastasia
7. Alek
8. Anastasia
9. Anastasia
10. Alek
11. Anastasia
12. Alek
13. Anastasia
14. Alek
15. Alek
16. Alek
17. Anastasia
18. Anastasia
19. Alek
20. Anastasia
21. Anastasia
22. Alek
23. Alek
24. Alek
25. Anastasia
26. Alek
27. Alek
28. Alek
29. Alek
30. Anastasia
31. Alek
32. Anastasia
33. Alek
34. Anastasia

35. Anastasia

Epilogue

Afterword

Also by Shandi Boyes

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## **FOREWORD**

Please note: This book has trigger warnings that involve child loss, mafia scenes, and men with wicked mouths and morals. Please check the author's website for a full list of triggers.

Read at your own risk.

## **DEDICATION**

*For all the good girls searching for their perfect 'daddy.'*



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Fighting Jacob (Jacob & Lola)

Taming Nick (Nick & Jenni)

Redeeming Slater (Slater and Kylie)

Saving Emily (Noah & Emily - Novella)

Wrapped Up with Rise Up (Perception Novella - should be read after the Bound Series)

### Enigma

Enigma (Isaac & Isabelle #1)

Unraveling an Enigma (Isaac & Isabelle #2)

Enigma The Mystery Unmasked (Isaac & Isabelle #3)

Enigma: The Final Chapter (Isaac & Isabelle #4)

Beneath The Secrets (Hugo & Ava #1)

Beneath The Sheets (Hugo & Ava #2)

Spy Thy Neighbor (Hunter & Paige)

The Opposite Effect (Brax & Clara)

I Married a Mob Boss (Rico & Blaire)

Second Shot (Hawke & Gemma)

The Way We Are (Ryan & Savannah #1)

The Way We Were (Ryan & Savannah #2)

Sugar and Spice (Cormack & Harlow)

Lady In Waiting (Regan & Alex #1)

Man in Queue (Regan & Alex #2)

Couple on Hold (Regan & Alex #3)

Enigma: The Wedding (Isaac and Isabelle)

Silent Vigilante (Brandon and Melody #1)

Hushed Guardian (Brandon & Melody #2)

Quiet Protector (Brandon & Melody #3)

Enigma: An Isaac Retelling

Twisted Lies (Jae & CJ)

### **Bound Series**

Chains (Marcus & Cleo #1)

Links(Marcus & Cleo #2)

Bound(Marcus & Cleo #3)

Restrain(Marcus & Cleo #4)

The Misfits

### **Russian Mob Chronicles**

Nikolai: A Mafia Prince Romance.(Nikolai & Justine #1)

Nikolai: Taking Back What's Mine.(Nikolai & Justine #2)

Nikolai: What's Left of Me(Nikolai & Justine #3)

Nikolai: Mine to Protect(Nikolai & Justine #4)

Asher: My Russian Revenge (Asher & Zariah)

Nikolai: Through the Devil's Eyes(Nikolai & Justine #5)

Trey (Trey & K)

### **The Italian Cartel**

Dimitri

Roxanne

Reign

Mafia Ties (Novella)

Maddox

Demi

Rocco

Clover

Smith

### **RomCom Standalones**

Just Playin' (Elvis & Willow)

Ain't Happenin' (Lorenzo & Skylar)

The Drop Zone (Colby & Jamie)

Very Unlikely (Brand New Couple)

### **Short Stories - Newsletter Downloads**

Christmas Trio (Wesley, Andrew & Mallory -- short story)

Falling For A Stranger (Short Story)

### **One Night Only Series**

Hotshot Boss

Hotshot Neighbor

### **The Bobrov Bratva Series**

Wicked Intentions (Katie & Ghost)

Sinful Intentions (April 25)

Devious Intentions (June 13)

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## ALEK

*M*y knuckles pop when I follow Kirill and two of his men into a seedy strip club on the outskirts of Kronstadt. Kirill is a piece of shit mafia leader I'd never heard of until my ride-or-die brother stumbled onto his lineage.

Ghost was unnamed, unaged, and on the fast track to juvie when we became friends shortly after my ninth birthday. Everyone called him Ghost because his hair was as white as a snowflake the first ten years of his life before it was dirtied by the lifestyle we were forced to live to keep food in our stomachs.

The boys' home we lived in until the day I turned fourteen provided a roof over our heads, but if we didn't want to go hungry and wear holey shoes handed down from the boys older than us, we had to get the rest ourselves.

It wasn't done legally.

Don't paint me with the same dirty brush that darkened Ghost's hair. We were more the Robin Hoods of Russia. We stole from the rich and gave it to the poor.

We just so happened to also be the poor who benefited from our criminal ways.

We got busted a handful of times, but sometimes that was the point. We still had to fight for a share of the food in juvie, but it was done in the mess

hall instead of icy back alleys that could kill a man standing up if you didn't keep moving to stop your blood from freezing in your veins.

Our summer months were spent implementing the plans we made while locked away.

Well, except for that one summer.

Her hair is as blonde as the first whore Kirill picks to take home for the night and her tits as sweltering as his second pick. I'm lost for similarities with his third, and I am honestly clueless about why he wants her. I've always been a one-for-your-mouth, one-for-your-dick kind of man. A third will only get lost in the process of being so fucking exhausted you'll spend the day in bed.

"He's done for the night," I murmur into the cell phone I recently squashed to my ear. "His picks are made."

Ghost sounds as peeved as I feel, but it has nothing to do with his girl being married to Kirill and everything to do with his baby sister and niece being disrespected in front of our competitors. This strip club is owned by Maksim Ivanov, a badass gangster who has no issues bringing a woman to her knees with a stern backhand slap, but unlike Kirill, he is a one-woman man.

Despite the miscommunication of my above comment, I'm the same way. When I am snowed under—by a woman, not coke—I don't fuck around. When you're my girl, I'll pretend the only multitasking I can do is choking you out while fucking you from behind so hard and fast you'll be searching for your uterus for a week.

When Kirill slips into the back of the SUV in the middle of a long line of many, I push my cell closer to my ear so I can hear Ghost's answer over the thumping music booming around the club-like atmosphere when I ask, "Want me to stay with Kate?"

I've kept an eye on Katie since her consignment slip landed on my desk over seven months ago—approximately a day before Ghost asked me to. I

don't know what it is about her, but she's had me acting like I did years ago when I stumbled onto my first girl not born for the grittiness of my life.

My feelings aren't sexually motivated this time around, though. Not only would Ghost have my nuts on a platter within a second of sniffing out any type of romantic feelings, but my heart also still only pines for one girl.

She wasn't a picture of innocence like Katie—and the worst headache I've ever fucking faced in my life—but my desire to protect her was immediate, and it wouldn't quit for anything.

I'm drawn from thoughts that'll see me strung out for days when Ghost asks, “How many did Kirill pluck from the limited pool at The Penthouse?”

While straying my eyes around the hundred or so topless women keeping the clientele at The Penthouse entertained with tasseled breasts and sparkling G-strings, I laugh about his wrongful insinuation before replying, “Three. All blonde. His preferences are as bland as yours of late.”

That fucker hasn't been laid in months, and I have no intention of letting him forget it. Before Katie arrived on the scene, he sought hiatus from his miserable existence with whores as much as me.

Now you'd swear he's on a sabbatical from sex.

Ghost doesn't take a nibble at the bait I'm dangling in front of him. That's proof Katie has his balls in her purse. I knew it months ago, but my failure to light his short fuse tonight confirms it, let alone what he says next, “Nah. She'll be removed from his watch soon enough.” Sparks of the cocky prick I fought and lost for the top bunk years ago shine bright like a diamond when he adds, “And from what I heard circling the crew, your knob is overdue for a polish. Some shit about it getting as rusty and corroded as the ship you last got laid on.”

“I'm not that fucking old.” My words are chopped up with laughter. I feel about as old as dirt since my nuts are so weighed down. When you're forging a war that almost got you killed only years ago, you don't have time for anything, much less something that takes hours to achieve complete

enjoyment from. “I also ain’t paying for shit I can get for free...” My words trail off when a blonde entering the strip club’s main floor area from the far right captures my attention. “You offering to foot the bill? ‘Cause I may have just noticed someone I’m willing to hunt through the cobwebs in my wallet for.”

I haven’t heard Ghost’s true laugh in months. With all the shit he’s wading through, it is a good thing to hear. “Tell Maksim he owes me. You’ll have the pick of the bunch.”

After reminding me to be careful and that we can’t trust a single fucker even if they’re our allies, Ghost ends our call. Even knowing he’s most likely sneaking into Kirill’s mansion as we speak to slip into Katie’s bed a second after the sedative he conceals in her food takes effect, I put steps in place to make sure their protection isn’t slackened by my cock’s inability to look from afar.

Ghost can take care of himself, but considering half of his body is scarred so mine remained scar-free, it makes me occasionally act as if he can’t.

The blonde has piqued my interest. So much so, the money I’m about to waste doesn’t taper my steps in the slightest. I’m not ten anymore. I have money in the bank, food in my stomach, and enough weight on my bones for people to take note when I enter the room.

Even when my target is locked and loaded, they track me as I cross the room, either hopeful I am here for them or praying I’m not.

The women are the former.

The men the latter.

My fuse isn’t as short as Ghost’s, but none of the men in this room know that. As far as they are concerned, I am a ticking bomb. Only I know that saying is more a medical diagnosis than for show.

When I reach Ilya, one of Maksim’s lower-ranked goons, I say, “The blonde. Private room.”

He rolls his pierced bottom lip through his teeth before asking, “Which



one? We were inundated with blondes after our latest shipment.”

I know this because the Bobrovs supply them with most of their women. They’re usually the ones we’re not interested in anymore. That was most of the women in the orlop since our focus was elsewhere once we returned to Kronstadt.

“Gold tassels. Daisy dukes. Fuck-me boots.” My words are ground through clenched teeth when I add, “The only one not part of the fucking trade.”

“Uh.” He tries to act unruffled by my low tone. It is a fucking impossible endeavor. I can hear his knees trembling, not to mention smell the fear leaching from his pores. “You’ve got expensive taste, my friend.” He locks his eyes with mine, his lip finally freed from his teeth. “Credit?”

“We’ll see.” I lean in close to make sure he can hear me over the thumping music. “I never buy before I try.”

He looks like he wants to seek assistance from the manager but thinks better of it when he spots my mocking grin. If he shows his hand now, he’s a dead man. A soft cock who can’t take a bit of haggling won’t last a day in this industry. “The private rooms are this way.”

After gesturing for me to follow him, Ilya orders one of the bar staff to alert the blonde that she has a new client. While shadowing him, I keep my head angled like Ghost has his entire life. I’m not hiding my face in shame. It is to keep my identity hidden from the woman about to grind on my crotch for ten minutes and not make a fucking dime for her time.

I won’t lie. Maksim knows his shit. Every private room has a do not disturb sign displayed, and the women roaming the halls, waiting for a vacancy, appear far more innocent than the grunts they’ll elicit from the men acting as if they don’t have a wife at home waiting for them with their standard two point five kids.

“Out,” Ilya demands when we enter a room at the end of a long hallway.

A dude with an ugly shoulder tattoo is getting his dick sucked by a girl

hardly of age. He isn't happy about the interruption. "I paid for twenty minutes."

"Yet you only needed two." You can't miss the spunk stuck on the fake lashes someone suggested she wear to make her look older than she is. "How old are you?"

"I—"

"She's legal," Ilya interrupts, pissing me off to no end.

"I wasn't asking you." I step closer to the unnamed redhead before repeating, "How old are you?"

Before she can be interrupted again, I slant my head and cock a brow at the man who needs to cover up before he scars me for life. I now understand why he has to pay to get off—he has a cashew for a dick.

"And you better pray she says something over the age of sixteen, or you're going to find more than my boot up your ass."

Sixteen is the legal age in Russia, but that isn't why I picked that age. I went with it because it is the age of the youngest virgin I claimed since I became an adult.

When I shift my focus back to the redhead, she swallows harshly before murmuring, "Sixteen." I arch and arch and arch my brow more until she succumbs to my silent threat. "Th-thirteen."

"Thirteen?" When she nods, I cuss. She is younger than even I thought.

Ilya holds his hands up in a non-defensive manner when I disperse my anger onto the right person. "She's from the last shipment. She is one of *your* girls. I-I don't check their ages when they come from you. You usually do it for us."

I cuss again. He's right. I always check the ages of the women in the orlop—usually stringently—but Katie's unexpected consignment altered things. I dropped the baton, so now I have to clean up my fucking mess.

"Give me your wallet."

"W-what?" asks the man with the nut for a cock, stuttering.

“Your wallet. Give me your fucking wallet.” Forever impatient, I don’t wait for him to fulfill my demand. I yank it out of the trousers hanging at his feet, pull out every denomination I see and a platinum credit card, then hand them to the young girl. “Train station is half a mile that way. If you get picked up by anyone, tell them Alek sent you home. They won’t even look at you then.”

She appears in fear for her life, but it has nothing on the will to live, blazing through her heavily hooded gaze. After snatching up the bundle of bills and the man’s white undershirt, she hightails it into the corridor.

Ilya’s fists are clenched, and his jaw works through a stern grind, but he keeps his mouth shut. It is for the best. I’m not in the fucking mood to deal with him. Not when the blonde is finally being guided into the room.

She startles when she spots me before her focus shifts to the man with his dick hanging out—if you can call his mishap a dick.

Her attention diverts back to me when I murmur, “He was just leaving.” When I assist him to his feet with a rough tug on his arm, I mutter, “Minus my foot up his ass purely because he had no clue she was underage. Am I right?”

He nods so fast he almost stumbles over his feet. “I would have never... she wouldn’t have... I’m not like that... I have a daughter her age.”

“Shut up, Gerald. You’re not doing yourself *any* favors,” the blonde mutters while folding her arms over the generous globes of her breasts, practically hanging out for the world to see. One slipup, and her chest will be as bare as the day she was born.

“Friends?” I ask her, pissed as fuck and not afraid to make sure she is aware of that.

She locks her eyes with mine, the fear in them growing when she spots my peeved expression before she shakes her head. “It’s my first night here.”

“Sure it is.” I toss Gerald into the corridor more aggressively than needed before giving Ilya his marching orders.

“I...” He stops, then starts again, “I’ve got to stay. She is so top shelf she’s billed by the minute.”

“And you think I’m going to shaft you—”

Before I can finish my sentence, the blonde pushes me into the room until my ass lands on a plastic chair Gerald’s pasty white backside better not have gotten near, or I’ll hunt him down and gut him like a rabies-infested dog.

“You only paid for ten minutes, so you better not waste a second,” she murmurs before straddling my lap.

“I didn’t pay for shit.” That shifts her focus to my face. She was raking her eyes down my body, suddenly conscious it is as firm underhand as it looks under my clothing. “I *never* buy before I try.”

She appears sickened by my comment, but it doesn’t stop her from doing a move my baby sister called the table when she attended gymnastics. She flattens her palms onto the floor inches from my feet, then grinds her hips upward, bringing her fragrant-smelling pussy to within inches of my chin.

After teasing me long enough to imagine how good her body wash will taste, she throws her right leg over my head to join her left before she rolls over. She grips my ankles with her hands, then rubs her crotch against the rod thickening in my pants.

“First day, my ass,” I mutter under my breath while slapping the denim-covered mounds bouncing in front of me.

“Hey,” Ilya shouts. “Touching is extra.” When I hit him with a stern sideways glance, he mutters, “They’re not my rules. Her owner—”

“Better check himself before I pay him a visit,” I interrupt, my tone warning I’m not playing.

Ilya’s swallow is only just audible over the blonde’s whispered request, “Stop it.”

My heart’s sluggish beat kicks up a gear that she has the gall to demand anything from me. No one else in our vicinity would. My cock, now strained against the zipper of my jeans, won’t stop me from riling her back, though.

“What? I didn’t say anything that ain’t true.”

She prances around me, hopeful her seductive routine will lessen the thuds of the vein in my neck...

... it doubles it.

And my annoyance is heard in my low tone when I say, “Lose the shorts.”

My growl rumbles around the compact yet still fancy-looking room when Ilya utters, “That’ll be extra.”

Over playing games, I repeat, “Lose. The. Fucking. Shorts.”

Through a shield of faultless locks fallen in front of her gorgeous face, the blonde whispers, “Alek.”

“Now, Anastasia!”

“Anastasia?” Ilya gasps out with a shocked breath, his shoulder no longer butted against the wall. “I thought you said your name was Eve.”

Aware I will forever be the greater of the two evils, Anastasia keeps her eyes locked with mine while pleading, “I need this job.”

I act as if there isn’t an ounce of honesty in her comment. “Take. Them. Off.”

She rolls her eyes and grits her teeth, but a second after calling me every derogative name under her breath, her hands shoot down to the button on her teeny tiny denim shorts.

As she drags the skintight material down her slender thighs, the twitch in my cock turns into a full-blown spasm. For a woman who has lived a hard and fast life, her body is like a bottle of wine. It gets finer with age.

Once her shorts are discarded at the side, I drop my eyes to my crotch. “Now show me that move you did earlier. The one where you bounced your ass in front of my face while grinding your pussy against my dick.”

“I—”

My voice rumbles through the suddenly shrinking-in-size room when I interrupt, “Now, Anastasia!”

After peering at Ilya in silent apologies, she straddles my lap reverse cowgirl style, swoops down low to hook onto my ankles, then brings her peachy ass real close to my face.

I spank her again—without protest this time—before I prove to Ilya in no uncertain terms who Anastasia’s owner is. I bite, and I bite fucking hard, on the tattoo high on her right butt cheek, producing a whimpering moan from Anastasia. To anyone else, it would be a cruel, demoralizing mauling. To Ana, it is foreplay.

Once heated skin tinged with blood streams into my nostrils, I free the skin sending my senses into overdrive. Anastasia’s knees buckle when I soothe the sting of my bite with a lash of my tongue, so I curl my arm around her slender waist to keep her upright before undoubtedly proving she will never be owned by another man in this god-forbidden town who isn’t me.

My teeth marks are a perfect match to the ones I tattooed on her ass, and they’re all the proof I need that she will forever be mine.

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**ANASTASIA**

“*Y*ou are such an asshole.”

Several dancers gasp in shock when I burst into the dressing room with Alek hot on my tail, but once their surprise wears off, they flutter their lashes and make gaga faces at Alek.

Even frustrated beyond hell, I understand their instant fascination. Time has been good to him. His hair is longer than the last time I saw him. Outside of the messy man bun, I’d say his dirty blond locks sit just below his shoulders. His eyes are crystal blue since they’re clear of the narcotics he regularly used during our tumultuous three-year relationship, and his body should be on Russia’s most wanted.

He is as hot as fuck, but I will never tell him that—*again*.

I hate him and everything he stands for, and I won’t hold back to ensure he knows exactly that fact.

“This is my fucking life, Alek. My livelihood! You have no right to trample over it.” As I stuff my clothes into my holey gym bag, immature tears threaten to slip down my face. I wasn’t lying when I told Alek I needed this job. It is my last chance to skip some of the shitfest the last twenty-three years of my life have been plagued with. I’m tired, exhausted from this damn life, and Maksim’s club was my one-way ticket back out of it. “It’s been three years. It is time to get the fuck over yourself.”

“Four,” Alek corrects, shadowing my walk, his strut as cocky as ever. “And the tattoo wasn’t my idea, драгоценный.”

I whip around so fast strands of golden hair slap my face. “It is Ana.” I shove my pointer finger into his chest so firmly the acrylic coating them nearly snaps. That’s how hard his chest is—rigid and firm just like his cock. “And I got it because I thought we’d be together for eternity.” He balks like I physically slapped him when I add, “Biggest fraud ever.”

“Don’t be like that. We had some good years.”

With my bitch-o-meter off the charts, I snap out, “Months. And they were far and few between the crappy ones.”

I am a liar. I loved this man with everything I had. He was it for me. I didn’t take a single breath without him invading my thoughts.

Then he went and fucked everything up.

“Just go back to whatever drug shipment, prostitution, organ-trafficking meeting you came from and leave me the hell alone. I don’t need your help.”

“драгоценный—” My glare cuts him off, and for once tonight, I feel like the ball is finally in my court. “Ana...” He waits to ensure I understand we’ll never be on an even playing field before saying, “You don’t need this.” He waves his hand around the dressing room over thirty women are stuffed into. “I said you could come to me for help at *any* time.”

“I don’t want your help, Alek. I’m doing just fine on my own.” When his blue eyes dart to Ilya, who should be grateful Alek’s retaliation occurred with his fists this time around, I huff out an annoyed whine. “It pays the bills.”

My frustration catapults to an unmanageable level when he asks, “It’s him again, isn’t it? That’s why you’re back in town. To clean up his mess.”

“Leave my father out of this. My... *career* has nothing to do with him.”

He doesn’t believe me.

He never does, so I give him something to mull over.

“I was fifteen when we met and had already dropped out of school. This...” I wave my hand around as he did only moments ago. “... is all I can



get.”

“Bullshit,” Alek retaliates. “You do this because it is easy, and god fucking forbid you’d actually have to work hard for something you want.”

I hit him with the stink eye to rival all stink eyes before snatching my eyeliner out of Brittani’s grasp, eliciting a pathetic pout before hotfooting it outside. I paid thirty dollars for that eyeliner, so I sure as hell am not leaving it with a woman who steals the other ‘dancers’ underwear so she can sell them online before deceiving them of their measly ten percent of the profits.

My anger takes a back seat when I bolt into the alleyway at the speed of a rocket. The young girl Alek was defending when I was summoned for my first private performance is standing at the end of the shady location, staring at a map in a foreign language.

Hardly any of the girls at The Penthouse speak English.

“This way,” I mutter in English to the frightened teen before looping my arm around her elbow and guiding her to the train station.

Alek flanks our brief walk but says nothing. I let him purely because it keeps the creeps’ hands off me long enough to purchase the redhead a ticket for a country bordering Russia before handing her a bottle of water from my bag. “They sell snacks on the train, but don’t drink anything they offer you. Even if it looks sealed doesn’t mean it hasn’t been tampered with.”

When she nods, I cup her cheek only long enough to soak up her tears before wishing her well. Then I shift my focus back to Alek. “Was this you?”

He tries to lie.

Even with us being separated for four years, I see straight through it.

“This is the *exact* reason I *don’t* need your help.”

“Ana—”

I stop him from following me by splaying my hand across his chest. I don’t speak. I don’t need to. The area my hand is pressed against expresses everything I need to say.

“Fine.” That was harder for him to say than the bitter coolness his tone

alludes to. I felt the extra thump his heart produced before he forced out his one word. It was as loud as the warning sirens wailing in my head when it takes a mammoth effort for me to remove my hand from his chest. Our relationship was nonstop explosive for the entire three years. I didn't think anything could top how dynamite it was until I lost more than myself to this man. "But at least let me pay for tonight."

My smile is as fake as the bus company's false signage of a guaranteed courteous driver when I reply, "Consider that one on the house for old time's sake."

Stealing his chance to reply, I stuff a handful of the crusty bills men shoved down the front of my shorts earlier tonight into the machine next to the sleazy-looking driver, then move toward the back of the bus.

I act as if I can't feel Alek's eyes on me as the bus chugs away, but it takes almost four miles before the hairs on the back of my neck stop standing to attention.

It'll be days before my backside stops feeling the effect of his touch.

Don't ask me about the thud between my legs. We're only just getting to know each other, so I don't want to lie to you.

My tattoo was a stupid move, but when you're eighteen, in a solid, seemingly unbreakable relationship, and deeply, madly in love, no decision you make is smart.

I met Alek when I was fifteen and living on the streets. He wasn't a knight in shiny armor. He was behind the wheel of a brand-new Bentley, careening down the road with no care for its reckless speed.

When he crashed into a power pole only a quarter of a mile from the homeless camp I called home, the hiss of the power lines he brought down with his pricy ride frightened anyone from approaching his then stationary vehicle. I wasn't scared. The only thing I feared was starving to death, so I snuck up to the Bentley and climbed through the smashed driver's side window.

Bypassers thought my efforts were heroic until I peeled the driver back from the steering wheel so I could search his pockets.

I thought the pot of gold under the rainbow had finally found its way into my hands. All I got was a twenty-five-year-old male's license, a handful of bills, and a faded family photograph.

Alek didn't own the Bentley. He was joyriding his way to a six-month stint in a minimum security jail.

My raid was utterly worthless, but Alek didn't see things the same way. He hunted me down for his wallet when he was released, and he got more than he bargained for when sparks flew.

He never crossed the line, though. Eventually, I took matters into my own hands when he kept saying I was too young for him. I wanted Alek enough I was willing to seduce him to get what I needed.

This is the point where I'm meant to say that the rest was history.

Regretfully, it was only the start of our story, and many months of it were painful.

That's why I now go it alone.

I don't need anyone's help.

I am perfectly fine in my own skin.

When the bus arrives at my stop several long miles later, I collect my duffle bag and then make my way to the front. I could exit via the electronic doors in the middle, but I won't sleep if I don't have a word with the driver before then.

"If you touch her..." after staring at the driver long enough to let him know I ran these streets long before the Bobrovs, I nudge my head to the girl in a school uniform who shouldn't be out this late, "... I will cut off the appendage you think she wants but doesn't, and I will mail it to your mother so she can 'attend' to it like she did in your youth." I could be way off the mark, but he screams pedophile pedigree from a mile out. "Do you understand?"

“I don’t know what you’re imp—”

I shut him up by grabbing the object I was referring to. As suspected, it is hard from watching the girl I’d guess to be around thirteen squirming in her seat about his unwanted watch.

“Maybe I should cut it off now? Save me needing to come back here tomorrow to ensure she is on the same route.”

“I-I won’t. I-I’m not interested in her. I promise.” I squeeze his groin harder, loving the weakening of its beating from my touch. I don’t want to be gawked at with envy. I want to be feared. “I swear to God.”

“God won’t help people like you.” *Believe me, I found out the hard way.* “So save your prayers for someone more worthwhile.”

Confident he’s gotten the point, I loosen my grip on his crotch, plaster a big fake smile onto my mouth, then exit the bus with a spring in my step. He will do as requested. I could smell the fear leaching from his skin. It was as intoxicating as the scent that wafts up when I enter the stairwell of my apartment building.

“Did you shadow the bus the whole way or take the shortcut only the locals know about?” As I sidestep Alek, his smile revealing I haven’t left his sight for even a second, I dig my key out of my pocket. “How did you know I’d be here?”

His deep, thick timbre sends a thrilling shiver down my spine. “You always come home when you’ve got nowhere else to run.”

Home is a weird word for a rat-infested dump that’s gotten worse since I was birthed on the concrete floor instead of better.

“Now that your conscience is clear, you can leave.” I flash Alek a glare over my shoulder as I climb five flights of stairs. “I’m safe and sound and can take care of myself.”

“Never doubted that for a second.” My heart thuds against my ribs when he adds on a hushed whisper while tracing my steps, “Although I might need to visit the local bus depot before sunrise.”

“He won’t touch her.” My grin is far too heroic for my liking.

And it doubles when Alek murmurs, “Don’t doubt that too. Although I’d rather you get your point across without grabbing some old geezer’s nuts.”

“And dick,” I correct. “I had his dick *and* balls in my hand.” Immaturely, I shove my hand in his face. “Want a smell?”

“For fuck’s sake, *драгоценный*. I just ate.”

His nickname bitch-slaps my attitude back three places. “Call me precious again, and I’ll show you how hard I clamped down on his private parts.”

The stupid hairs on the back of my neck rise again when he steps close enough to pin me to the front door of my apartment with his thick and enticing body before he murmurs in my ear, “*драгоценный*.”

I’m not strong enough for this—not in a million years—but the damn door won’t budge no matter how hard I twist the key. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” I cuss at the door, expressing the exact words I want to shout at my traitorous body. Alek’s body is an inch away, but the internal battle not to lock lips with him is the hardest I’ve ever fought.

He was my kryptonite for years, and you don’t simply become immune because you forced thousands of miles between you.

The answer for the faulty lock comes from the last person I want to hear from. “It is because the rent is months overdue.”

Pete The Sleaze moseys into the stairwell. His shoulders are so broad he hogs the cracked and paint-peeled space as much as Alek, except the extra weight he’s carrying is fat, whereas Alek’s is all muscle—pure, unadulterated muscle.

I regain some of the brain cells I lost when Alek pinned me to the door while he steps back to speak with Pete. “How much does—”

“If you speak another word, I will make sure Polina’s father knows she doesn’t work in fashion.” That shuts his mouth better than the index finger I pushed up against it. “Dressing trafficked women for auction isn’t doing

trade shows.”

“Technically, it is,” he mumbles around my finger. After hitting me with the quickest wink, he yanks a bundle of cash out of his pocket like everyone carries thousands of dollars in their jeans before he tosses it down the stairwell. “Send me anything else she owes. I’ll have it paid by the end of the week.” He drinks in my peeved expression like it’s an outpouring of love before adding, “And send someone to fix the lock. It’s broken.”

“It’s not broken. I had it replaced.” Pete’s words shift to a groan when Alek steps back from the door before buckling its hinges with his big boot. “I’ll call a locksmith.”

Once he shuffles away, Alek shifts his focus to me. I wish he wouldn’t. The playful gleam in his eyes was always my undoing. I could be mad as hell, and all he had to do was stare, and I was under his spell in an instant. “Get what you need for a couple of days.” Shocked, I balk before arching a brow in silent questioning. “Your lock is busted. You can’t stay here with a busted lock. It isn’t safe.” He licks his lips before cracking them into a smile. “You can crash with me until it gets fixed. I’d say it will be a couple of days.”

“And catch fleas? No, thanks. I’m good.” I skirt by him and then attempt to slam the door in his face. It does me no good. He literally bent the hinges. “I’ll stay with Stace.”

His groan exposes I’ve hit a sore spot with him. He hates Stace as much as me. “I thought she moved away not long after you?”

“She did.”

I dart through my house, gathering up anything of value. It is an extremely short trip since it is the size of a shoebox, and other than a handful of charcoal sticks an artist used to barter for a private lap dance, I have nothing of value.

“Then she came back a couple of months before me.” I stuff my warm clothes into my backpack, then straighten my spine. “She’s pregnant. Five

months.”

I shouldn't loathe the curiosity in his tone when he asks, "Who's the father?" but I do.

Needing to keep my hands occupied, so they don't land on some part of Alek's body I'm sure will leave him out of the game longer than I stayed out of Kronstadt, I continue packing. "She hasn't said, but there are rumors."

"If she's selling the same shit she did back then, she's full of crap, драгоценный." When my glare almost knocks him on his ass, his back molars smash together before he corrects, "Ana." He steps closer, bringing my defenses down with an honest pair of eyes. "I *never* touched her. Not once."

"Your numerous confessions never seem to stop the rumors."

"I don't give a fuck about rumors." He blocks me from entering the tiny bathroom by grabbing the tops of my arms before he silently demands my focus. When he gets it, albeit hesitantly, he repeats, "I don't give a fuck about rumors as long as you don't believe them." I fight not to sway into him when he says, "Whatever she told you was a lie, and considering what you'd just been through, that was a fucking shitty thing to do."

His last sentence reminds me of why we separated, and I spent several boring years abroad trying to forget every magnificent thing about him.

He hurt me—badly—and I refuse to stick around for round two.

"I need to get my things. It's that time of the month. I don't want your sheets getting ruined."

An ordinary man would balk at woman talk.

Not Alek.

He simply steps back with a jerk of his chin, unwillingly edging toward my trap.

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**ALEK**

“Come on, Ana. My nuts are about to freeze off.”

That’s a lie. This place is an icebox since the heating doesn’t seem to work, but it’s been four years since my eyes have taken in her tight, fit body, so there’s plenty of warm blood pumping through my veins. It just needs to stop pooling in the region I’m sure Anastasia would like to rip off with her teeth if given half a chance.

We didn’t start things amicably, and they certainly didn’t end that way, either.

The air between us is stale, and I hate that even more than her so-called friends forever starting shit between us. Stace is a bitch with abandonment issues. Every kid on this block and ten over faced the same problems she did, but she was the only one who had sex with every Tom, Dick, and Harry without protection in the hope she’d get pregnant.

On the rare occasion her plan worked, it also backfired.

I won’t lie. I felt fucking bad for her when one of her johns took the news similar to Kirill a month back. He stomped on her, causing an internal hemorrhage that almost got her killed, but she was straight back on that bike the following month, riding down the same demented path.

“Ana?” I call out again.

I’m not a patient man. Waiting around is for guys with nothing better to



do. I have a hundred things to do, and every single one of them involves Anastasia's body in some way.

Fuck me. My cock is acting as if no time has passed. It wants to sink into her, and it wants it yesterday.

"I'm coming in."

I cuss to myself when I push open Ana's bathroom door to find an empty space that's as icy as a freezer since the window that opens onto the landing outside is pulled all the way back.

"Goddammit, Ana!"

While rambling like an insane man, I race out of Anastasia's apartment and gallop down the stairs before making a beeline for my car, narrowly missing Sleazy Pete on my way.

As suspected, it isn't where I parked it. It is speeding down the isolated road at a million miles an hour, and a feisty blonde who always kept me on my toes is behind the steering wheel, flipping me the bird.

I'd be pissed if I wasn't so goddamn turned on.

Anastasia's spunk is her third most attractive feature. Her stroke-worthy face is equally as enticing as her rocking body. It is the challenge to calm her wild that every man wanted to conquer when I tracked her down after an early release from my first case of grand theft auto adult addition. I was the only one who failed to register as a participant since she was so damn young. I fought my attraction for months, merely looking out for her since no one else was.

She caught me off guard one morning when the deadbeat running the local women's shelter tried to make her pay for a roof over her head. He didn't want money. Ana ran like she did from every shelter I took her to, but that time around, it was the middle of winter, and the first time I didn't want to spend the icy months behind bars.

I let her bunk with me for a couple of days while organizing a new place for her to stay.

She ended up in my bed her first night there.

I fought and won that battle, but the odds were stacked against me on her sixteenth birthday. She used my jealousy against me, and when I'm jealous, I act like a fuckwit.

I shouldn't have taken her as hard as I did, but Ghost wasn't the only one dabbling in recreational drugs back then. I tried to make it up to her over the next three years and thought I was on the money until the day our lives changed forever. It doused the fire in Ana's eyes and left her as a shell of the woman she was.

Our relationship crumbled not long after that.

Last I heard, she was shackled up with some rich fuck on an Italian island, but I stopped keeping daily tabs on her over two years ago. It isn't that I didn't care anymore. I just finally realized she was right. I'll most likely die at the hands of a Bobrov or because of them.

I'm fine with that as long as it doesn't take people like Anastasia down with me.

Once my taillights are nothing but a blur in the distance, I yank my cell phone out of my pocket to dial a familiar number. Considering the hour, I leave Ghost to his hair twirling and call Yev instead.

"Want me to get Kliment to activate the LoJack?" he asks, not bothering to issue a greeting.

He can't see me, but I shake my head. "Let her have it."

"*Have?* That's a three hundred K ride." He sounds like he's asking a question, but his chuckles don't announce that. He's stirring.

Fucking prick.

"Can you send someone to pick me up?" Forgetting he is aware of my location since he just witnessed my car being stolen, I mutter out Anastasia's address. "And keep this on the down-low. I'll tell Ghost about her return when I'm ready."

My lips quirk when his voice echoes in my ear. "I won't say anything."

When a flashy sports car with its top down pulls up in front of me, I end our call, then slide my phone into my pocket. “We need to stop paying you so much.”

“This ain’t the Bobrovs,” Yev replies, his grin as big as the moon. “But we can pretend it is if it’ll make you feel better.”

When I slip into the passenger seat, I ask, “What are you doing around these parts?” This area of Kronstadt is nothing but the projects—low-income housing for people who struggle to afford the pittance they demand each month.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Yev replies before checking for an opening.

He zips through traffic like a race car driver when he finds one. His daring maneuvers take care of some of the adrenaline thickening my blood, but only a tiny portion of it. I still have a ton to disperse.

“Want me to flag her down?” Yev nudges his head to the silver Aurus Senat that stands out amongst the rusted, less-valuable vehicles surrounding us when I stare at him in confusion.

Anastasia is idling next to us at the traffic lights. I know she’s aware I caught up to her because she’s gripping the steering wheel for near death, and a tiny vein in her neck is fluttering out of control, but she keeps her gaze front and center like someone as beautiful as her will blend into any group.

She can’t.

“Nah. I’m not up for a fight tonight.” *Tomorrow, though. That’s a completely different story.*

Yev smiles, throws the gearstick into first, then ignores the red signal by weaving us through the traffic and zipping through the busy intersection. “Then I guess I better get this old man home to bed before the nurse leaves without inserting his nightly enema.”

His grin grows when I sock him in the arm. He’s one of the youngest members of the Bobrov crew. I trust him solely because he came from the

same boys' home as Ghost and me. He was late to the party, only rocking up at the same time Anastasia arrived on the scene. Despite him having nothing but the clothes on his back, he looked out for Ana, so I've done the same for him for the past several years.

The reminder shifts my focus from Ana's shocked face to Yev. "How long have you known she's back?"

His cuss is a whisper, but I hear it. "A couple of weeks. I wanted to tell you, but you know Ana."

"She made you pinkie promise that you wouldn't?" When he jerks up his chin, I scrub a hand over my prickly beard, hiding the tic there. "Glad to see she hasn't matured any the past few years."

"Like you want her to." He's quick to explain when my growl rumbles louder than the wind whipping strands of my hair out of my man bun. "Age never came into it with you two. She was mature when she needed to be, and you were a childish jerk when she was. Mac and fucking cheese... perfect together, but not necessarily good for you."

"You should be real fucking grateful you're behind the wheel."

He flashes me a quick smirk. "Why? Wanna arm wrestle?"

"Nah. I want to smash your teeth in, but since you're doing at least thirty over the speed limit, and one punch will knock you out, I'll need to wait until you pull over first so I survive the wreckage."

His smile doesn't droop a smidge. It grows when he mutters, "Then I guess it's lucky I filled up before cruising by to make sure Ana got home safe after her shift."

Now I really want to kill him. "You knew Ana was stripping?"

"No," he bites out far too fast for me to believe he isn't lying. "She made me swear." He cusses, veers around another handful of vehicles, then mutters, "She won't let me help her. Then when I suggested letting you know she was back, she clamped onto my dick so hard, I haven't been game to use it the past week."

He isn't helping himself.

Not a teeny fucking bit.

“Stop fucking growling, Alek. It makes me confused as to what I'm supposed to say.”

“Say anything that doesn't include my girl with your dick in her hand—”

“Hands,” he corrects, interrupting me. “She needed more than one to contain *all* that. And when the fuck did she become your girl again?” He ducks, missing my first swing, but he isn't so lucky the second time around. “Fuck, Alek. You trying to get us killed?” Before I can sock him in the nose again, he yanks himself out of the firing zone. “And I got you here, didn't I?” With my hands fisted on my thighs, he explains, “Kirill didn't pick that club out of thin air. I suggested it over and over and over again until he couldn't hold back his curiosity for a second longer.”

I almost call him a genius until I remember my cock's response to my eyes landing on Anastasia's body for the first time in years. “What if he picked Ana?”

“Huh?” He gulps as his eyes pop. “I didn't consider that.”

I punch him for the second time before remembering he isn't who I want to take my aggression out on. “Why is she back?” When he hesitates, I snap out, “I suggest you remove your seat belt before you fucking lie to me again.” His confused expression slips into panic when I mutter, “You might survive rolling out of a vehicle at this speed, but I don't see you being so lucky when you're dragged behind it for miles.”

He unlatches his belt but keeps his tone honest. “Her old man hit the gambling route hard again.”

“How much does he owe?” I growl out through clenched teeth.

Yev shrugs. “Ana won't say, but it must be a bit. She's taken on three jobs since she came home, yet she still can't pay the rent.”

I work my jaw side to side before asking, “Do you know who he owes?”

“Do you have a pen and a piece of paper? The list is long.”

When the Bobrov compound comes up on the horizon, I demand, “Get me a list by the end of tonight.” He jerks up his chin but remains quiet while pulling up to the heavily manned gate. Yev has to flash his ID to get in. I merely need to look at the guard. “And I want a list of the people she works for.”

“Maksim owns—”

“Not the actual people she works for. *Work* work.” When he appears lost, I snap out, “The fuckers who touched without my fucking permission.”

Yev laughs. “There’s no list, Alek. Bottom dwellers can’t afford her, and the top guys knew why she was wearing shorts instead of the club G-strings. You were her first private job.” He angles his head to hide his grin. “From the way she gingerly entered the bus, I’ll say you’ll be her last for a while.”

He throws open his door and hotfoots it out of his car before I can retaliate. His race into the compound gains us the attention of many eyes. Only one I give a fuck about.

“What was that about?” Ghost drags his eyes to Yev’s sports car before returning them to my face. “Where’s your ride?”

One word and his killer expression alters in an instant. “Ana.”

When his lips tuck high at one side, I skirt by him. “Shut the fuck up, Ghost.” As I walk down into the den teeming with topless women, I tell my tenth lie tonight, “I’ve got a handle on it.”

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**ANASTASIA**

*A*s a furiously raging heat zooms through my body, I strive to gain my father's wandering gaze. He had me when he was seventeen, making him only seven years older than Alek, but unlike Alek's ageless face and fit body, his is scoured with wrinkles and withered like he is only years from a retirement home.

His hollowed cheeks and gaunt skin should have me feeling sorry for him, but all they do is make me even angrier. "You said you'd stop. That last month was the last time." I toss down the IOU slip he owes a man stupid enough to loan him money. "Sixty thousand in one night! How the hell can you lose *sixty thousand*."

"The race was rigged. The horse—"

"Figuratively, Dad. I know how you lost. It is written all over your face."

When I lift his downcast chin, my stomach drops to my feet. His face is battered and bruised, compliments to his latest bookie not doing his homework before loaning an exorbitant amount of money to a man known to lose.

Everyone in this city knows how bad of a gambler my father is, and until last month, they stopped lending him money, aware they'd never get it back.

"How long do we have?"

When he shrugs, the strap of his wifebeater falls off his shoulder. He's

lost so much weight in the past four years that I walked straight past him when his begs for me to come home finally saw me succumbing to his monthly pleas. “A week. Maybe two.”

“A week?” I can’t breathe with how heavy his burden feels on my chest. “I can’t come up with sixty thousand in a week.”

“Th-then they’ll... they’ll...”

When a snivel completes his statement, I snatch up the blanket covering the rip in the couch and curl it around his shuddering shoulders. “I’ll get the money. Somehow.” I bob down in front of him, hating that even after all this time, I still see the man who stood by my side as I shook my way through the worst event that has ever happened in my life. “But I can’t do anymore, Dad. I need you to stop.”

“I will,” he promises like he always does. “But if the horse’s injury had been recorded accurately, we would have been millionaires. I swear, bub. I know a winner when I see it.”

He fails to mention he was at the track before he placed his bet. That would be admitting that he has no clue about anything.

“Why don’t you go wash up, and I’ll get you something to eat before I go to work?”

“O-okay.” He stands then shuffles to the bathroom, his waddles dislodging the blanket on the way.

As I pick it up from the floor, I inwardly cuss. I’m already working three jobs to pay off the one hundred thousand he owes Maksim. I have no clue where I’ll find the time to pluck another sixty thousand from the limited pool of resources available. Half this town knows me as Alek’s girl, so they won’t touch me with a six-foot pole. The other half can’t rub two pennies together.

“Don’t,” I murmur to myself when my eyes stray to the casino chip Alek had encased in glass six years ago. “Gambling got you into this mess, so it isn’t the solution to get you out of it.”

I love poker, and I’m good at it too, but every competition I won



increased my father's wish to gamble. He forever says I got my skills from him and that if I'd just let him play, we could live on easy street.

He lost more than I won at our first and only mutual poker tournament.

I haven't played since.

"Do you want a sandwich?" I'll most likely have to scrape the mold off the bread, but when it is either pickle juice or moldy bread, you go with whatever will fill your stomach. "How about toast?" The heat will burn off the germs.

"Toast will be good. Thanks, bub."

"Okay." I'm hit with unfairness for the second time this morning when I pull open the refrigerator and am confronted with darkness. The bulb can't be blown because I only replaced it last week. "Did you pay the electric bill?"

I wait on pins and needles for his reply, and although it is expected, it still hurts when he grumbles out, "Shit."

The empty condiment containers jangle in the breeze of my slam when I close the refrigerator door. After sucking in some big breaths like air could solve world hunger, I mutter, "I'll be back in a minute. I need to go to the store."

Maksim's men take all my salary to recoup my father's debt, but Ilya leaves me the tips, aware I can't eat air to stay alive.

When he hears my gallop down the rickety stairs, Pete's door pops open.

"I know, all right. I'll get you next month's rent as soon as possible." Even with Alek's generosity seemingly excessive, my father still owes a ton of back rent. He isn't months overdue like Pete announced last night. He is a year in the hole. "I've got some now. I can give you..." I rummage through the notes in my pocket, grimacing when I notice how low the denominations are. I only graced the stage for a couple of minutes before I was requested to attend the private suites. I thought I had finally hit the jackpot. How wrong was I? "I can give you thirty." I lock my begging eyes with Pete's. "Forty if you'll turn the electric back on." I add words to my pleading expression when

I don't seem to be getting through to him. "Please, Pete. It is freezing up there."

"It is also illegal to disconnect gas, water, and electricity without notice." I thought the hairs on the back of my neck were standing to attention because I hate begging, but the deep voice of my interrupter says otherwise.

Alek is back in the projects—his original stomping ground.

"I also said to send me what they owe." He steps closer to Pete, his size undeniable when he has to duck to miss the cracked light fitting dangling from the ceiling. "Are you hard of hearing? I know ways to clean out the blockage."

Confident Pete would rather deal with me than a steaming mad Russian, I shove two twenties into his hand before promising to get him the rest by the end of the month. "But I need electricity to get the rest. I can't work in the dark."

*Liar.*

*Liar.*

*LIAR.*

None of my skills require lighting. The only ones I've conjured up since losing my job at The Penthouse will usually occur in a dark and dingy place.

"Okay." Pete swallows like he's not shitting his pants. "But only until the end of the month. Any longer and he'll have to move on."

"I'll get you the money. I promise."

I could return to my apartment when he flicks a lever in the electricity box under the stairwell, but since Alek doesn't understand boundaries, and my father is home, I continue to the store like I didn't give my last ten dollars to Pete.

Alek follows me but doesn't speak a word. That isn't unusual. When he's pissed, he is the silent, brooding type. He's only playful when everyone is doing exactly what he wants. That usually involved me naked in some way.

He was the happiest when his head was between my legs, and the

moodiest when anyone denied him the opportunity to get me alone.

The remembrance has me snapping out with an emotion I should no longer hold around him. Jealousy. “Bobrovs short of women?” When he remains quiet, I sneak a peek at him over the stacks of bread I’d give anything to purchase but can’t afford. “You’re usually only moody when you’ve been denied.”

Jealousy stabs me hard and fast when he replies, “The Bobrovs are *never* short of women.” I’m saved from bending over in two and vomiting on the dirty tiles when he murmurs, “Just none that can hold my interest.”

I’m not looking at him, but I know he’s raking his eyes down my body. His gaze is as heated as the damp crevice between my legs. I’ve had plenty of ‘opportunities’ the past four years as well, but they all bored me to death. “If you’re here about your car, I parked it behind The Penthouse.” When I lock eyes with his face, my assumption that he’s drinking in my skintight jeans is on the money. “No one will touch it there since they’ll believe it belongs to Maksim.”

“I’m not here about my car.” He steps up to me until there’s no way he could miss the increase in my pulse before he leans across me to grab the biggest, fluffiest loaf of bread that almost smells as divine as him. “I’m here with a proposition.”

Since my focus is more on him instead of my hungry stomach, it takes him a little longer to make his second selection. He goes for a jar of *Syrnyi Pashtet*. It is made with cheese, grated carrots and garlic. It is the perfect spread for a thick slice of bread.

Aware I am not about the glitz and glamor, he snatches a plain packet of crisps from the shelf and a cucumber Sprite from the refrigerator before he heads to the cashier while spelling out his terms. “There’s a poker tournament this weekend. Twenty K buy-in.”

“I can’t gamble.” I stop before I say too much. Almost blubbering out that gambling is what got me into this mess. “I don’t have the buy-in.”

After paying in cash for his purchases, Alek hands the bag to me, then gestures for me to leave the store before him. “I’ll fund your buy-in—” My frustrated huff cuts him off. “Which you will pay back in full when you win.” I’m still not down with his proposal until he adds, “With interest.”

“How much?”

He purses his lips like he hadn’t considered our conversation going down this route before murmuring, “Ten percent.” He cuts off my scoff by adding, “Of the prize pool.”

“That could be in excess of what you lend me.”

“Exactly.” His grin hits my stomach with more than starving grumbles. “Our agreement is nothing more than a sound business investment.” That shouldn’t hurt to hear, but it does. “So what do you say? One last hoorah before you fuck off back to Sicily to laze on a private yacht with a rich schmuck overcompensating for his lack of appendage with an ugly ass boat.”

His knowledge about my past four-year shocks me, but he missed an important part. “Tommaso doesn’t own *a* yacht.” I let him stew for a couple of seconds before correcting, “He owns *many* of them.” I shrug like my next comment is nowhere near as crude as it is. “And strap-ons were invented for a reason.”

“Yeah, for you to fuck him up the ass.”

Confident I’ve pissed him off as much as his insinuation did me, I skirt by him and make my way home. I could return the bag of food he purchased for me, but since it will keep my father and me fed for days, I won’t. Furthermore, despite his beliefs my father owes him something, in my eyes, it is the opposite.

I make it halfway home before Alek’s anger catches up with me. “If he’s so fucking great, *драгоценный*, where the fuck is he? And why does it look like you haven’t eaten in months?”

My empty stomach adds to my dizziness when I spin around like a whip. “Because it isn’t his job to take care of me. It’s—”

“Mine!” Alek bangs his chest with his fist. “It has *always* been mine.”

He takes a staggered step back when I shout, “When it suited you. Other than that, I was left on my own.”

“I came as soon as I could.”

“But it was too fucking late! You didn’t make it on time.” My voice cracks on a sob during my last sentence. “She was already gone.” Hating that he’s rehashing memories I want to forget, I wipe away the stupid tear clinging to my cheek before refusing his proposition. “I don’t need your help. I’m fine on my own.”

“*драгоценный*,” he yells when I pivot back around and race down the cracked sidewalk.

I ignore him.

It is a horrible trait that will one day backfire on me.

Mercifully, that day is not today.

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**ALEK**

“*T*old you. She’s as stubborn as fuck.”

Yev switches his headshake to a nod when I ask, “Did you deliver the rest?”

The groceries Ana left the store with won’t be a drop in the ocean compared to the ones Yev delivered while I embarked on a verbal tirade with Ana on the sidewalk.

People from these parts didn’t bat an eyelid at our shameful spectacles. Our tussles were so vocal during our relationship they went unnoticed. We didn’t have shit to fight about. We just enjoyed the make-up sex too much to realize we were bitching about anything that would cause a rift.

I fucking loved fighting with her.

It was better than any sex I’ve had since she left.

Needing to get my head back into the game, I ask, “What about the landlord?”

I sling my eyes to Yev when he answers, “I could only pay half.” He laughs at my shocked expression before revealing just how badly in debt Ana’s father is. “He was a year in the hole. Since I think I know you a little better than you know yourself, I told Pete I’ll be back with the rest this afternoon.”

Nodding, I agree with him. Not the part about him knowing me better

than I know myself. About me wanting to pay all Ana's father's back rent. "Bring back double." Yev's you're-so-fancy whistle rustles through his teeth when I add, "And another twenty K in small denominations." This fucking sucks to say. "She might accept if she thinks the funding isn't coming from me."

Yev wipes his sweaty palms onto his jeans. "I reckon you would have hooked her if you hadn't mentioned her returning to Sicily."

I scrub at my jaw, tracing the tic there. "I couldn't fucking help it." I only stayed away from Ana the past four years because I thought she was living the high life. Shows not everything you see on social media is real.

I shift my focus back to Yev when he tugs on his seat belt while murmuring, "I reckon you were also on the money about your other comment too, though." I arch a brow, silently demanding he spill the beans. With a laugh, he says, "That she was doing him up the ass with the strap-on." When my jaw grits, hating the idea of Anastasia with anyone, he laughs louder. "What? You saw the pictures. He's totally batting for the other team." He nudges me with his shoulder before firing up the ignition. "That's why you let him live, right?"

It is, but I'm not going to tell him that. "We need to stop by Polina's store." Now it's Yev's turn to be confused. "Because once you convince Ana to accept my proposal, she's going to need to look the part of a woman willing to lose twenty Gs in a friendly game of cards."

"A pretty little number will also keep their focus off the number of times she bluffs." When I shoot him a riled look, suddenly wondering if this is a good idea, he shrugs. "She bluffs a lot." He pulls onto the busy street before murmuring, "You should know that better than anyone."

I know what he's referencing without him needing to spell it out. He's talking about the time Ana told me she didn't love me anymore. I refused to let her leave until she said it to my face. She complied without fucking flinching.

It gutted me.

Up until last night, that was the last time we spoke.

“Hold up,” I murmur when my phone commences ringing. Only two people have my number. My sister and Ghost, and both only call in an emergency.

The screen displays it is Ghost.

“What’s up?” I ask after squashing the phone to my ear.

“I need a doctor. Someone discreet.”

I rack my brain for a second before replying, “For you or Kate?” We have a lot of discreet doctors. We’re the fucking bratva. What else did you expect?

I’m blown completely off the mark when Ghost replies, “Sofia.” She is his baby sister, who is as much a pain in his ass as Polina is mine. “We can’t control the bleeding. She’s clammy and shit like Katie was but a cool bath isn’t helping.”

“Have you called Dr. Marc?” He is the only gynecologist we trust, and it is an extremely thin band circling him. If he hadn’t agreed to keep Katie’s false pregnancy under wraps, he would have been let go months ago.

By let go, I mean killed.

“Can’t. Kirill has men on him. He’s suspicious as fuck.” A painful groan doubles the speed of his voice. “I need someone, Alek. She isn’t good.”

“I’ll get someone.”

Confident I won’t let him down, Ghost disconnects our call.

“Where do you need me to take you?” Yev asks, aware of the urgency of Ghost’s request but clueless as to why we can’t use the correct channels. Sofia hasn’t left the compound in years, and when she does, she is flanked by Kirill’s top men. He’s so over-the-top with precautions, you’d never think he has married another dozen women since his wedding with Sofia six years ago.

As I peer back at Ana’s building in the side mirror of Yev’s sports car, I say, “Stay with Ana. I’ll find my own way back to the compound.”



He breathes out, “All right,” as I toss open his door and commandeer a sleek black SUV coming from the opposite direction. I don’t do it the lawful way. I draw my gun on the driver until he either pulls over voluntarily or with a bullet between his brows, then drag him out by the lapels of his suit jacket.

“Keep me updated on Ana,” I demand to Yev when I do a one-eighty around him before leaving him in a rubber dust cloud.

Thirty minutes later, I skid to a stop at the front of the compound.

“He wants to scan your ID,” I say to the balding fat guy in my passenger seat.

“Oh. Um...” He ruffles through the bag I forced him to pack by gunpoint to produce his hospital ID. I bet he wishes he wasn’t so eager for a smoke break this morning. “Will this do?”

The guard snatches the identification card from his grasp then slants his head to look at me. “Who is he here for?”

I want to fucking gut him for his tone, but instead, I smash my back molars together and then pretend I am the prick Ana believes I am. “I knocked up one of the whores. I ain’t paying for a kid I don’t want for the next eighteen years.”

The guard gives me an understanding look before gesturing for the three gunned-up goons in front of us to move.

“Oh dear,” the doctor murmurs when I steer him into Sofia’s wing. The grandeur would have you convinced she is a princess, not a captive enslaved to a monster.

As I take a step back, my eyes shoot down to my feet. Blood isn’t the only thing soaking into Sofia’s mattress. An undeveloped fetus is as well.

“He’s dead,” Ghost announces to the doctor when he veers for the baby first. “And so the fuck will you be if you don’t help her.” Ghost’s fuse is shorter than a match head, but it is even scarcer when it comes to his sister. The only person who’s been able to force their way into his protective bubble of late is Katie, but to save her, he has to let go of the shield he’s been

umbrellaing Sofia and her daughter, Lera, under the past four years.

“What the fuck happened?” I ask Ghost while the doctor conducts a range of tests on a scarcely alert Sofia.

“I don’t know.” He sounds genuinely lost. “She had that miscarriage a couple of months back.” By miscarriage, he means forced abortion. “He would have made sure everything was removed.”

As my eyes stray to the baby too tiny to live outside of its mother’s womb, I murmur, “Clearly something was missed.”

Ghost doesn’t reply. He is too busy struggling not to yank out one of his pistols and pop a bullet into the doctor’s head when he announces he can’t stop the bleeding. “It can’t be controlled by normal methods. Her uterus isn’t contracting properly after birth. If we don’t respond quickly, she will bleed out.”

“Then make it contract,” Ghost demands, his voice a roar.

“I can’t,” replies the man of tiny stature but wide girth. “Not here. She needs a full hysterectomy.” When his announcement leaves us speechless, he adds, “We don’t have time to waste. We must act quickly.”

“Tell him,” I suggest to Ghost, turning to face him. “He loved her enough once to marry her, so maybe he’ll let her go for this.”

“But that will put Lera in his sights. If she leaves...” he locks his eyes with his sister, who is as white as the name that never graced a birth certificate, “... his targets will hone in on Lera.”

“Then we’ll give him someone else to set his focus on.” If looks could kill, I’d be a dead man. “Not Kate.” I drag my hand down my body. “He fuckin’ hates me and would give anything to kill me.” I smile like a smug prick. “But he can’t. My mafia lineage is a fuck-ton smaller than yours, but notable enough Kirill can’t touch me.” My reply hasn’t lessened the grooves between his brows in the slightest. “So, give him me. If you don’t return with Sofia in...” I shift my focus to the doctor. “How long will she be out?”

“A day. Two at most.”

I angle my head back to Ghost. “If she’s not back by tomorrow night, I’ll sign my own fucking death certificate.”

This is cocky as fuck for me to admit, but I’m not experiencing an ounce of fear from my reply. Ghost will come back for me as much as he would Sofia and Lera. It is why my face is unmarked while his wears the effects of it being blown to shreds. He threw himself onto a grenade rolling across the room, meaning I remained unscathed while his body took the full brunt of the explosion.

Ghost isn’t on board with my plans. “Do it here.”

“I can’t.” The doctor’s apologetic tone is the only thing keeping him alive. “With unsterile equipment, her death will switch from fast and relatively painless to slow and agonizing.”

His honesty gets Ghost over the line. “I hope your calendar is empty because you’re going to spend the next twenty-four hours twiddling your thumbs in Kirill’s office.”

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KIRILL IS A CUNT.

There is no kinder word for him.

He refused Ghost’s request to take Sofia out of the compound purely to be a prick, then sat at the side of her room, watching the doctor perform a vaginal hysterectomy with the most basic of equipment all to fuck with Ghost’s head.

He didn’t even look at his son lying dead on his first wife’s bed. He was hardly human, but he has hands, feet, and genitals that make no fucking sense when it comes to Kirill’s madness about wanting a son. He wants an heir, but he could literally not care less that his wife just miscarried his son at five months’ gestation.

It makes no fucking sense.

“I’m sorry. I’ve done everything I can. I’m not sure what else I can do.” This is the point Ghost’s gun would usually be squashed against the doctor’s temple, but the humility he has displayed to Sofia and her unborn baby keeps his brain in his skull. “It is just a waiting game now.”

Ghost dips his chin before moving to the side of Sofia’s bed to replace her dry washcloth with a wet one. He’s here, but not, if that makes any sense, and there is no better proof of that than his murmured comment, “Alek will show you the way out.”

The doctor appears as surprised as me while he gathers up his things.

“Leave him,” I grumble when his focus shifts to a bundle of towels at the foot of Sofia’s bed. “I’ll take care of him.” In our industry, that usually means something completely different than how I’m referencing it this time around.

The doctor mimics Ghost’s head bob before he follows me out of the compound.

An hour later, I bury a second unnamed child in the Bobrov garden.

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**ANASTASIA**

“*E*ve, you’ve got a new whale.”

I place down my client’s order, grimacing when he hands me a measly two-dollar tip before spinning to face Jax. The tops in this strip club leave more to the imagination than The Penthouse, but not by much. My nipples are covered with thin latex triangles instead of metal tassels that clanged together every time I took a step.

When my eyes meet with Jax’s across the room, I’m tempted to sprint for the exit. My tips tonight won’t make a dent in my father’s debt, but it might pay half of the groceries the man being guided to the private booths purchased against my wishes.

The only reason I don’t is because this is the first time I’ve seen Alek in days. The last time he failed to chase me down saw us not seeing each other for four years, and it has me wondering if Yev’s claims that he’s never moved on from me are true.

I guess he had no reason to show up until now. My other jobs require clothing. I only started at Spanks tonight. It’s my very first shift.

“What did he order?”

Jax twirls a platinum credit card around his fingers. “The fucking works. Daddy has deep pockets.” He whips his hair side to side while clicking his fingers together. “Regretfully, he only has eyes for one blonde.”

While smiling about his pout, I ask, “Have you run his card yet?”

He shakes his head. “We usually wait. A lot of johns request the works, then demand a refund when they don’t last a second.” When he hears the groan I didn’t mean to express, he mutters, “As I said earlier today, you only do what you want to do. If that’s nothing but dancing, then you only have to shake your little caboose. I ain’t forcing any girl to do anything they don’t want to do.” He leans in close, then snickers. “Men... that’s another story.” He clicks his fingers in my face all sassy-like.

It sucks that Alek tracked me down so soon after finding alternative employment. Jax makes it seem as if I’m working at a nightclub instead of a strip joint.

Mistaking my forlorn look, Jax asks, “You want me to run it through now? Put a hold on it to make sure he can afford what he’s asking for?”

I shake my head. “He can afford it. He has more money than sense these days.”

After squeezing his hand in silent thanks for his support, I mosey toward the private booths. Most strip clubs are designed the same way. Maksim’s just aren’t quite as sleazy.

Only once I’m certain I have my game face on do I enter the room assigned to Alek. I’m preparing for war, so you can imagine my shock when I enter a pitch-black room.

“Please don’t,” Alek grumbles when my hunt for the light switch sends a scratchy noise booming into the room. “I have a massive fucking headache, and for the first time in my life, it doesn’t start with the letters A N A.”

His groan makes me smile. He always called me the biggest headache of his life. I took it as a compliment. It seems I was the only woman ever capable of tying him down, and that was purely because I kept him on his toes.

He grows bored easily, and some of our downfall can be blamed on my failure to remember that.

“What are you doing here, Alek?” My tone is lower than my previous one, barely a whisper. “If it is about the rent and groceries, I’ll get the—”

“I need to sleep.” With my eyes slowly adjusting to the dark, I spot him dropping the arm covering his sleepy eyes. “And I can’t do that with anyone else but you.”

I laugh a witch-like cackle. “What are you trying to say? You haven’t slept once in the past four years? Even vampires need some shuteye.”

“I’ve slept.” He sits up on the bed, which leaves no doubt as to what services some dancers here offer. “Just not without assistance.” I need to get a hold of my expressions. Only a handful of creases line my nose when I screw it up before Alek corrects, “Drugs. Drugs helped me sleep.” He scrubs at the back of his neck while murmuring, “But I can’t do that right now. Too much shit is going down.”

My tone is as pathetic as the immature brat I’m acting like when I mumble, “So great to learn I’m your second choice... *again*.”

“Fuck, *драгоценный*. That isn’t what I meant.”

“It’s Ana.”

He acts as if I never spoke. “You don’t have to fucking touch me. I just want you to lay next to me for a couple of hours, so I can stop my brain from fucking exploding and dripping down my nostril cavities.”

The pain in his voice is my undoing. It buckles my resolve in an instant. He was plagued by migraines our entire relationship. They’re a consequence of the accident that saw him removed from his family home and placed into foster care.

My father is bad, but Alek’s was worse.

“You need to scoot. These beds aren’t designed for people to lay side by side.”

Again, he groans before he does as asked.

“Do you have water?”

He kicks the bag dumped on the end of the single bed, highlighting a half-

empty gallon of water.

“Where’s your medication?”

“I’ve already taken it.” He grimaces like something as simple as speaking is torturous. “They haven’t done shit. I just need sleep.”

Since I agree with him, I tug off my heels, unbutton the button at the top of my denim shorts so it won’t dig in while lying motionless, then slip onto the scarce bit of mattress Alek reserved for me. He isn’t meaning to be a hog. He’s just too big for such a little bed.

“Stop concentrating on how hard your head is thumping.” Unconsciously, I run my thumb over his furrowed brows. “Think about *anything* else. My breathing. The flutter of the air conditioning vents. The splashes of the ocean when its lolls rock you to sleep.”

We didn’t have much to our name when we began dating, but we had a little safety boat that hung several feet above the ocean on the cargo ship the Bobrovs recently purchased. We ate picnics in it and made love on the hard, rusty floor. We even spent a handful of summer nights out there, watching the stars while hiding from the men transforming the insides into a luxury vessel.

It was a little hidey-hole that was solely for us, and I loved it almost as much as I did Alek.

I tried to replicate some of the memories on the boat towed behind Tommaso’s yacht. The glossed wooden benches and unfamiliar smells killed it. Not to mention the three little terrorists who found me no matter where I hid.

I wasn’t Tommaso’s love interest. I was his children’s vacation nanny. When his regular nanny took holidays, I stepped in to help. It sounds luxurious until you realize a nanny does every horrible task a parent doesn’t want to do. The teeth brushing, butt wiping, and endless amounts of homework. And let’s not mention trying to make children follow their vegan parents’ lifestyle choices.



It wasn't a fun time, but it hurt less than my last week in Russia, so I stuck with it until my father's begs assured me he wouldn't see the year out alive.

He owes too many people too much money, and now Alek is on his list as well.

My father was too hungry to realize he couldn't eat the food Alek had delivered. He scarfed down packet after packet of sweets before bringing them up in the shower that once again has hot water thanks to Alek's generosity. The gas ran out a month ago, but I didn't have the money to pay the bill, so I either showered at work or in the middle of the day so I wouldn't freeze to death.

When I notice Alek's breathing is leveled and the rapid movement under his eyelids has settled, I drop my thumb from his brow and drink in the features I never thought I'd take in again.

He should have aged since I left him, but only the faintest wrinkles line the corners of his eyes. His dirty blond locks are devoid of a single gray hair, and despite his affirmation that your nose never stops growing, his is still the perfect size for his mannish face.

He hasn't aged a day, and I should hate him for it. But I just can't.

I hate what he represents not the man he is.

"Stay," Alek murmurs on a whisper when the thought of sneaking out creeps into my head. When I flinch, he pops open one eye that's still displaying how much pain he's in before he mutters, "After all this time, I can still read your thoughts."

*Then read this, asshole. You're a jerk!*

He chuckles, making me screw up my nose like a rabbit.

His laughter dies down as quickly as it reaches his ears. "Fuck. That hurts."

Without thought, I return my head to my share of the pillow, then my thumb to his brow. "I'll stay for an hour, but then I need to get back to work."

“An hour works. I can handle an hour.”

His lips quirk at one side when I mutter, “You won’t be saying that when you get the bill.”

“It’ll be worth it.” He tightens his grip around my waist before he eventually falls asleep.

I succumb to the rhythmic beat of his heart not long after him.

By the time I wake, the sun is up, the strip club is empty, and so is the bed I’m suddenly praying had its sheets changed before Alek arrived. I’m so anal about clean sheets—I lost everything because of them.

Jax’s wolf whistle is too piercing for the early hour. “You look better than I expected. I’ve been in this industry for eight years, and I’ve yet to witness an all-nighter.” He waits for me to join him near the empty bar before asking, “Was he good? He has gigantic hands, and you know what they say about big hands. Big hands, big—”

“Socks?”

He shushes me by throwing the receipts he’s bundling into my face. “It rhymes with sock.” While gathering up the mess he made, he asks, “Direct deposit or cash?” I peer at him in shock, but he must miss it because he keeps rambling on, “Cash requires a ten percent surcharge. Something about no bank fees. Normally, you wouldn’t notice it, but for an all-night gig, you’ll feel the pinch.”

My eyes bulge when he spins his calculator around to face me. “Are those my earnings?”

“No, baby girl.” His chuckles fan my cheeks with hot air. “That’s the ten percent you’ll lose if you choose cash.”

“That can’t be right. There’s no way I made five figures in one night.”

“Pussies are expensive.” He does a head clicky thing before adding, “I’ve been saving up for one for donkeys.” His expression reveals how excited he is to begin transitioning before he brings us back to reality with a stern tsk. “So, baby girl, cash or direct deposit?”

“Cash, please.” Depositing ninety-nine percent of it into the glove box of Alek’s car will be the only way he will accept a refund, so I have to carry over twenty thousand dollars from one side of town to the next. I ran into Ilya yesterday. He said Alek still hadn’t collected his car. He is considering charging an impound fee. “This is your share of my tips.” I dig a measly couple of bills out of the pocket of my denim jeans to hand them to Jax. “I only served a couple of rounds before...” I wave my hand to the room I vacated only minutes ago like it will explain what I mean.

“Honey, you can keep it. Where do you think a majority of the ten percent surcharge goes?” Jax whistles out while handing me the biggest bundle of cash I’ve ever handled. “Do you want one of the guys to walk you out?” He drags his head to the left before slinging it to the right. “I’m sure I can find someone.”

“It’s fine. I can handle it.”

He angles his head and cocks a brow. “You sure? That’s a lot of money.”

“Positive.” After grabbing my things from the change room, I dump the bundles into the bottom of my backpack, then cover it with a sweater. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Ahhh...” When I spin to face Jax, he twists his lips. “I don’t have any vacant shifts tomorrow.”

We’ve only just met, so I can’t call him out as a liar, but I have a feeling he’s being deceitful. “Sunday?”

“We’re closed Sundays.” Before I can display just how desperate I am, he advises, “And Mondays are dead. We only just cover the bar staff.”

“Tuesday?” I sound like a loser.

“Tuesday...” He flicks through an imaginary planner before bobbing his head. “Yeah, Tuesday works. I’ll see you Tuesday.”

I issue my thanks with a smile before heading for the closest exit. I’m partway through it when Jax shouts, “If you happen to find anything else before Tuesday, give me a call so I can fill your shift.”

I'm highly doubtful anything will pop up, but I give him my assurance with a wave before stepping into the bitterly cold morning air. It is so damn freezing, I am tempted to yank out the sweater hiding the bundle of bills in my backpack for some extra warmth. The only reason I won't is because the zipper is busted so anyone can peer inside.

I won't make it three blocks if people learn how much money I'm carrying.

This amount of money could change someone's life. It could mine as well, but only if I am willing to place my father's debt back onto his shoulders.

Since I'm not, I adjust my grip on my backpack and continue my walk.

I'm halfway to The Penthouse when I can't ignore my intuition for a second longer. I'm being tailed. It just isn't from the man I'm anticipating.

"If you were watching where you're going instead of ten places in front of you, you would have avoided that." I spin to face Yev, who is smearing dog poo from his loafers back onto the sidewalk. "When did you start wearing loafers?"

He shakes his foot firm enough to dislodge the last clump of poo before joining me further up the sidewalk. "You don't like them? I think they make me look sophisticated."

"They make you look old."

With a grin, he barges me with his shoulder before shadowing my walk at my side instead of several steps back. "So you're telling me I'm in with a chance?" When I groan, he mutters, "What? You've always had a thing for older men."

"Alek. I had a thing for Alek, and he's not that much older than us."

He makes our age gap seem far worse than it was when he murmurs, "Say that to a sixteen-year-old eyeing a six-year-old." He coughs out his last words, his snicker breathless since I winded him with a sock to the stomach. "You both still hit just as hard as each other."

His reply freezes me in my tracks. “Alek hit you?” When he grins and nods, I stammer out, “When? Why?” My concern seems nowhere near as serious when I ask, “Was it closed fist or open?”

Yev loops his arm around my elbow and continues our trek while replying, “I dodged his open-handed fist.” He angles his head so I can see the bruise fading under his eye. “Wasn’t so lucky with the second swing.”

“Did you retaliate?” Yev is playful, fun, and always the life of the party, but he could knock any man on his ass. If he didn’t have such a short fuse, he could have gone pro.

His grin gleams in the early morning sun. “Nah. I deserved it.”

“How does anyone deserve a punch in the eye?”

Everything makes sense when he murmurs, “I told him how you put me in place, and how you needed two hands to do it.”

“Oh my God, Yev!” I sock him again. This time, I drop my aim a couple of inches below his navel. “You’re lucky he only hit you. Only a couple of years ago, that would have seen you buried in a shallow ditch.”

Spit flies in all directions when he *pffts* me. “Please. That would mean he’d have to dig a hole, and you know Alek only does that for the people he likes. He would have dumped me in the ocean.”

His reply is mostly honest. “Alek likes you.”

He screws up his face like he doesn’t believe me. “I still think he blames me for you guys breaking up.”

Over our conversation, I double the length of my strides. The only person responsible for our breakup is Alek—the very man leaning against the passenger side door of the car I was planning to deposit twenty thousand dollars into. He looks well-rested, and his eyes aren’t as pained as they were last night. His migraine is gone—*or perhaps it is only just beginning*.

“I can’t accept your money.”

Alek tightens the fold of his arms before peering over my shoulder. With a lift of his chin, he dismisses Yev from my watch.

He tries to hide the tic of his jaw by scrubbing his hand along it when Yev checks with me on what I want him to do. He'd stay if I asked, but after his confession, I think it'll be best if he leaves.

“We'll catch up soon, okay?”

He smiles, jerks up his chin, then disappears into the fog that won't lift for several more hours.

Once he disappears, I plan to get back to the conversation about the ridiculous amount of money Alek paid to lie next to me, but Alek has other ideas. “Why aren't you wearing a coat? It is fucking freezing out.”

I don't own a coat, but I'm not going to tell him that.

“I had to pay a ten percent surcharge for cash, so not all you paid is in here—”

“Where the fuck is your coat, *драгоценный*?”

I continue talking as if he didn't speak. “But considering your migraine is gone, I'm sure you'll see it as money well spent.”

“*драгоценный*.”

“I can't be sure without proof, but I think some of the cash circulating last night was being laundered, so you might want to take it through a similar process to make sure you don't get caught.”

“*драгоценный*.”

“Or perhaps your money is dirty, so you gave it to Jax to launder.” I shrug, truly confused. “Either way, here is your money.”

“*драгоценный!*”

“What,” I shout back, over the use of a nickname I've always loathed.

There is *nothing* precious about me.

White puffs of air escape Alek's nose when he repeats, “Your coat? Where is your fucking coat?”

“I don't own a coat!” I thrust my hand to the left like my father's building is on the horizon. “I took everything when I moved in with you, so when I came back, I had nothing. It is also really fucking hot in Italy. Coats...”

My words trail off when Alek rises to his full height. I'm short, so it should be intimidating. However, my body acts on the opposite end of the scale. "Get in the car, Ana."

"What? Why would—"

"Get. In. The. Car." He stoops down low, bringing his face to within an inch of mine. "Or I'll take you over my knee and spank you until you have no choice but to get in my car, since you'll no longer be able to walk." He waits a beat to ensure I can't miss the absolute truth in his eyes before adding, "I played nice. I'm done with that now. Get in the fucking car."

Confident I'll obey, he stands to his full height again, puffs out his chest, then stalks to the driver's side door of his pricy ride.

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**ALEK**

*W*ith her grumbles unconcealed and her attitude at an all-time high, Anastasia slips her scarcely covered ass onto the passenger seat of my car and slams the door shut.

“Seat belt.”

“I...” She thinks better of her reply. Opting to keep her mouth shut, she glares at me while pulling the seat belt across her chest and latching it into place.

The heat of her stare doubles when I activate the lock feature. Even if she has a change of heart, she can’t go anywhere. The doors won’t open.

“You’re welcome, by the way,” she murmurs once I pull into traffic. When I peer at her, confused, she adds, “Only hours ago, you would have been too curled over in pain to yell at me.”

“I didn’t yell at you.” I wring the steering wheel while saying, “I also still would have been here this morning whether or not you had helped me.” The confusion on my face jumps onto hers when I mutter, “I learned my lesson once before. I won’t do it again.”

Her brows are furrowed, but since I’m signaling to turn right, she shifts her focus in another direction. “You need to take the i20 at this hour. Traffic will be gridlocked on the motorway.”

“We’re not going on the motorway. We’re going over it.”



“That’s still going to be bumper to bumper.” Forever stubborn, she leans over to change my signal to left while murmuring, “Just take a left here, and I’ll guide you the quickest route home.”

I switch the indicator back to right. “I’m not taking you home.” When I spot her erect nipples in the corner of my eye, it is the fight of my life to free my next set of words out of my clenched jaw. She is so fucking cold her nipples were stabbing into my chest when I silently goaded her to deny me. “I’m taking you to get a damn coat.”

“I’m not letting you buy me a coat.” She tests the locks before folding her arms over the very thing turning my mood manic.

She was using cardboard for a blanket the night I finally tracked her down. I didn’t give a fuck about my license or the measly bit of cash I had in my wallet. I wanted the only family photograph I had that didn’t include my father. It was a picture of my mom, Polina, and me when we thought we had finally escaped his wrath.

My mother was killed hours after the picture was taken.

I was supposed to get back the image then leave.

When my eyes landed on Anastasia, my feet refused to budge. I was left with no choice but to toss Anastasia over my shoulder and take her home with me. It was a piece-of-shit rundown studio apartment, but once I stopped plotting ways to spend the winter months locked up, I slowly transformed it into the home I never had as a kid.

Eventually, with Ghost’s help, I purchased every apartment in my building. Anastasia and I shared the top floor, and the rest were for people like us. The unwanted.

I haven’t been back there in years, but I know our apartment hasn’t been touched. I told anyone who’d listen if they touched it, I’d kill them.

“Alek...” Anastasia breathes out heavily when our surroundings become familiar. “You still live here?”

She is quick to shut down the disappointment that blazes through her eyes

when I shake my head, but she isn't fast enough for me to miss it. "But all your things still do. I'm sure you'll have a coat or ten."

"More like a hundred." She crosses her legs over before twisting her torso to face me. "Remember that winter you bought me one for every day of that snowstorm? You didn't want to wash."

"I was more than happy to do the laundry."

Her laughter twitches my cock. "Paying someone to do your laundry and doing it yourself are two completely different things."

Anastasia laughs so hard she snorts when I mutter, "Says you."

The real reason I wanted to pay someone was to stop Anastasia from carting our dirty clothes to the laundry room in the basement. The elevator only went to the foyer, so she would have had to carry the basket down a level of unsafe stairs. Considering her stomach was swollen with my child, I didn't want her to do that.

With her memories pushing our earlier fight into the background of her mind, she unlatches her belt and follows me into the foyer of our old apartment building. "Still smells the same."

"It's the mold. After a while, you start believing it is aromatic."

I fight not to bend in two when she socks me in the stomach before she enters the elevator I'm holding open for her. "If this place was moldy, you wouldn't have let me stay here."

She's right. I wouldn't have. Her safety was always my priority.

"Is Ms. Babanin still in 5A?"

Her lip drops into a pout when I shake my head. "She moved out a couple of years back. I think she's in Moscow with her sister."

Anastasia's eyes pop. "The one she hates?"

I shrug. I wasn't in the know as much as Anastasia.

We ride the elevator in silence for a couple of seconds before she finally breaks it. "I'm glad she eventually got back to Moscow. She's been wanting to return there for decades. Even when it hurts, your hometown never stops

calling you.”

Memories flood in hard and fast when the elevator dings open on the top level. The couch I took her against on her sixteenth birthday. The tub we both can't fit in but still tried every single weekend. The refrigerator Yev and I dented when we carried it up several flights of stairs since it was too wide to fit in the elevator. And the overflowing walk-in closet since there are hundreds of coats stuffed into the space we were considering changing to a nursery.

“Can I?” Ana asks when her eyes land on the walk-in closet.

I jerk up my chin. “Take what you want. They're all yours anyway.”

As she rummages through years of clothing, I prop my shoulder onto the doorjamb and watch her. I may as well get comfortable. She's going to be here for hours.

When we started knocking down walls to make my studio into an apartment, we didn't have enough clothes between us to fill a set of drawers.

Before she left, we had side-by-side walk-in closets that were once studios.

I thought we had the world at our feet, then it crumbled.

“Why aren't you digging in the back?” I ask when Ana's attention rarely veers from the first few racks. “That's where you keep all your good stuff.”

Forever worried about getting robbed, she stashed her favorite things in the hardest places to grab them. If you do a grab-and-run, you'll only ever get the things she was handed down or paid for herself. You won't get close to her designer babies.

Another migraine presents in a hurry when Ana replies, “I'm fine here. This stuff is great.”

“That stuff is knock-off and cheap. It won't keep you warm.” I pluck her up from the floor and walk her to the far corner of the space. “Start here and work your way back to the door.”

“I can't take this stuff, Alek. They're not mine.”

I try to simmer my anger—try and boil it down. It is a damn waste of time. “How the fuck aren’t they yours? I bought them for *you*.”

“Exactly. *You* bought them, not me.”

She tries to step past me, but I block her path. Her closet is huge but I’m a fucking giant. “Don’t make me threaten you again, *драгоценный*. Not in a confined space. Not in an area where there’s no one to save you from me.”

When her neck flutters instead of forcefully swallowing as expected, my anger switches to want in an instant. The shouting, the anger, the violence. It all makes sense now.

We fought as foreplay.

Then we made up by fucking.

It is the way we’re programmed.

“Unless that’s why you’re pushing me?” I step closer, forcing her to merge into the outfits she’s disowning. “Because you want me to punish you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Her tone is low, her expression bland. She would fool any man who didn’t know her as well as I do. “Why would I do such a thing?”

“Because the sex was always out of this world, but it went to an entirely different galaxy when you pissed me off.”

Her lack of reply sinks her ruse and confirms my theory.

We won’t step past anything we’re facing with words.

She needs my dick.

“Five...”

Her hot breath hits my cheek when she mutters, “Alek. Don’t. This isn’t why I’m here.”

“Four...”

A flash darts through her eyes before she tries to suppress it. “I’m not sleeping with you.”

“Three...”

I grow worried I can't read her like I once could when I mutter, "Two..."

There's no reason to fret. Not another syllable seeps from my lips before she darts past me and sprints out of the dressing room.

If she didn't want me to chase her, she would have remained put.

Anastasia's fantasy is being hunted, and I chased her a minimum of once a month during our three years together. Once we even took our adventures outdoors. I'd never been so hard as I was when I took her in camo gear in the middle of a forest.

Except perhaps now. My cock is braced against the zipper of my jeans, begging to be freed.

"Soon," I murmur to myself while taking off after Anastasia.

I find her in the entryway and catch up to her before she makes it outside. "I found you."

As I squash her head to the door like a police officer would a perp, I drop my hand to her teeny tiny shorts. Once they're huddled around her knees and shredded enough she won't ever be able to wear them again, I free my erection from my jeans.

"You better fucking hope your quick dash made you wet, or I'm going to tear you in half."

Her mewls tell me everything I need to know.

She is fucking drenched.

My endeavor to keep her contained and enter her isn't pretty. It is rough and unhinged, much like the hold I place on her head to keep her still, but my fucking god, it is the equivalent of heaven when I finally sink into her.

"Did you really think you could outrun me?" I drive into her on repeat, loving the tightness of her pussy walls as they cling to me, equally pained by the intrusion as they are turned on. "That I wouldn't track you down and make you mine... *again*." I drag her hair away from her face, then force her head back to look at me. "You'll never be free of me."

Although parts of my comments are role-play, they're the exact words

that ran through my head when I followed her to Europe the month she left me. I had every intention of dragging her home, kicking and screaming. The only reason I didn't was because a bratva war had erupted, and she was safer in Italy than with me.

I was meant to bring her back when things settled down, but by then, I was too late. She was with Tommaso.

“This fucking pussy belongs to no one but me.” I slam into her so furiously the bangs of my rocks will have several floors below us checking their peepholes for unwanted visitors. “It was made for *me*. Crafted for *me*. It is fucking *mine*.” My hand drops from her hair to curl around her throat. “Say it, *драгоценный*.” I tighten my grip when the stubbornness in her eyes remains strong before repeating, “Say it.”

My cock throbs through a brutal release when Ana murmurs huskily, “Make me.”

With cum still rocketing out of my dick, I pull out of her clenching pussy, walk her to the dining table, clear away the dishware she left there the day our world imploded, then plonk her ass at the king's end of the table.

“You wanna beg, Ana? I can make you beg.”

When her thighs tremor from my gasping breaths hitting her slit, I up the ante of making her scream by tugging off her shorts, flipping her over, dragging her back, then burying my head between her ass cheeks.

“Ohh...”

She tries to hold back her pleasure, to make out I'm the only one steamrolling toward another release, but the instant I rub the cum dripping out of her onto her clit then stuff two fingers inside her, she's lost to the sensation burning her alive.

“Oh. Oh. *Ohh...*”

“Louder.” I stab my tongue into her puckered hole while slapping and gripping her ass so firmly, my teeth imprints won't be the only part of me she'll be wearing the next week.

The initial pain of me stretching her passes as she inches closer to an orgasmic wave. She is still tight as fuck and sucking at my fingers like she wishes they were my cock, but her juices are loosening her up, opening her to me.

As I eat her ass, I force her hips into a swaying movement with the hand not filling her greedy cunt. The changeup has her moans bouncing off the walls and her thighs shuddering. She is on the brink of release, but not a single fucking plea is leaving her lips.

“Beg me!”

I circle my tongue around her anus for the hundredth time before yanking back to slap her ass with enough force for her to whimper.

When I push my thumb against her ass, the pressure brings out the moans I’m seeking.

“Pl-please.”

I push down firm enough to invade the tight circle but not penetrate it before asking, “What was that?”

She remains quiet.

*Stubborn fucking girl.*

Confident I’ve got what is needed to have her begging, I remove my fingers from her clenching cunt, then replace them with my dick. I slam in without remorse, and like the prick she wants me to be, I don’t wait for her to acclimate to my girth. I yank straight back out before forcefully ramming back in.

“Yesss,” Ana hisses on a moan, her hips rocking to match mine, which forces more of my thumb into her tight ass. “Fuck me, Alek. Please.”

My growl sounds like a warning, an alarm telling her how fucking close I am to losing control. I can be a cruel fucker in the bedroom but only because I know she can take it.

“Look at you. Two holes already filled but still greedy and seeking more.”

Once I've positioned her so I can enter her without hindrance, I free her hip from my grasp and then twist it around her glossy locks. When I tug her back with force, arching her back until it displays a perfect U, her whimpering moan doubles the tingles racing through my balls.

“You want more, don't you, драгоценный?”

“Yes.” She swallows like her mouth isn't as drenched as her cunt before muttering, “Please. More.”

I steal some of the wetness drenching her throat by switching the focus of my hand from her hair to her neck. While continuing to thrust in and out of her, I grip her throat firm enough to limit her breaths but not end them entirely.

When her lips turn a fascinating shade of blue, I loosen my grip before lifting my index and middle finger to her mouth. “Open up. I want every fucking hole you own consumed by me.”

With my dick in her pussy, my thumb in her ass, and my fingers in her mouth, I've got all my bases covered.

“I told you this table is the fucking perfect height.”

Our position should be odd, but since I stand several inches taller than Anastasia, not to mention our differences in width, I face no issues demanding the attention of every inch of her body. I tower over her, and since my dick isn't short, even with only a little over half being stuffed inside her, I'm sure it is still more inches than she got in Italy.

The reminder of our time apart has me pumping into her harder. I fuck her like a madman, each thrust skidding Ana's knees across the table more and more.

I eventually have to remove my fingers from her mouth to tangle them with her hair again. It is the only way I can tether her clenching cunt to my cock.

The change gives her even more inches and pushes her deeper into the throes I want to deny until she promises never to run again, but then I realize



that isn't us.

When Ana runs, I chase her.

It is the way we operate.

"I wanted to chase you. I went to Italy. I just..." My words fall short when she peers back at me in shock. Her mouth is hanging open, and her eyes are filled with more than lust. Tears are there too. "It was a fucking war zone."

I want her to know I was protecting her, but it does the opposite. "So you picked them again?"

"No, *драгоценный*. It wasn't about them." When she tries to pull back, I yank her back onto my cock with a cruel tug on her hair. "It was about you. It was stopping you from facing what I've faced the past four years." For the first time in years, I am honest. "And it was for her. I couldn't leave her." When nothing but bewilderment hardens her features, I explain, "I took her." The remembrance of that day softens my cock enough for it to slip out of Ana. It is for the best. I want her facing me when I admit to what I did. "I couldn't leave her there. She deserved to be buried. To be acknowledged." Salty blobs gloss her cheeks when I mutter, "So I took her."

Shock is the first expression Anastasia exposes.

It is quickly chased by anger.

Pure rage.

"You fucking ass!" She whacks into me as if all her energy wasn't depleted while fucking. "She wasn't yours to take!" She beats into me another three times, her whacks growing in momentum the more often they occur. "She wasn't yours. She was mine."

"Ours, Ana! She was *ours*."

She pushes me away from her with everything she has. "You didn't give birth to her." She gathers up her clothing as if they're not torn. "You weren't even there for her birth."

When I issue her the same excuse I always give, she looks like she'd give

anything to hurt me as much as she was hurt that day four years ago. “I came as soon as I could.”

“But it was too late, Alekander. She was already dead.”

With her hurt too high to register she’s barely dressed—and mine too perverse to react—she races for the front door of the apartment.

And I let her go.

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**ANASTASIA**

When the creak of the laundry door opening filters into the room, I brush away the salty blobs on my cheeks with the sleeve of my shirt, then instinctively peer up at the person entering.

It isn't Alek, but the memories his worried expression floods my head with, it may as well be.

Yev had seen me at my worst, both as I went into premature labor and after my daughter was born still.

"When Alek called, I thought I might find you here." He gallops down the stairs that have been replaced since I tumbled down them before slotting his backside next to mine. "Why are you down here, Ana? This shit hurts me to remember, so I don't understand why you'd put yourself through it."

Angrily, I remove another tear tracking down my cheek before shrugging. "It smells better than the ER."

He chuckles, but his heart isn't in it. It is the fake laugh he uses when women throw themselves at him and he wants to let them down gently.

After a beat, he mutters, "You still haven't told him this is where it started, have you?"

Disheartened, I drop my chin onto my chest before shaking my head. "Then I'd have to take some of the blame."

"What happened wasn't anyone's fault, Ana. You slipped. It was an

accident.”

“That could have been avoided if I had listened to Alek.” I drag the sleeve of the sweater Yev curls over my shuddering shoulders under my eyes. “He didn’t want me to come down here, but the sheets were dirty, and they were my favorite set, so I...” I clamp my mouth shut when my last few words come out as a sob. “Maybe he knew. Maybe that’s why he didn’t come.”

“Or maybe no one has the full story.” When I shoot him a riled expression, he mimics my shrug while smiling. “He wanted to give you the world, so I don’t understand how it could change so easily.”

He *pffts* me when I murmur, “He got bored.”

“Please. I could hear you from my ground floor apartment. He wasn’t bored.”

My cheeks only inflame a smidge. I’m too angry to be embarrassed. “Then why was he with her, Yev? You saw him, yet you still won’t believe what you saw.”

That has him stumped. “I... it... fuck, Ana. I don’t know. I just think there’s more to it.” I already feel like shit, but he adds more mud to my rumpled exterior. “You also never gave him the chance to explain. You yelled, said a lot of not very nice shit, then left.” He locks his hands together before wetting his lips. “And he let you because he was in shock.” When he looks at me, I see the remorse in his eyes, but it doesn’t lessen the impact of his words. “He had to take the doctor’s word that you weren’t pregnant anymore. He didn’t get to spend any time with her like you and your dad did.”

“He took her,” I confess, still shocked by Alek’s earlier confession. “He wanted to bury her.”

I had wanted the same, but because of her gestation, supposedly there was no need. She wasn’t a baby. She was a fetus. I tried to argue but I was only strong when needed, and in that case, I didn’t have it in me.

Alek wasn’t the only one shocked that day. The last thing I expected

when I woke in a pool of blood at the bottom of the laundry stairs was to go through labor alone. I begged Yev when he found me to find Alek. He didn't want to leave me, but I made him.

Alek never came.

Yev returned with a doctor who was no longer practicing due to a malpractice suit and my father. They only convinced me to go to the hospital when the doctor cautioned that I could lose more than my child—I could lose my life as well.

Alek had lost a lot at an incredibly young age, so I didn't want him to lose me as well.

I had only just given birth to my precious, unbreathing little girl when Stace arrived at the hospital. I was clueless as to why she was in my room until she turned to Yev and said, “You didn't tell her?”

I shouldn't have nibbled at the bait she was dangling, being in no mental state for a fight. My child had only just been born unbreathing. I was only able to hold her for a couple of minutes, then I was wheeled into a ward where screaming, yet alive babies couldn't be missed.

I was emotionally and physically drained but too curious for my own good.

“Alek wasn't here because he was with me.” It was a lie Stace had said numerous times in the past three years, so I almost laughed until I spotted Yev's downcast head.

I begged him to discredit her claim, to tell me there was no way in hell Alek had left my bed with sticky, gooey sheets to go mess Stace's, but he didn't say a word. He merely shrugged before suggesting I wait for Alek to show up to work out what happened.

“What did you see?” I screamed at him, startling the mother in the bed next to mine. I wasn't with Alek, so there was no fancy private suite like there had been when we found out we were pregnant, then again three months later when we found out she was a girl. I was in a shitty hospital for

runaways and abused mothers and on the verge of a breakdown. I wasn't letting Yev off the hook. "What did you see?"

He cursed under his breath before confessing, "His car was in her driveway."

"Did you go in?" When he acted as if I didn't speak, I pegged the prepacked sandwich the midwife left on the table for me at his head before asking again, "Did you go in!" When he nodded, my heart rate slipped into dangerous territory. "And?"

He hated ratting out one of his 'brothers,' but Yev was as loyal to me as he was Alek and Ghost. "He was in her bed, passed out."

Still to this day, I'm not sure how much time passed between Yev's confession and Alek arriving at the hospital, but my devastation hadn't dipped in the slightest. I went rank on him. I called him horrible names, blamed him for everything, then told him I never wanted to see him again.

I meant every single word except the final ones I said to him when he tried to stop me from boarding a train to Helsinki. He wouldn't have let me go unless he believed I hated him, so I gave him the performance of my life.

I ripped his heart out of his chest as my fall had torn our daughter from my womb.

I gutted him, and I hate myself for that as much as I hated how cowardly I was when I let them remove my daughter from my arms before I was ready. I hadn't named her or dressed her. I hadn't counted her fingers or toes. I hadn't done any of the things Alek and I discussed the night he noticed the pop in my belly. I just let them take her as if she meant nothing to me.

"Do you know where he buried her?" I ask Yev, my mind back in the present since it hurts too much to sit in the past.

When he shakes his head, I'm not sure which emotion to express first. Anger or relief. I hate that Alek is the only one who knows of her whereabouts, but I also like that he kept her burial as personal as the tiny feet tattooed on his chest.

The marks of his tattoo were so fresh at the train station, I could see it through his crisp white shirt. I just refused to acknowledge it since I was as confident that he had betrayed me as I was that a foolish mistake robbed me of motherhood.

I can still have children, but since I never wanted them with anyone but Alek, I act as if I can't.

"Will you please take me home? I'm zonked."

Yev jerks up his chin, mumbles something about needing to head that way to purchase some noise-canceling headphones, then nudges his head to the door. "Come on. I'm parked out front."

As I climb the highly glossed stairs, my brows furrow. "If he doesn't know I slipped, why did he replace the stairs?"

I freeze in place when Yev answers, "He gutted the entire place when he came back from Europe a couple of years back." My heart squeezes when he adds with a breathy sigh, "Except the top floor. No one could touch that."

"It was his home."

Yev's hair doesn't budge an inch when he shakes his head. "No, Ana. *You're* his home."

With nothing left to say, he guides me to the flashy ride he would have riled its owner about only four years ago. "When did you become a pompous prick with no dick?" I ask while slipping into the passenger seat of his ride. It is sleek and smooth, but even with it being compact, my feet can't touch the floor since the passenger seat is almost merged with the backseat. "Have you been carting around big foot?"

"Close." He closes my door before jogging around to the driver's side and slipping behind the steering wheel. "Who is just as big?"

"Alek is," I murmur to myself before attempting to pull our conversation off the woes of my past. "Seriously, Yev, how can you afford such a fancy ride?"

He pulls out of the parking lot before answering, "It's about not giving up

opportunities purely because you have a beef with someone.” He takes the corner too fast not to fishtail before adding, “Ghost hates my fucking guts, but it doesn’t stop him from investing in a few... syndicates I have running.”

“Ghost doesn’t hate you.” He does, but Yev doesn’t need to know that since most of Ghost’s dislike is purely because he has trust issues. “And how legal are your syndicates?”

His grin is too bright for the hour. “About as legal as a game of cards.”

“If you’re counting cards, I suggest you stop. If Maksim finds out, you won’t have to worry about Ghost’s dislike.”

“Ha! I told you he hates me.” He continues talking, foiling my endeavor to claw myself out of the hole I just threw myself into. “And I ain’t counting cards.” He rolls his bottom lip between his teeth. “You’re not the only one who can bluff.”

As I fold my arms over my chest, I sink low into my chair. “I don’t bluff all the time.”

“Bullshit.” He zips us through traffic lights signaling that we’re meant to stop. “Your routine hasn’t altered. You bluffed back then, and you bluff now.” I scoff, but he acts ignorant. “Don’t get me wrong, it works. I’m just lost as to why you’re willing to use it against Alek instead of letting it help him.”

“I saw his ride. He doesn’t need the 20K he’d get if I won.”

I swallow the brick his reply lodges in my throat when he says, “Nah, but the heat might simmer down a little if you were showing active steps to repay your father’s debt.” When I stare at him, silently demanding a more thorough explanation, he discloses, “He knows about your father’s recent gambling spree.” He cusses when I sock him in the arm. “I didn’t fucking tell him.” I punch him again solely for believing he can lie to me and I wouldn’t know. “All right, I did, but it was an accident.” Before I can punch him again, he pushes out, “But I’m not the only one telling porkies.” I don’t think I could harbor an ounce more intrigue by the time Yev lets me off the hook. “Your



dad is a lot more in debt than he let you know. That IOU he showed you this week was only the down payment of his balance. He owes the Yurys over six hundred thousand. With interest, you'll be hitting seven figures by next week."

"What?" My chest expands and deflates quicker than my pulse surges when my lungs expel more air than they take in. "That can't be right. He couldn't have accumulated that much debt in a day. There's no way someone can lose that much money *in a day*."

I'd give anything for a brown paper bag when Yev's sorrow-filled eyes expose nothing but honesty.

My father is dead.

There's no way he will get away with not paying back the head of the Russian mafia that much money, and I can't borrow that much money from Alek.

I just can't, not after the way I left him and placed all the blame on his shoulders.

I wonder if I spoke my last sentence out loud when Yev says, "Play in tomorrow's tournament. Use it as an in for the bigger events." He scrubs at his jaw, remorseful about his next words, but he's aware they must be said. "Just don't tell your dad. He's not your lucky charm."

"Alek is," I mumble out loud this time around.

## ANASTASIA

“*I*t’s about time you showed up.”

My hands ball into fists long before a squeak pops from my lips. Alek should be grateful he is sitting on the couch on the other side of the dressing room. If he was closer, my fist would have connected with his eye by now. That’s how much he scared me.

He smirks, amused by my tightened hands before leaning forward so his elbows balance on his knees. Although he’s acting suave, I can tell our exchange yesterday is still playing heavily on his mind. His eyes are rimmed by dark circles and look pained. I bet he’s on the brink of another blackout migraine. Just the thought narrows my bitch-o-meter by a smidge. His condition isn’t a game. If it isn’t handled correctly, it could kill him.

I was so terrified when I didn’t hear from him during my first six months abroad that he had succumbed to his diagnosis, so I reached out to Yev. He said he was a grouchy cunt but very much alive. He gave me regular updates over the next three and a bit years.

Even though I shouldn’t have, I cared greatly for Alek—I still do. But I am also hurt that he betrayed me when I needed him the most.

“Did you find anything you like?” Alek nudges his head to the main area of his sister’s boutique I’ve been browsing for the past thirty minutes.

As much as I would like to rock up to tonight’s event in denim shorts and

a sweater, I can't. I wouldn't even make it past the doorman in that getup. I need it to seem as if the twenty thousand dollar buy-in is only a share of the weekly allowance my rich husband gives me.

"I saw a couple of things. I'm just not sure what screams trafficked woman and an old guy's rich wife. They dress about the same these days."

"That's because they are the same," Alek murmurs, standing. "Go for something black but with a short hemline. It should be fitted but only on your breasts. Any indication of a bump in your midsection will lose you their interest." My heart flutters in my pussy when he twists a lock of my hair around his index finger while murmuring, "You should wear your hair up. If they're imagining what it will be like to kiss you here..." he drags his index finger along my collarbone, "... they'll be thinking with their dicks instead of their head. That'll see over half bowing out in the first couple of rounds."

Hating that I can sometimes be overruled by my libido too, I try and even our playing field. "I want to know where she's buried."

Alek doesn't show any sign of a balk, but I know he was smacked internally by the swift change in our conversation. The vein in his neck works at double the speed when he promises, "I'll take you there." He waits for me to acknowledge the promise in his eyes with a head bob before continuing, "But we need to get over this hurdle first. Your father has two days to pay back a massive chunk of his debt or the Yurys will pay him a visit." He slants to the left to capture the attention of his sister, who is mingling in the main part of the store with Yev. "Bring me that number you mentioned earlier. Size four." Confident Polina will jump on cue, he lowers his eyes to mine. "You'll probably want to lose the bra for this dress. It's... *hugging*."

With a roll of my eyes from his prolonged gawk of my breasts, I snatch up the dress Polina arrives with before giving Alek silent marching orders.

I have my back facing him, so I only hear the husky chuckle that arrives with his mischievous grin. "I've seen it all before, *драгоценный*."

"And I swore years ago that you'd never see it again."

It is the fight of my life not to crank my head back to face him when he mumbles, “You *lied* years ago. Don’t mistake that as a pledge.”

I peer at him under a sheet of hair when the stomp of his boots gets the better of my curiosity. He isn’t leaving as requested. He is demanding for Polina to kick out the handful of patrons scanning the merchandise.

“You can’t remove my customers—”

Alek shuts up her reply by yanking out the fancy card he handed Jax out of his wallet and holding it out for her. “Charge a day’s takings. That way, if she runs *again*, and I have to fucking chase her *again*, you won’t lose any profits when I gouge out your customers’ eyes for looking when they shouldn’t have.”

“I’m not going to run.”

He looks at me like he doesn’t believe me. I don’t blame him. I forever ran during our tumultuous relationship because I knew he’d chase me. “Then, once you’ve done that, close up for the day. We might be here a while.” He drags his hooded gaze down my frozen form during his last sentence.

The tremors it hammers me with are heard in my reply, “I’m not sleeping with you.”

The sides of his lips tuck high as he folds his arms over his chest then props his shoulder onto the doorjamb, giving clear prompts he isn’t budging for anyone or anything.

“You’re an ass.”

“I own your ass, *драгоценный*.” As he licks his lips, his eyes drop to my backside. “And it is about time you learn that.” You’d swear he could see my tattoo through my shorts for how gleaming his grin is. He’s acting as arrogant as the night he put it there. It was a symbol that I was his, and back then, I was more than happy for everyone to know exactly that.

I was Alek’s property.

I don’t know where I sit now. I’ve never thought rationally when it came to Alek, so when betrayal and hurt are thrown into the mix, my emotions are

all over the shop.

“I trust your judgment. This dress will be perfect.” After snatching up the dress, I try to step past Alek.

Of course, he won't let me go without protest. “You need to try it on.”

“It's fine. It'll fit.”

“Try. It. On.” His hot breaths hitting my face already have me struggling, much less what he says next, “Or I'll be forced to take measurements.” He swoops down lower, bringing his handsome face to within an inch of mine. “With my tongue.” My eyes snap from Yev, who's looking at me with concern over Alek's shoulder, to Alek when he murmurs, “He won't save you from me, *драгоценный*. Not back then and not now.”

The night Alek tracked me down for his family photograph, Yev tried to stop him from taking me with him. They got into an altercation while I was still tossed over Alek's shoulder. Alek won, and he's never let Yev live it down.

I think that fight is one reason Yev went into street fighting. He didn't want to let anyone down again. Although I am confident it would be a more even fight this time around, my protection isn't Yev's responsibility.

“I'll call you tomorrow,” I mouth to Yev over Alek's broad shoulder.

He angles his head as if to say, *you sure?*

When I nod, he dips his chin before offering to walk Polina out—his grin once again pompous.

“I know the way,” she assures him, doubling the glint in his playful eyes.

“Yeah, but what if there's some old geezer in the alley? I wouldn't want you getting hurt when his...” The rest of his comment is lost when he follows Polina out the exit doors only the staff uses.

Within seconds, only Alek and I remain.

The last time we were alone, I forgot he is my enemy.

I won't make the same mistake twice.

After years of nannying, I've learned the art of getting changed discreetly.

Not a single bump on my areolas is exposed when I slip out of my clothes and slide into the dress Alek suggested, and Alek knows that.

He looks more pissed now than he did when his dick slipped out of me yesterday.

Almost murderous.

My eyes bulge out of their sockets when he murmurs, “I don’t think it will do.”

“What? This is perfect.” I spin to face the mirror, grimacing when I realize the straps of my bra are visible. “Right cut, modest yet sexy hemline, and it cups my boobs in all the right places.”

“It won’t work.” He enters the main part of the shop for only a second before he returns with a dress that will be far too tight for me to slip underneath my current number.

“I thought you said I shouldn’t wear anything that hugs my midsection.”

“No. I said any *hint* of a stomach will have their attention veering away from you.” He lowers his eyes to my flat stomach. “You don’t have an ounce of weight on your midsection.”

I snatch the dress firmly enough to rip it before attempting to be as cruel to his ego. “Because I worked it off in Italy with Tommaso.”

As I yank off the dress with no care that I am popping several threads, Alek mumbles, “Lie to me again, *драгоценный*, and I’ll fuck the rest of them out of you.”

“You can’t fuck lies out of people.”

Before I can blink, he grips my hips and drags me back. I moan like a nympho returning from a four-year sabbatical when he grinds his dick against the seam of my ass. He isn’t hard—regretfully—but he doesn’t need to be to get my libido’s attention. “Wanna bet, *драгоценный*.” He rolls his hips another handful of times, turning my brain to mush before asking, “Tell me again about your time with Tommaso?”

“Who?”

Alek smiles, firms his grip enough to ensure I'll know for hours exactly where he touched me, then takes a step back. "I think you were right. Dress number one was a far better choice." He collects it from the floor before handing it back to me. "There's just one issue." His eyes drop to the scant bit of material now clinging to an intimate region of my body. "You won't be needing these."

Without a single objection firing from my mouth, he hooks his thumbs into my panties then slowly lowers them to my feet. Only when I step out of them do his eyes lock with mine. He stares at me for several panty-wetting seconds before he lifts the scrap of cotton to his nose and inhales deeply.

His growl sets me on fire, but it has nothing on the tremor that racks through me when he slides them into the pocket of his trousers before he returns to his full height. "I'll hold these for safekeeping. If I don't get to taste your arousal tonight, I'll be able to smell it while stroking my cock."

It has been years since his mouth has been on my pussy, but it is acting as if he still knows every intimate detail of it. I guess that can be expected for how thoroughly he studied it when we were together. He forever had his head between my legs—even the morning he left my bed for Stace's.

The reminder sees me slipping the dress over my head before pulling my bra out of the strapless opening. Although I'd rather keep my hair down, I pull it up with an elastic then use some pins out of my purse to make my messy bun appear more sophisticated and sleek. I applied makeup this morning, but I add an extra coat of mascara to my lashes to amplify the lusty gleam in them before spinning to face Alek.

I don't need his approval for tonight's event. I'm merely requesting permission to leave the dressing room. I need to catch up with Yev before he leaves me stranded to Alek's charm again. I'm not strong enough for this, even more so when his permission is granted with a pledge.

"Whatever they told you to steal your confidence isn't true, and I plan to prove it."

There is nothing but a promise in his eyes, and it has me hopeful he will follow through with his guarantee this time around.





## ALEK

*W* here the fuck are you, Anastasia, I mumble to myself when the chairs around the poker tables fill with the backsides of the who's who of Russia. Yev said they'd arrive fifteen minutes before registration. It's about to close.

I knew I should have driven her myself. I would have if I had any chance of shutting down my possessiveness when it comes to Anastasia. She puts my head in a tailspin, and I spend the next hour banging my chest like a Neanderthal.

I've always been super over the top with my alphaness when it comes to her. I wouldn't even let an experienced artist tattoo my bitemarks onto her ass because I didn't want another man that close to her. I studied the art for six months before I tested them on myself. My initials in the crevice of Anastasia's left thigh were my first attempt on her. She can't spread her legs without anyone seeing ALK. Add that to my teeth imprint on her ass, and I thought I had every region covered.

I was wrong. Her tits, which are the first thing I notice when she finally arrives, need something as trademarked as the three-word tattoo on the skin between my right thumb and forefinger.

*Ana's throat here.*

“What the fuck took you so long?”

Yev squashes himself between me and the old geezer next to me before ordering a drink. “Traffic was a bitch—”

“And you drive like you don’t fear death, so don’t give me that shit.”

He tosses down a twenty for the bartender before twisting to scan the crowd. When he says, “She’s got over a dozen hooked already,” he thinks it will shift my focus off his tardiness.

He is shit out of luck.

“Why the fuck were you so late?” He won’t touch Ana, but something is warning me I should be on the defensive.

Yev scrubs at the nonexistent stubble on his chin before replying, “I ran into some trouble on the—”

He’s interrupted by the last woman I was hoping would attend tonight’s event. “Alek. It’s been so long.” Stace drags her fingernails across my chest, instantly making my jaw spasm and giving Yev an out. “I thought these events were no longer your thing.”

“No.” I remove her hand from my chest a little too forcefully since it gains me the attention of numerous sets of eyes, including Ana’s, which are narrowed into tiny slits. “I said they were no longer Ana’s thing, and since she was no longer interested, neither the fuck was I.” I drop my eyes to the obvious swell of her stomach. “I heard you got a john finally willing to stick by you.” I say my comment loud enough for everyone to hear. If she wants to spread rumors, I’ll share some of my own. “What did you promise him this time? Shares in your daddy’s estate?”

She fights back with the stern bite all neglected kids have. “Come on, Alek. You know I don’t need gimmicks to get a man into my bed.” It is the fight of my life not to the slap the contemptuous gleam from her eyes with a stern backhanded whack when she murmurs, “You took no coaching at all.”

“Don’t fu—”

“It was great seeing you again.” With a victorious grin, she leans in to press her lips onto the edge of my mouth. I don’t need to peer in a mirror to

know her smooch left a lipstick mark. Ana's narrowed squint as she attempts to bluff her way to victory tells me everything I need to know.

While scrubbing Stace's lipstick from my mouth, I track down Yev, who is still on my radar despite his wish not to be.

"Ouch," Yev mutters under his breath when Ana's first opponent sees right through her bluff. He counters her bid before doubling it, leaving Ana no choice but to fold. "Do you think that's why she's here? To derail Ana?" When I stare at Yev confused, he nudges his head to Stace. "I haven't seen her at an event in years. Then suddenly, on the night Ana returns, so does she. I ain't calling that a coincidence."

His reply piques my interest. "How often do you usually attend?"

I arch a brow in shock when he replies, "Every fucking week. How the fuck do you think I can afford my ride?"

His chuckles bounce between us when I answer, "I thought you'd hooked up with some rich bitch desperate for an unwrinkled cock."

"Well..." He shrugs and grins before shifting his focus back to Ana. "She needs to win the next three legit for them to believe her best bluff."

"She will. She's got skills. She just needs to concentrate."

Yev sighs. "Which won't be easy with her stealing her devotion."

Stace is chatting with a hostess at the side of the poker table Ana is on. It is women talk none of the men would be interested in, but Ana doesn't have a heart filled with black goop and a dangly chunk of flesh between her legs that steals her smarts. She's hanging off Stace's every word, her anger growing when Stace's hand drops to her stomach a second before her eyes flick to me.

"What shit is she spewing this time?"

"If I knew how to lip read, I wouldn't be reading any lips that weren't between a pair of stellar legs." I usually appreciate Yev's humor, but tonight, my heart isn't into it. Stace forever tried to cause trouble between Ana and me during our three years, but it never worked. It only made us closer when I fucked the jealousy out of Ana before ensuring she knew there wasn't any

other woman I wanted on the planet who wasn't her.

I can't do that this time around.

Can I?

"Ah, shit. Come on, Ana." Yev drags his fingers through his inky dark hair when Ana's second loss sees half her chips given to the chump seated across from her.

We don't give a fuck about the money. I outlaid more when I made Polina close shop early today. It is the fact Ana is letting a bitch like Stace rile her. She was always stronger than this, and I fucking hate knowing what caused the drop in her confidence.

She wasn't the same after she birthed our daughter.

Nothing could return the light in her eyes.

"Contact the Yurys. I need to make sure there are no additional terms attached to Andrei's debt."

Yev slants his head and cocks a brow. "Like what?"

I nudge my head to the girl who still has the devotion of almost every man in the room, even with her forehead being wrinkled by the crease it gets every time she's jealous and the stern balling of her hands that exposes she will be a ball breaker if given a chance.

"The Yurys' leader married a girl decades his junior after a failed negotiation with a sanctioned ally, and is rumored to be seeking a wife for his eldest son, Asher."

"All right. I'll make some calls now." Yev downs the nip of vodka placed in front of him before tossing on the coat he only removed minutes ago. "While I do that, can you please fix her fucking head?" He stares at Ana while wetting his suddenly dry lips. "I can't remember a day where she walked into a room and didn't believe she was the most wanted person there. I fucking hate seeing her like this."

"You're not the only one."

I realize I said my comment out loud when Yev whacks me on the back

while saying, “Then fucking fix it.”

“And how am I meant to do that? Invent a time machine and go back to the morning I took her too hard and too fast?” Just like the night I claimed her virginity, I wasn’t meant to go so hard the morning I woke her by kissing her goodbye on her pussy lips instead of the plump ones on her face. Ana just has a way of making me so unhinged, it goes from gentle sweeps of my tongue to manic fucking in two simple steps.

Ana. Naked.

No wonder why she hates me.

“One, if you need me to give you tips on how to make Ana believe she is enough, maybe you’re no longer the man for the job.” Before I can smack his words back into his mouth, he quickly adds, “Two, you guys need to talk. Badly.” He stuffs his hands into his pockets to protect them from the brutal winds he’s about to be subjected to. “There is a ton of miscommunication, and not a lot of fucking.” With a grin, he mutters, “And if I recall correctly, that’s how you two communicate.”

He leaves before he can see the honesty on my face.

And Ana loses her next hand just as quickly.



## ANASTASIA

*F*uck!

I agreed to play tonight purely to take some of the pressure of my father's debt from Alek's shoulders.

All I'm doing is doubling it.

I haven't won a single round because I'm too busy focusing on Stace and her conversation about her unborn baby's father. She hasn't mentioned a name, but the way her eyes continually flick to Alek when anyone asks is driving me nuts. Only four years ago, I would have laughed at her constant insinuations that Alek was interested in her. I knew I was more than enough for him, but I don't feel as confident this time around.

Yev saw him in her bed. What more proof do I need that I wasn't enough for him?

"Sorry? What did you say?" I mutter to the dealer when he nudges me out of my thoughts.

"It's your act. Check, bet, call, raise, or fold."

"Umm..." *Jesus, Ana, get a grip!* "Raise."

I realize my mistake when I spot the grin of the man across from me. He knows I'm not holding anything to use with the ace in the hole on the table.

My nails dig into my palms when I bunch my hands so tightly, my knuckles go white. One more round, and I'm out in a shamefully short thirty



minutes.

Before I can place down a chip to make me an active player in this round, I'm plucked from my seat and forcefully walked to the exit.

My first response is to go on the defensive. "I'm not losing on purpose. It's just been a while."

"Clearly," Alek replies, his long strides not faltering. "So how about we fix that before moving on to other matters?"

My eyes dart in all directions when I am pushed into an office I didn't notice upon entering. Alek doesn't give me a second to take in the pricey decor, though. A second after I drink in the large wooden desk with an antique lamp, my backside is planted on the leather writing rectangle, my legs spread, and my senses overwhelmed by Alek burying his head between my legs.

"Woah. Damn. Jeez. Alek, we can't..." I try to push his head back, but there's no power behind my maneuver. All my strength is reserved for not coming on the spot.

I've already made a fool out of myself once tonight.

I refuse to do it a second time.

My breaths shift to gurgles when his finger glides over my clit along with his tongue before he pushes it inside me. His touch is hot, potent, and so full of lust. Instead of tethering my fingers through his hair to yank him away from me, I hold him hostage to my pussy before grinding against his mouth.

"Yes, *драгоценный*. Fuck my mouth like you do my cock. Take what you need."

The way he talks while never stopping the frenzied flicks of his tongue and the sweet yet still rough movements of his mouth is like watching porn—erotic and naughty at the same time.

I love watching him eat me, and how far my thighs have to spread to fit him between my legs. His stubble and the occasional graze of his teeth drive me so wild, my back arches as jolts of pleasure shake my body. I moan

through the sensation ripping through me hard and fast before fully surrendering to it.

As I climax, my body shakes so intensely, I feel like I'm going to explode. Alek's name tears from my throat as a soft, keening moan rumbles up my chest. I ride the wave for as long as possible, aware not a single one should be taken for granted.

I once orgasmed so often I never considered going years between tremors.

As my tremors shimmer to a manageable shudder, Alek drapes my legs over his broad shoulders before blowing a hot breath over my aching slit. "Fuck, драгоценный," he murmurs between carefully timed licks, his voice husky with arousal. "Do you have any idea how many men wish they could be doing this to you right now?" He inches back so he can see my face as his fingers continue their slow, steady pumps that won't keep my focus off a second climax any time soon. "I should kill them just for the thought." My body tingles when he growls out, "Or maybe I should make them watch, force them to suffer through the knowledge that they'll never have you like this." The possessiveness in his tone is expected and as much wanted as my clit throbbing in response to the perfect amount of pressure he places on it with his thumb. "Then I'd gut them for a second time..." a gush of warmth spreads across his palm when he snarls, "... with my knife."

When a second orgasm crashes down on me, Alek steals the last of my breath by sealing his mouth over mine. While holding me in a familiar and much-wanted way—with his hand around my throat—he kisses me like he can't live another moment without my lips on his.

I can't breathe for a moment, can't move, but just before panic sets in, Alek loosens his grip then scoops out the soundless screams creeping up my throat with his tongue.

He devours my mouth with as much ownership as he did my pussy until the tremors that never fully subside while being bedded by him return with

vengeance. I shudder under him as he drops his focus from my mouth to my chest. He doesn't go for the bouncy, plentiful lumps no man can see. He goes for the sneak peek of my cleavage and the teasing portion of my skin that announces there is a lot more on offer than what is being shown.

I know what he's doing before the first suck draws my skin into his mouth. He's marking me, claiming me. He's making sure every man outside of our private bubble knows I am his.

And I don't do a damn thing to stop him.

His initials are etched next to my pussy. His bitemarks are on my ass. Now his mouth has marked my breasts.

There's only one place he's scoured with a more obvious mark of ownership—my heart. And the gouges deepen when he lifts his eyes from the hickey he placed on my breast to me and murmurs, “No one else, *драгоценный*. There will *never* be anyone but you wearing my marks.”

His words are so honest, I bob my chin before my head can talk me out of it.

I swallow back a moan of disappointment when my agreement sees Alek pushing back from the desk instead of wholly devouring me on it. I want more than his head between my legs. I want his big fat cock, and from the strain of arousal etching on Alek's face, he wants the same thing.

Regretfully, he values my safety above his needs.

“Soon, *драгоценный*. But we need this down payment first.” He tugs me off the desk, then yanks down my dress so it sits below my still-throbbing pussy. “And I need you to show them just how fucking good you are.”

“I don't know if I have what it takes anymore—”

With the hand brandishing my name, Alek traps my words in my throat with a steel-tight grip before bringing his lips to within half an inch of mine. “You should know better than to speak shit like that to me.” His low, gravelly tone shoots lightning down my spine. “You are better than every person in that room... women included. So go fucking show them so I can finish what I

started on their filthy fucking money.”

His comment pushes the first poker tournament he took me to into the forefront of my mind. The jackpot was a little over ten thousand, which Alek demanded in one dollar denominations so we could fuck on it like millionaires. We made such a mess, half of them were not suitable for public use, so we stored them in the safe of our walk-in closet for emergency-only use.

I used a majority of them to fund my ticket to Europe.

“I—”

He stops me from speaking again. This time, by squashing his index finger against my lips. “Not now, *драгоценный*. You have a point to make, and the only people you need to make it to are out there.” My heart thuds in an unusual pattern when he murmurs, “I don’t need proof. You’ve always been perfect to me.”

Before I can ask, *then why her?* he double checks I’m covered before ushering me out of the office as quickly as he forced me inside.

The atmosphere is different now, more subdued. Or maybe it is because a lot of my pent-up frustrations were released onto Alek’s mouth.

Whatever the case, I don’t feel as jittery while taking a seat around a poker table filled with notorious members of several mob affiliations. Not even Stace’s presence hackles my spine. That could have more to do with the fact it looks like she is aware what has caused my flushed cheeks and dilated eyes. She has the same peeved expression she had when she walked in on Alek going down on me in the bathroom at her twenty-first, and he refused to stop hogging the only toilet her guests had access to until I had climaxed.

She couldn’t understand why he wanted me so badly, and I couldn’t understand why she never wanted to find her own man to do the same.

She always wanted mine.

When my eyes shoot to Alek to check if he’s noticed Stace’s change in demeanor, he cockily winks at me before dragging his hand over his mouth.

My thighs tremor when his nostrils flare upon the detection of an odor on the two fingers he stuffed inside me. He doesn't care that he looks like a weirdo sniffing his hand. He's not once been embarrassed when it comes to ensuring my needs are taken care of. Whether in a McDonald's drive-thru or at Stace's birthday bash, if I wanted him, he was there, willing and ready to take me to the highs of ecstasy. Not once did he leave me high and dry during our three years.

It's why I have such a hard time contemplating his disappearance four years ago. He was always there for me, even when I wished he wasn't, so why wasn't he that day?

I'd give anything to march up and ask him right now, to force the conversation we should have had years ago, but was too chicken to undertake. However, I can't. The hand has been dealt, and I have three reputations to mend.

Mine.

Alek's

And ours.



## ALEK

S parks of the girl who didn't have a fucking thing but fought to keep it with everything she had brightens Ana's eyes when she taps her hands on the roof of my car while doing a little jig. "I forgot how good that felt. My God." She slings her head to me, her hair now loose and framing her gorgeous face. "Did you hear that last guy's groan?"

I'm about to say I almost plucked his Adam's apple out with my bare hands for subjecting me to such a noise, but she continues talking, foiling my attempt.

"He was so pissed. He totally thought I was flushed and squirming because of his 'little lady' comments." Theo lives to see another day when she pushes out with a snort. "I've never wanted to vomit so bad in my life." Her mood subdues a smidge when she mutters, "Not even when I was pregnant." As traffic whizzes by us, she twists her torso and murmurs, "Probably would have if you hadn't woken me in the middle of the night to eat."

No, she doesn't mean my cock this time around.

The first doctor we visited said her nausea wouldn't be as bad if she ate small meals at regular intervals, and that the reason a lot of women get sick is because they go too long overnight without sustenance.

I hated seeing her sick, so I set an alarm for two in the morning each day

to make her favorite meals. Sometimes it was just a sandwich, other times a burger with the lot.

There was even one time she was eating sardines with ice cream.

“What was that face for?” Anastasia asks, well versed on my expressions but a little rusty since it’s been so long since she’s witnessed them.

“I was just recalling the seafood sundae you ate when the caterers blew up the industrial freezer at Lulu’s.” Lulu’s was the little catering company Ana had set up the month before she found out she was pregnant. She loved to cook, and I wanted her to share her skills with more than just the people in our building. Yev sorted the trucks and had them fitted, and I conned the clientele away from their usual catering contacts.

It was doing well until Ana was diagnosed with hyperemesis gravidarum. She was so sick the first couple of months, she had no choice but to bring on additional help. They kind of overtook and stole Ana’s dreams out from underneath her.

Perhaps that’s why she lost some of the spark in her eyes?

Anastasia’s face stops screwing up in disgust when I ask, “Did you ever get back into catering?”

“No.” She peers out over the housing estate she will always class as home while clarifying, “Helena always said she was more than happy for me to cook, but she had a chef and a butler, so she didn’t need me.”

“Helena?”

“Tommaso’s wife,” she explains before realizing she said too much. “Anyway. Thanks for the ride, and the buy-in. I will deposit it into the Yurys account first thing Monday.” She opens her door and slips out like my mouth isn’t hanging open and my dick isn’t knocking at the zipper of my jeans.

Ana would *never* associate with a married man. Her mother cheated on her father, and her affair tore two families apart. She loathes adulterers. So much so, if you even mention having a wife at some stage in your life, she will cut you off in an instant.



When she shoots down the cracked sidewalk at a million miles an hour, I call her name, “драгоценный.”

“It’s fine. I’ve got it. It’s not that heavy,” she replies while lugging the bag full of cash into the foyer of her building.

“драгоценный.”

“We’ll chat soon.”

Before I can get out another word, she disappears up the stairwell.

“If you want to be chased, драгоценный. I’ll chase you.”

With my feet pounding the concrete as actively as my heart does my ribs, I reach Ana before she forces me to pay for a replacement lock. I catch her just outside her apartment door, and flatten her to the beaten wood like it is the first time I’ve used my height against her.

It isn’t, by the way.

“Explain. Now.”

“There’s nothing to explain.”

I push into her deeper, loving that I can feel the change in her pulse the closer I get to her. “You were on his yacht. Topless.”

I hear her gulp before I see it when she peers up at me. “I wasn’t... I’ve never... oh, shit.” She forcefully swallows again, then mutters, “There was a bee. It stung me. I didn’t know they couldn’t sting twice, so I panicked.” She breathes out slowly as if embarrassed. “Helena was out with the kids, and I didn’t know Tommaso had returned to the yacht.” As her eyes bounce between mine to gauge my response, she murmurs, “He offered to get out the stinger. I was covered the entire time, and he told Helena the instant she returned.” Her expression is one I’ve witnessed many times. “I thought she’d fire me on the spot, but she didn’t. She trusted him.” Her breathing shallows as she whispers, “As I should have you. I—”

We’re interrupted by a groan of a man in pain. It is closely followed by a stern voice. “She’s not here yet, but once she is, we’ll see just how far she’s willing to go to keep her daddy dearest safe.”

As Ana's eyes pop, she whispers, "Dad."

I curl my arm around her waist before she can burst through the front door of her apartment to announce to the shadows under the door that she's home. There's more than one set of heavy breaths projecting beneath the opening and half a dozen hushed murmurs.

"Let me go, Al—" I clamp my hand over her mouth before I continue dragging her down the stairwell, confident the Russian militants swamping her apartment's minuscule floorspace are here for more than money.

You don't go after a man's daughter unless you're convinced she can offer you something money can't buy.

It is usually their bodies.

"Where the fuck are you, Yev?" I shout into the cool night air when our return to the sidewalk isn't finalized with a flashy sports car skidding to a stop at the front of Ana's building.

He's meant to be watching Ana like he has the past seven years.

He's meant to have her back when I can't.

That's what life brothers do.

"Thank fuck," I murmur when Yev's flashy ride zips down the street a second after I retighten my hold on Ana. She's kicking, scratching, and biting in an endeavor to get free. She doesn't realize not every mafia man is like me. They'll hurt her to get what they want, and I'm going to fucking kill them for even considering using her as partial payment of her father's debt.

"How many?" Yev asks while leaning across to throw open his door for Ana, who is still fighting to get free.

"Half a dozen at a minimum." I force a thrashing and wailing Ana into the passenger seat before asking, "Yurys?"

"This isn't them," Yev assures while yanking a seat belt over Ana while I hold her in place. "They were happy to wait on the agreement of an interest increase."

"Then who the fuck is it?"

When Yev shrugs, as clueless as me, I yank on Ana's seat belt so fiercely, it reacts as if she was in an accident. It pins her to her seat better than my hand splayed across her chest.

Its tight hold doesn't alter her stubbornness, though. Her hands race for the latch in a nanosecond, only slowing when I bark out, "You even attempt to touch the fucking latch and I will tan your ass so hard, having my name tattooed on your snatch will seem like a walk in the park."

Yev looks shocked by my comment, proving he's never come close to seeing my initials on Ana's inner thigh, but before he can say a thing, Ana murmurs on a sob, "He's my dad. I can't lose him."

"You won't." When my words offer her little assurance, I dip down low and grab her face in my hands. "I promise you, *драгоценный*, I will get him out." As I wipe away the tears streaming down her beautiful face, I murmur, "But I need to know that you are safe and far from danger. I need you protected like you were when I let you walk away. I won't let anyone hurt you, *драгоценный*. Not even me."

That's why I left her in Italy. I knew bringing her home would hurt her more, so I let her stay.

"Promise me again," she begs on a whimper, aware I'll lose my life before I would break a promise to her.

"I promise, *драгоценный*." I press my mouth to her lips before talking over them. "You have my word."



## ANASTASIA

I've been sick to my stomach for the past several hours. Yev didn't know where to take me after we left Alek on the sidewalk of my building, yanking a gun out of the back of his jeans, so he brought me to the one place I've always felt safe.

He brought me home.

"Are you sure you don't want me to clean that up?" Yev asks as his eyes scan the dishware Alek removed in a hurry so he could eat my backside with the ferocity of a caveman.

I'd never done anything before Alek. I was all talk and no action. It wasn't that I lacked opportunity. It was that I never trusted anyone. A kiss could turn into a blowjob, a blowjob into an engagement then vows full of lies.

I didn't want that. I didn't want my parents' life, and for years, I thought I had succeeded in their failed endeavor to find their better half.

Alek was older and more mature, but he understood my worries and never pressured me to give up my dreams so he could live his.

I was nineteen with a catering company, for crying out loud. He wanted me to have the world, but he also comprehended that I needed to achieve it for myself. I would never have accepted it if he had simply handed it to me on a silver platter. My hands needed to get dirty, but if I had any inkling

they'd get this stained trying to clean up my father's mess by myself, I would have reached out for help sooner.

I am stubborn to a fault, and the knot in my stomach announces this the loudest of them all.

When Yev arches a brow, soundlessly requesting an answer, I remember he asked a question. "No. It's fine. I'll get it."

I've only just bobbed down to pick up a fork when a loud bang sounds through my apartment. It came from the front door.

"Go into your room," Yev demands while removing a pistol from a holster I didn't realize he was hiding under his bomber jacket until now.

I want to fight, but considering my heart hasn't established a normal rhythm since Alek ate my pussy on a random mob boss's desk, I move for the large pillar that once separated the apartments on our floor into multiple studios without a protest seeping from my lips.

"Dad," I murmur on a relieved breath when he stumbles into my old apartment a second after Yev opens the door. He's battered and bruised, and his eye is nearly swollen shut, but mercifully, he is without life-threatening injuries. "Where's Alek?" I ask while guiding him to a chair in the living room.

"He's... ah... he's..." I accept the bottle of water Yev is holding out for me before shakily opening the cap and handing it to my father, hopeful as hell some moisture will alleviate his dry throat and loosen up his words. "He's... still there."

"At our apartment?"

He shakes his head, doubling my worry. He's so thin, his bones rattle when he moves too quickly.

Yev must notice the same. "How about we get you showered and organize something to eat? Then you might not be so confused."

As he helps me assist my father into the bathroom, I ask Yev, "Should you go?" I'm not sure how much experience he has with a gun, but his fists

are capable of taking down a man or three. That's one to three less men for Alek.

"I can't," Yev replies. He waits for my father to grab a hold of the shower rail before twisting to face me. "You've always been my primary assignment. If Alek isn't with you, I need to be."

"That was years ago, Yev. That doesn't count now!" I'm yelling at the wrong person, but it is what I do when I am stressed.

"He made me promise years ago, Ana, but it's remained in place ever since." I suck in a shocked gasp when he murmurs, "Why do you think I'm so tanned? The Sicily sun loves my skin as much as yours."

I don't know whether I should punch him or hug him, so instead, I use words. "Why didn't you ever reach out?" I could have used a friend my first couple of months abroad. I was lonely, homesick, and grieving the loss of both my child and the love of my life.

"Because you were happy, and that is all Alek ever wanted, so he asked me to keep my watch undisclosed unless I thought it was absolutely necessary." His smirk is half cocky, half remorseful. "You seemed to handle electronic contact just fine." When a stupid expression crosses my face, he bumps me with his hip before shifting the focus to anything but the girly hormones I can't control when it comes to the men I love. "Get him showered. While I rustle him up something to eat, I'll see what I can find out." He rubs my arm like he still isn't brave enough to pull me in for a hug like he did on my sixteenth birthday. "But you need to stop worrying. The old man is a tank. Nothing will take him down."

I'd feel more confident in his saying if I didn't once believe the same about my father.

Now he is a withered old man who saw out his prime before he reached it.

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“IT’S BEEN HOURS, YEV.” My eyes stray from the sun peeking on the horizon to him slouched on a replica of the couch my father fell asleep on hours ago. “How much longer do we have to wait for news?” I’m the most panicked I’ve ever been. The only time I’ve felt this hopeless was when the doctor told me my fall had caused the placenta to detach from my uterine wall and there was nothing he could do to fix it. “What if he’s hurt or worse...” I can’t say the word. I refuse to say it.

“Ana, where are you going?” Yev asks when my impatience gets the better of me.

“I need to make sure he’s okay. I can’t just sit around and do nothing.” When I throw open the front door of my old apartment, against the grumbled protest of Yev, I smack into a hard wall of muscle that smells as divine as his handsome face.

“Alek.” I throw myself into his arms like my nose isn’t stinging before slinging my arms around his neck.

He holds me close while snapping out orders to the group of men following him, “Pack as much as you can as fast as you can.”

“What’s going on? Why are you packing?” I stop, swallow, then try again when I realize the men only move for my things. “I’m not leaving.”

“драгоценный—”

“No, Alek! You can’t fucking come in here and tell me I’m leaving. That isn’t your right.”

The veins in his neck bulge when he shouts, “He didn’t just barter with money. He bartered with *you!*” He thrusts my hand at my father, who’s slowly rising from the couch with sleepy, bruised eyes. “His fucking daughter. His flesh and blood. He put you on the table, and the only way I can get you out of the agreement is by removing you from their sights completely.”

“What?” I’m too shocked to speak. Too shocked to think rationally, but I am not too shocked to realize where my anger should be directed. “You used



me as a bid?" I race for my father so quickly my hand connects with his face and body for four precise whacks before Alek pulls me away from him. "I'm your fucking daughter. Your blood! I'm the only family you have left."

"And the sole fucking reason I'm letting you live." Alek's growl freezes me. He means every word of his threat. My father would be dead right now if his blood tracked through the veins of any other woman but me. "But if you ever come back here, if you *ever* make contact with her again, I will forget the promise I made to her, and I will kill you without remorse. She was *not* your bargaining chip, she has never been your bargaining chip, and she will *never* be your bargaining chip again. I will die before I ever let a man like you degrade and demoralize her again."

Too confused to continue fighting, I wiggle to be placed down. When Alek does as asked, albeit hesitantly, I shift on my feet to seek answers from a face I can read like a book.

He's sending me away, isn't he? That's why he's packing my things.

I realize how wrong I am when he answers my unvoiced questions, "I'm not letting you go again, *драгоценный*. I shouldn't have then, and I am not again now."

Something so heartfelt should have a more deserving reply, but with my heart and head at crossroads, I murmur, "Okay," before stepping aside so Alek's men can do as asked.

Twenty minutes later, my father is bundled into a car on the most direct route to the airport, and I'm sitting on the passenger seat of Alek's car that's flanked by another four SUVs just as large, being driven into the Bobrov compound.

I've never been here before. It was being built along with the rebuilding of the cargo ship the Bobrovs use for shipments. It is awe-inspiring but a little scary.

"Take her bags to my room."

I peer at Alek with concern when his barked demand comes out a little

groggy. I've scanned his body for injuries a hundred times in the past twenty minutes. Other than bruised knuckles and a graze down his right forearm, he is relatively unscathed.

"What's wrong?"

He screws up his nose before shaking his head. "It's nothing. I'm fine."

When he stumbles forward at a rate too fast for me to catch him, I brace him against the hood of his flashy ride before shouting for Yev to help me.

"What's wrong with him?"

As Yev struggles to keep him upright, I race for the bag his vehicles are never without.

"Where the fuck are you?" I mutter to myself when I cannot find his medication bag.

"What are you looking for?" Yev asks when I toss stuff out of the glove box like I found a pair of dirty knickers in my husband's nightstand.

"His medication. He usually keeps it in a black beauty bag."

"With silver stripes?"

I sling my head to Yev before nodding.

"Back passenger side pocket. I noticed it last month. Gave him shit about the fancy label on his designer tote bag."

My heart stops threatening to break out of my chest when I find Alek's medication. "I need you to hold his head back." When Alek groans through the pain no doubt rocketing through his body, I murmur, "I'm sorry, baby, but you need to swallow this before your brain explodes." I place a dissolvable tablet under his tongue before stuffing a second one to the very back of his throat. He gags when I stuff my fingers in deep, but it means only the littlest bit of water needs to trickle down his throat to sink the tablets into his bloodstream.

I can tell the instant the first tablet takes effect as Alek pushes Yev off him as if he isn't the sole reason he didn't kiss the pavement before he shifts his groggy eyes to me. He looks exhausted, both physically and mentally, and

it breaks my heart.

“It’s okay, baby,” I murmur when he leans into my embrace instead of helping it. “You can rest now.”



## ALEK

*B*lood and recently fired ammunition are pushed out of my nostril cavities when another scent takes hold. It smells fresh and alive, unlike the scenes of death that plagued my head while I slept off the migraine that almost knocked me on my ass. I was fighting it by guzzling water during the last couple of rounds of Ana's poker tournament, but I didn't get the chance to take my medication. It makes me groggy as fuck and incapable of protecting Ana, so I tend not to take it when tension is high.

I pay for it tenfold within hours, but since it was hours after getting Andrei away from the men holding him captive, I'll take it as a win.

"How long have I been out?" My voice is husky and sounds as raw as my throat feels.

Ana spins to face me. Her cheeks are ashen, and she looks like she didn't sleep a wink. "Around eight hours." She slips off the large recliner in the corner of my room, puts down a sketchpad, then stalks toward my bed. "You started getting a little grabby only a couple of hours in, so I moved to the couch so you could rest properly."

Her laugh when I yank her on top of me should be piercing to my ears after another episode, but it's been so long since I've heard it I relish it. "You could have woken me. I wouldn't have minded."

After rolling over and balancing her chin on her hands splayed across my

pecs, she mutters, “I wasn’t sure if the sheets were clean. And you know how anal I am about that.”

I laugh. It kills my chest and head, but it can’t be helped. Ana was obsessed with cleaning our sheets. So much so, I had planned to buy her a pair for every day of the week so she wouldn’t cart them downstairs like her winter coats.

She left me before I could.

Before I can assure her no one has stained the sheets but me, she asks, “Where is my father going?”

“Not far. I just need to keep him hidden until the heat dies down.” I scrub at my chin before scooting up so my back rests against the headboard. I, of course, take Ana with me. “I paid what he owed, but they want more.”

“Me?” Ana guesses.

“Yes.” My annoyance is heard in my tone. “But I assured them in no uncertain terms you were not his to barter with. A handful of men took my word for it.” I shrug like killing is my aphrodisiac. “Some didn’t.” I tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear before saying, “But until I am confident they got my point, you can’t leave my side, драгоценный. Not for a second.” Goose bumps rise against her skin when I drag my finger under her chin to lift her eyes to mine. “Not even to sleep.”

Forever stubborn, she murmurs, “Then I guess I should pretend I’ve already showered.”

“You could.” I rock my hips upward so she can feel the effect just having her lay on top of me causes. “But then I’d have to come up with an excuse to make you dirty again.”

There’s a challenge in her eyes I want to conquer, but before I can, I need to make sure my foolishness hasn’t been exposed to anyone but her. “Who was there?”

Ana’s eyes dance between mine before she clues onto what I’m asking. “Just Yev.” When I sigh in relief, she asks, “You still haven’t told him, have

you?”

I shake my head. No one but her knows about the condition that resulted in my being moved to a boys' home. I keep it hidden like Ghost wishes he could the scars on his face. I'm not ashamed of it. I just don't want to give anyone the belief they can use it to overcome my protectiveness of Anastasia.

I'll let my brain explode before I will ever let anyone hurt her.

Ana immediately shakes her head when I ask, “Did you tell him?”

“No. It isn't my story to tell.” She sucks in a big breath before murmuring, “But I wish you would. What will happen if you black out when I'm not there?”

“That's only happened once before,” I assure her before adding with a smirk. “And I don't need to worry about that since you're never going to leave my side.”

She can fight it all she wants, but I see the need in her eyes and smell it on her skin. She likes my idiotic act as much as I love seeing her in my space. This compound became my home when she left, but it's never felt like home until now.

“How about I get cleaned up and order you some breakfast before I act like you need nothing but my body to keep you gorged.” My cock isn't fucking happy when I slide out from beneath her before standing on a pair of wobbly legs. “Anything in particular you feel like? I can ring an order through to Vera.”

With a hungry lick of her lips, Ana drags her eyes down my body before shaking her head.

“I'll see what she's got on offer.” I tug on a shirt and a pair of sweatpants before heading for the bathroom to wash the sleep from my eyes. I only just make it into the bathroom before I stumble into the wall. My head is still fucking pounding, and it is affecting my motor skills, but I can't let Anastasia know that.

She already had one douche let her down this week.

I refuse to be the second.

I've only just splashed my face with water when I detect I am being watched. Ana has her shoulder propped on the doorjamb, her stellar legs are crossed, and a worried expression is fanned across her face. "You're still in pain, aren't you?"

"No." I try to back up my lie with a headshake. Big mistake. It doubles the chances of me folding in two and hurling my guts up.

"Alek..." She looks set for World War III before she thinks better of it. "Back in bed." I barely attempt a protest when she cocks her brow and asks, "Did I sound like I was making a suggestion?"

"Nah. You sound like fucking Ghost."

"Good. Because I'm sure if he was here, and he knew how much pain you're in, he'd be kicking your ass all the way to your bed as well." She moves forward like she knows the possibility of me walking back to bed is virtually impossible. "Can you take more medication yet?"

When I recall how long she said I slept, I gingerly shake my head. "I just need to harden the fuck up."

Ana glowers at me from underneath my arm before she assists me back into my room. When my backside plonks onto the mattress, I take her with me. Her closeness was always the cure for my thumping head. Her sass mainly the cause.

Happy to let me use her body as a pillow, Ana cuddles into my side before trekking her fingers over my heavy brows. She traces the grooves caused by the brain injury my father gifted me before dropping her focus to my nose. "I think you lied." I defensively brace. It's a waste of time. "Your nose hasn't grown a bit since the last time I perused it."

"An entire week ago."

She rams her elbow into my gut, allowing me to hide my whimper with a laugh. "I wasn't looking last week. I was too mad to look."

"Ohhh... so why were you grinding against my thigh?"



Her laugh pushes down the bile creeping up my throat. My stomach is empty, so I won't bring up anything but my stomach's lining, but I'd rather mess the sheets with something other than puke. "I didn't grind against your thigh." My cock twitches like it doesn't need my head in the right frame of mind to fuck when she mutters, "I was getting frisky with your hand." As she circles her thumbs over my temples, she switches the direction of our conversation. "But that's a conversation we can have when your brain isn't threatening to explode." Her faint breaths hit my cheek when she whispers, "Sleep, baby. I'll be here when you wake."



## ALEK

*A*na lied.

When I wake, she's no longer spooned around me, softening my hard bumps with her soft ones. She's back on the couch across the room, sketching in her notebook.

"Did I give you permission to move?"

Ana bites on her lower lip to hide her smile before she prowls across the room. "You sound so much better." She flattens her hand along my forehead like she can gauge my pain by doing something as simple as touching me. "How's the head?"

"Which one?"

She can't hide her smile this time around. "You should eat." Her moans have my mind veering far from food. "Vera's syrnikis are delicious."

"You've eaten?" The sheet wrapped around my shirtless torso falls to my waist when I sit up to scan my room. There's a serving tray on the drawers, and numerous empty plates on the table now housing Ana's sketchpad. I'm interested to discover what she's been working on, but my wish to remind her I'm not the soft cock my injury makes me out to be trumps anything else.

"Ale..." Ana moans out when I snatch up her wrists, pull her on top of me, then roll over so she is underneath me. "You... I..." Her words shift into breathless whimpers when I drag my cropped beard down the material hiding

her fantastic tits from me. She's wearing one of my old shirts, and I'm praying like fuck she's skipped my boxers drawer.

"Thank fuck," I murmur against her rapidly heating skin when I tug up the hemline of my tattered shirt. She's bare and so fucking ready for me, I can smell how aroused she is.

When I blow a hot breath over her drenched slit, she arches her back, exposing her want, but she still tries to convince me this isn't what I need right now. "You should eat."

"I'm about to." My lips raise against the smooth planes of her pussy when she snarls at me.

I wipe her riled expression off her face by stabbing my tongue between the folds of her pussy before dragging it up to her clit. When I circle my lips around the nervy bud, she whimpers before doubling the span of her thighs, ensuring I can fit without hindrance.

As one of her hands weaves through my man bun and the other fists the sheets, I bury my head between her legs as deep as I can go before eating her like a starved man. I suck hard on her clit, then lap up her arousal with long, precise licks.

"So fucking sweet." Her groan spurs me on. "Best fucking meal I've eaten."

Ana's cries grow desperate as her thighs begin to shake. "Please... ah... Alek."

I eat her harder. Faster. It is a desperate and rough exchange that has her moans turning lofty and ear-piercing. Her juices spread from the apex of her thighs to her ass and over every fucking inch of my chin, but I don't stop. I tease her with my tongue and bite her with my teeth before adding my fingers into the mix.

"Yesss," Ana pushes out with a hiss when I stuff two fingers inside her.

When I curl the tips to milk the sweet spot inside her, her pussy grips at me with the same desperateness as the gulps she's sucking down while

fighting not to be overwhelmed. Anastasia hates being quick off the mark. She'd rather savor the buildup of an orgasm than have it blaze through her like a wildfire.

"Give it to me," I demand before tugging on her clit with my teeth, certain it is seconds from sending her exploding over the edge. "Come on my face."

"No." Her voice is breathless. Lusty. "I don't want to come until you're inside me."

"Oh, don't worry, you will come then too." I lift her ass off the bed, then hit her clit with back-to-back rapid-fire hits with my tongue. She almost wins the battle she is forging through until I stimulate her G-spot with slow, purposeful strokes.

She never wins when I go gentle.

Ana's moans blare over the thud of my brain against my temples before she shatters like glass. As the world splinters around her, she utters my name into the cool morning air before freezing like a statue.

Then she shudders, thrashes, and grips my fingers so fucking tightly, I'd be tempted as fuck to push inside her now if I didn't think it would tear her.

"Fuck yes, драгоценный. Ride my face. Take what you need."

By the time she comes down from her climax, her body is limp and lifeless, meaning I have no trouble draping her leg over my thigh and slowly entering her.

I grunt through the sensation that grips my sack when I realize how tight she is. The walls of her pussy are clinging to my cock, massaging me and making me lose my fucking mind.

Her moan when I bottom out at her uterus is the most erotic thing in the world. It vibrates over my skin, doubling the throbs of the veins feeding my cock and having me want to push in harder and faster. The only reason I don't is because I don't want to tear her.

"Let it go," Ana begs, her voice husky from the screams she released

during ecstasy. After balancing on her elbows, she peers down at the area where our bodies are intimately joined.

I'm gripping the base of my cock. Don't get confused. I have no issues staying hard, but by keeping my hand wrapped around the base, I won't ram into her like my deviant fucking head really wants to.

"Can't..." I rock my hips forward, flicking them when I sink in to her deep enough to reach her G-spot. "Can't hurt you."

My self-control is almost lost when she squeezes the walls of her pussy around my twitching shaft. She wants me to lose control, to take her without constraint like I did the night I claimed her virginity. But I can't.

The last time I lost control she lost our daughter.

"драгоценный," I growl out through clenched teeth when she jerks down the bed, impaling herself deeper.

"If you won't fuck me, Alek. I'll do it myself."

"Christ!" I groan when the rock of her hips exposes inches of my cock that's coated with her arousal. She's drenched for me, wet and hot, and the sight of her pussy sucking at me, begging for more, has me forgetting my objectives.

I lurch my hips forward, growling when I take her deep and hard.

Ana doesn't mind. "Yes, Alek. Please... fuck me."

She lifts her knees to her chest, opening herself more to me, then arches her back. I bury myself deep inside her, then lift my eyes to her face to check for any signs of discomfort.

There isn't any.

Nothing but the wish to climax again is crossing her face.

After shuffling in closer, my knees are squashed into the mattress as Ana's are in her chest, I push one hand down on the lower half of her stomach, then lift one to her jiggling breasts. As I thrust into her on repeat, I watch the bounce of her uncontained breast. It jostles in rhythm to the pounding of our hips, growing in speed and velocity as I pump into her over and over again.

As the sucks of her pussy grow desperate and her moans ramp up, the rocks of Ana's hips slowly lose steam. She's exhausted but still chasing release, so I grip her hips and take charge of our exchange. I pound into her on repeat, stealing every last snippet of energy she has left to give with perfectly timed thrusts of my hips.

“Oh. *Oh. OH.*” Her moans get louder with every one she releases, and although they are lyrical gold to my ears, they expose my flaw.

They are way too fucking clear for my liking.

Ana stares up at me with lusty, dilated eyes when I grip her throat as firmly as her pussy is my cock. I only need to clamp down for a short three seconds before she gives in to the hysteria overwhelming her. She comes with a hoarse cry. My name is a whisper since nothing but minute slivers of air make it through the tiny gap not blocking her windpipe.

“Fuck, *драгоценный.*” I bury myself in as deep as possible to ride out the tight squeezes of her pussy. I don't want to come yet. I still need to force another handful of orgasms out of her. She always demands multiple, and I am more than willing to submit to her needs. “One more. I need at least one more.”

When she thrashes against the sheets, her body and head torn on how to respond, I give her no choice but to side with the devil on her shoulder. After flipping her over, I flatten my hand on her stomach and arch her up, bringing her dick-aching ass to within inches of my face.

I'm tempted as fuck to eat her ass—she loves when I'm nasty like that—but the wetness coating her thighs keeps my focus on her greedy cunt. I want her juices dripping down my balls as badly as I want them hanging off my chin.

I am on the edge of glory, but I won't claim victory until Anastasia's needs are fully taken care of, so I enter her again from behind this time, filling her like I'm sure no other man has.

I don't hold back this time around. I thrust in hard and fast, driving into

her with so much force, she splinters only minutes later. Her moans and the frantic squeezes of her pussy push me over the edge. While grunting her name, I fully hilt her before releasing deep inside her.

We're so fucking spent by the time my cock stops jolting, Ana's knees slip out from under her, and I collapse on top of her. It is a sticky, gooey mess I'd happily stay in for eternity if my gut wasn't growling like it is possessed. I'm fucking starving, and no amount of feasting on Ana's body will subdue my hunger pangs, so we can't stay twisted in a heap for too much longer.

"Come on. Let's get you showered and cleaned up before reintroducing you to the Bobrov man." I doubt any of them have forgotten who she is. She was known as the untouchable when the Bobrovs were attempting to place footholds in the US market. If you even looked at her in the wrong manner, you were a sitting duck.

I want to make sure everyone from Russia to Australia knows that's still the case.

As I slip off the bed, I place a trail of kisses down Ana's spine before stopping to sink my teeth into her ass. She whimpers as if she is in pain when I dig my teeth in hard enough to mark, but I know it is all for show. The lusty gleam she flashes me over her shoulder tells me she loves wearing my marks, much less her moan when I tug at her tattoo before freeing it from my maul.

"Always so fucking greedy," I murmur against her heated skin when she arches toward me instead of away from me. "How about we see how many more whimpers we can force out in the shower?"

Stealing her chance to deny me, I scoop her into my arms, then walk her into the bathroom, my lips never leaving her neck.





## ALEK

*A*n hour later, I sneak out of the bathroom to answer the door when someone pounds on it with enough force to buckle the hinges.

Ghost appears amused by my drenched head and barely covered body, but his focus shifts from my dilated eyes to my face when more than Ana's juices dribble over my lips. "What the fuck is going on with you?" He plonks his shoulder onto the doorjamb like it is natural for him to track me down instead of the other way around before dropping his eyes to my lips. "Anyone would think your nose was caving in from snorting the good stuff too much with the mess you've got going on underneath it."

I drag my hand under my nose, cussing when a trail of blood smears across the back of my hand. Incapable of blaming an insatiable appetite for my fuck-up, I run with another excuse. "I had a couple of issues I had to take care of last night."

"I heard." He folds his arms in front of his chest before angling his head to hide the scars on the right side of his face. "Why didn't you reach out?"

"You have enough shit going on. You don't need to deal with my crap." Sparks of the cocky fuck I am shine bright when I mutter, "I also had a handle on it."

"I've heard that too." He waits for my curiosity to get the best of me before asking, "But you must be a little unsure if you're bringing her here."

His eyes flick to the bathroom for the quickest second before they return to me. “She’s Kirill’s top pick.”

“Nah,” I deny, shaking my head. “Because she ain’t interested in you.”

We’ve been running many theories over the past couple of months, and they all point in one direction. Every one of Kirill’s Virgin Marys over the past two years have been Katie doppelgangers—red hair, fair, untouched skin, and sweltering assets. They just lacked Katie’s gall, meaning they didn’t last any longer than Ghost’s interest in them.

Then Katie arrived, and the rules changed.

Despite rumors circulating amongst his men that Ghost and Katie were messing the sheets, Kirill married Katie the day we returned to Russia. Usually, a wedding is closely followed by an announcement that his bride immaculately conceived. Katie failed to get pregnant after many artificial inseminations, yet Kirill still let her live. He only showed his asshole side when he killed her unborn child by stomping on her. Supposedly, he preempted the baby sex. Since he was of the belief she was a girl, he forced Katie to miscarry.

Usually, the mothers perish with their unborn daughters.

We were lost as to why the same fate didn’t happen to Katie, but the fog lifted when we noticed Kirill was orchestrating for Ghost and Katie to spend more time together. He was practically encouraging them to cheat, and when he had solid proof they were, he didn’t say shit.

That’s why Katie is living at a convent, and Ghost is here, striving to work out what the fuck is going on. We made some headway when Katie’s lineage didn’t present as squeaky clean as her persona, but with the Bobrovs still banned from trade in the US, our leads went cold earlier this week.

One thing hasn’t changed, though. “He’s doing more than fucking with your head.”

Ghost lifts his chin, agreeing with me, but remains quiet.

Silence isn’t unusual for him. Me, on the other hand, can’t shut the fuck

up even when it is for the best. “What are you thinking?”

He drops his arms then purses his lips. “That I should just fucking kill him and pay for the consequences of my actions.”

“Not gonna lie. I’ve been wanting you to do the same for years now.” I step back to grip the bathroom door handle when the shower switches off. I trust Ghost, but that doesn’t mean I want him seeing what’s mine. “But that wouldn’t just have the Bratva raining down on you. You’d have the whole fucking kingdom.”

Kirill is protected by mafia law. It means he can be a cunt in all meanings of the word, but we can’t touch him. That is as fucked as me getting weekly reports on Ana’s well-being the four years she lived abroad but doing jack fucking shit about them.

Stupid.

“We’ve just got to work out his game, G. The rest will fall into your lap when we work that out.” When the door handle rattles under my hand, I grip it firmer before saying, “I haven’t checked my emails yet, but I should have some reports back. I’ll bring them over as soon as I’m done here.”

“Alek, let me the fuck out!” Ana demands at the same time Ghost asks, “You sure you’ll be done that soon? To me, it sounds like you need to wash her mouth out.” He doesn’t need to say the rest of his reply. I see it in his grin. *With your cock.*

“Already gave that a whirl.” My dick twitches when I recall Ana on her knees, sucking off every droplet of her arousal. “Didn’t work.” Ghost’s failure to deny my next statement exposes just how fucking snowed under he is for Katie. “Lucky I like them feisty... *just like you.*”

His amuse-filled eyes drift from the bathroom door Ana is still cussing behind me. “If you’ve got more important matters to take care of, I can bring someone in.”

“No need,” I assure him. “Ana isn’t going anywhere, and I’m not shy, so if she needs her mouth washed out, I won’t need to leave your office to do

it.” His growl tells me I riled him as planned, leaving me fully sated.

I’ve blown three times in two hours and pissed him off.

My day won’t get any better.

“I’ll be on deck within the hour...” I pause, then correct, “*We* will be there within the hour.”

Although his hackles are raised, and his temper is shorter than a match head, Ghost considers my silent demand for Ana to be a part of our team for half a second before he notches up his chin, approving them.



## ANASTASIA

*A*lek laughs when I whack him in the gut. It pisses me off even more than being locked out of a conversation I should be a part of. If my father's debt dragged Alek off more pressing matters, a migraine that could see him permanently disabled will be the least of my worries.

His laughter is nipped in the bud when I ask, "Was that Ghost?" When he lifts his chin, his eyes slowly float up from my barely covered chest to my face, I ask, "Is he angry I'm here?"

"Why would he be angry?" he asks, confused.

With a huff, I skirt past him to hunt through the clothes Alek's men packed on my behalf yesterday. "He knows I'm not a fan of this place."

Ghost learned of his mafia pedigree late in life. At the beginning, he wasn't interested in anything it had to offer, then his sister got trapped in the world, leaving him no choice but to throw around his title.

It sounds simple now, but I had issues understanding it when his new title had him stealing Alek's attention from me.

"And neither the fuck is he, so you finally have something in common." When Alek's chuckled reply offers me little reassurance, he yanks out the sweats I pulled from the bottom of a suitcase, tosses them onto the bed, then shifts me to face him. "What's this really about?"

Feeling stupid, I brush off his worry with a two worded reply, "It's

nothing.”

“драгоценный...”

The growling of my nickname feels almost as good vibrating on the lips on my face as it does downstairs, and it has me obeying in an instant. “The money you paid. Did that come from you or Ghost?”

“Your father’s debt?” When I peer at him, shocked and open-mouthed as to what else he thinks I’m referencing, he murmurs, “It came from me.” He drags a hand over his manbun that’s hanging a lot lower since I gripped it for dear life while he ate me for breakfast. “I’ve done some not-so-good shit the past four years. Illegal shit comes at a premium.”

He sounds ashamed, and it has me biting with the snappiness he’s accustomed to. “Was one of those things Stace?”

Alek isn’t the only one reeling from the sudden flip of our conversation. I wasn’t planning to bring this up until I was certain, with the utmost positivity, that he understood my gratitude for him helping my father, but the dishonesty on his face pushed it to the surface at a rate faster than I could contain it. “What?”

“Her dad is in distribution. He knows everyone who is offloading or buying.” While acting like my heart isn’t being torn to shreds, I rummage through my suitcase for a shirt while mumbling, “So it makes sense you’d sleep with her to tighten ties.”

“What the fuck did you just say?” His voice is an angry roar.

“Nothing—”

Equally excited and feared, I freeze when he growls out, “Lie to me again, драгоценный. I fucking dare you.”

After swallowing to relieve my suddenly parched throat, I crank my neck back to peer at him. Gone is the playful I’ll-eat-you-until-the-sun-rises Alek replaced with a man who looks like conducting backyard abortions is how he gets off. “She...” I’ve dug a mighty large hole, and I’m about to jump in it, but since I’m too scared to leap alone, I horrendously drag someone into the



pit of hell with me. “Yev saw you. You were in her bed.”

“Yev?” Alek opens and closes his hands three times before he spits out through a clenched jaw, “He’s the reason you left me?”

His wish to deflect the blame with me makes me angry. “No—”

I don’t get the chance to say more. Alek heads for the door, uncaring he’s wearing nothing but a towel hanging dangerously off his wide hips. “I’m going to fucking kill him.”

His angry stomps freeze when I snap out, “For ratting you out? You’re a fucking hypocrite.”

My snarled comment regains me his sole devotion. Except now I’m not sure I want it. He looks pissed. Ropeable. So fucking sexy it is the fight of my life not to mop up his scowl with my tongue.

*What the hell, Ana? You’re meant to be mad.*

“You said you’d tell me if I was no longer enough, that you’d leave before finding someone else.” Suddenly vulnerable, my voice cracks during my next sentence. “Y-you lied.”

“I didn’t fucking touch her.” Anger and betrayal pile on my shoulders when he adds, “How many goddamn times do I have to tell you that?”

“Then why were you in her bed!”

His roar knocks me back two paces, much less what he confesses, “Because my head was about to fucking explode, and you weren’t answering your damn phone!” Too stunned to continue speaking, Alek fills in the gaps I did not know were so gapingly obvious until now. “I also needed to hide her where no one would think to look. In the last place anyone would expect. Stace’s house seemed like the logical choice since everyone knew I fuckin’ hated her guts for how worthless she always made you feel.”

“Who?” His comments about Stace stealing my confidence make sense. She did that as often as possible in our youth, but I am completely and utterly lost who he protected that day. Usually, his protective side was reserved for his unborn daughter and me. He’s never gifted it to anyone else before, and

I'd be a liar if I said I wasn't disappointed to learn someone stole it, even if it was only for an afternoon.

"Lera." His reply doesn't ease my bewilderment in the slightest until he mutters, "Ghost's niece that was cut out of Sofia's stomach the same day—" He stops, cusses, then drops his glistening eyes to my stomach. "The same fucking day my heart was cut out of my chest." He stares at me like he doesn't know who I am when he asks, "How fucking low must you think of me if you believe I would pick *anyone* over you that day? That I wouldn't have been there for you in a heartbeat if I had known. She was my blood, Ana. My daughter." He bangs his fist on the tiny feet tattooed on his chest during his last sentence. "But I only got to hold her in a jar. A fucking jar all because you believed some fucking bitch's lie over the promise I made before I fucking touched you."

When I step toward him, the most remorseful I've ever felt, for the first time, he holds out his hand, wordlessly disapproving of my approach.

"Alek, I—"

"Need to take a damn hard look at yourself," he interrupts, seemingly unaffected by the wetness on my cheeks. "I know that day hurt you, Ana." This is the one time I wish he would call me precious. The fact he uses Ana exposes how much I hurt him. "But you weren't the only one hurting." I am truly gutted when he mutters, "I lost *everything* I'd ever wanted in one fucking day."

Pure emotion fuels my response. "I did too."

A strand of blond hair falls out of his man bun when he shakes his head. "You didn't lose me. You gave me up. That's different."

"Because I thought—"

He cuts me off by racing out the door and slamming it shut.

---

BY THE TIME Alek returns to our room, breakfast, lunch, and dinner have passed. I've worn a hole in the rug pacing, and he clearly spent the time downing vodka as if it were water.

He can barely stay on his feet.

I realize how terribly wrong I have the situation when blood trickles out of his nose not long before he careens face first to the floor. "Alek." I roll him over the best I can before pulling his hair out of his face. "Baby." His cheeks are white, blood is trickling from his nose, and his breathing is shallow. "Fuck, baby, no."

Too panicked to care about how angry it will make Alek, I race to the door, yank it open, then shout as loud as I can, "Help! I need fucking help!"

No one's head turns in my direction.

Not a single soul.

Only a ghost.

When he spots my white face and fear-filled eyes, he grabs a man he was showing out, then races him into Alek's room.

"What the fuck?" Ghost murmurs under his breath when he spots Alek. "What the hell happened? He was fine a second ago."

While the man, whom I assume is a doctor, conducts a set of vitals on Alek, I ask Ghost, "Did you see him take anything?"

Ghost assists the doctor to put Alek in a seated position with his back braced on the wall before shaking his head. "He's not gone down that route for years." He locks his eyes with mine. "Not since you left. He thought his habit was one of the reasons you left so he kicked it years ago in case you ever came back."

"Not illegal drugs." I can't believe I was so stupid to have believed a single thing Stace said. Drugs were Alek's crutch, but he gave them up for me. "Medication. He's meant to take it daily. He will die if he doesn't."

"What medication?" the doctor asks.

"I don't know what it's called, but he had a TBI when he was nine."

Anytime he overexerts himself, it causes intracranial pressure, which results in—”

“Brain swelling,” the doctor interrupts, cussing. “We need to get him on the bed.” While Ghost maneuvers Alek like he doesn’t stand an inch taller than his six-foot-four height, the doctor requests for someone in the hall to bring him his bag before shifting his focus to me. “Did he take his medication today?”

Ghost answers on my behalf, “He hasn’t taken anything. Today has been a clusterfuck. We didn’t have time to piss let alone anything else.”

I can’t help but wonder if I was the cause of the carnage today.

The doctor’s worry is heard in his reply when he asks, “Where is his medication? I have prednisone in my bag, but the quicker we administer a dosage of steroids with his prescribed medication, the less damage will occur to his brain.”

“In his car,” I answer for Ghost this time around. “He keeps all his prescriptions hidden in his car.” When shock registers on Ghost’s face, I blubber out, “He didn’t want anyone to know.”

Breaking Alek’s trust is the least of my worries when Ghost mutters, “His car isn’t here.” I’ve never been more grateful for my inability to talk when panicked than now. “We needed a decoy. Alek volunteered. He was wearing a fucking seat belt.”

“A seat belt wouldn’t have stopped his brain from crashing into his skull!” I’m yelling at the wrong person, once again taking out my anger on anyone but me, but it is what I do when I’m stressed. I bite first and plead for forgiveness second.

When Yev arrives with the doctor’s bag, my heart sinks into my chest. I am part of the issue. His battered face and cracked knuckles expose this.

As the doctor administers medication and prepares an IV bag, Ghost instructs Yev to take me to his office.

“What?” I whip around to face Ghost so fast, my hair slaps my face. “I’m

not going anywhere.” My anger shifts from Ghost to Yev as fast as it takes for Yev to pluck me from my spot by a rough yank on my arm and toss me onto his shoulder. “Put me fucking down, Yev, or I’ll crash your nuts with a grinder.” He ignores me. “Yev... Yev!”

I continue screaming until he dumps me onto a couch in Ghost’s office and barricades the door with his body that I beat into until exhaustion overcomes me.



## ANASTASIA

Ghost ducks, scarcely dodging the letter opener I fling at him the instant I realize who is entering his office. Angry it misses its mark, I grab the next closest object and peg it at his head. The stapler scratches the non-scarred side of his face, and I don't feel the slightest bit remorseful.

It has been hours since Yev left, and I haven't heard a single thing about Alek's condition.

After dragging his hand over the droplet of blood pooling at the end of his fresh scratch, Ghost asks, "Are you done?"

"I would be if the gun in your drawer was loaded."

When he smirks—forever the smug prick—I upend the stack of files on his desk.

"Hey!"

He doesn't need to threaten me further. The images that fall out of the folders are too shocking to put energy into anything but holding the contents of my stomach. "Who is that?"

Ghost gathers up the folders before snatching the image of a beheaded woman out of my hand before replying, "Kirill's second wife." He dumps the files into a filing cabinet at the side of his desk, slings off his jacket, then removes a two-gun holster. "Doc says Alek will make a full recovery. He just needs to rest and lower his stress." After planting his backside onto his desk,

he kicks out his chair and nudges his head to it, demanding for me to sit. When I do, he adds, “I’ve just got to work out if having you here will help or hinder his recovery.”

“How is this my fault? You let him crash his fucking car.”

He looks like he would give anything to punish me for my scornful mouth, but he holds back his annoyance—*just*. “He crashed it into a gleaming gold Aurus Senate.” I try to act like they’re as common around these parts as Lada’s. My efforts are noteworthy but worthless when he adds, “With ‘golden’ tags.” Ghost folds his arms over his chest before leaning back like he’s in for a long night. “Who is she? And why did Alek know she’d get Kirill out of the convent long enough to get Katie settled?”

“What?” I’m not acting daft. I am truly confused.

“Kirill held Katie’s head under water this morning. Alek stopped me from retaliating by saying he knew another way we could get to him.” He leans forward so I see nothing but honesty on the unscarred side of his face when he utters, “Kirill left the house immediately upon hearing the driver of a gleaming gold Aurus had been in an accident.”

I’m still confused, but I play along in the hope Ghost won’t kick me out before I see with my own eyes that Alek is okay. “Stace Lenkov. Her father is in distribution. They’re wealthy, but not like this.” I wave my hand around his office. “She only found her father once she became an adult. Before that, she...” I hate myself for almost including Alek in my next statement. “...fucked anyone who would give her the time of the day. She wanted a sugar daddy.”

“Wanted?”

I nod when the interrogation in Ghost’s exposed eye asks way more than his one-worded question. “She’s five months. The father’s identity hasn’t been acknowledged.”

“Who do you suspect it is?” This is the most words Ghost and I have exchanged even with me dating Alek for three years.



“Up until this morning, Alek.”

Ghost huffs, then shakes his head in shock like he couldn't have heard what he thinks he did.

When he realizes his hearing isn't playing up, he asks, “You're serious?”

I sink into my chair before jerking up my chin. “She was chasing him for months before...” It is so hard to remember that Alek didn't cheat, I have to physically stop myself from spewing lies. “I fucked up.”

Ghost *pffts* again before giving me my marching orders. “If you're stupid enough not to notice how fucking snowed under he is for you, you're not smart enough to be a part of this.”

My first thought is to sprint for the door, but my heart won't allow it. “I can't leave him.”

Ghost swivels around the chair I vacated like it was on fire, sits on it, then lifts his eyes to mine. Air hisses between my teeth when he slants his head so the scarred side is exposed. It is far worse than it was years ago. Almost patchworked back together. “Then don't.” My relieved sigh is premature. “But if I find him like that again...” He finalizes his reply by straying his eyes to his filing cabinet of horrors.

“You won't. I promise.”

He has no reason to believe me, but he does. After a brief nod, he gestures his head to his office door again. This time, I race out of it.

I only get a few steps away when I am suddenly stopped. The person grabbing my elbow instantly regrets their manhandling when I respond with violence.

It was my go-to on the streets when I had to fight for everything I had.

The palm I ram into the dark-haired man's nose adds to the bruises mottling the skin under and above his eye. He retaliates, as expected, but his backhanded slap has nothing on the pain that's been splintering through my veins for the past eighteen-plus hours.

When the man with icy blue eyes rears his hand back for another slap,

I'm saved by the last person I expected. "Don't ruin the merchandise before I've had the chance to sample it."

Ghost moseys down the hall with his hands in his pockets and not the slightest bit of agitation on his face. Only the flicker of danger in his eyes exposes he's pissed as fuck.

"She would have thought you were me." I knew Alek and Ghost were close, but I had no idea just how close until he pushes my head to the wall while growling, "She likes to be hunted." He kicks apart my feet with his boot before squashing his thigh between them. His ploy to make the man believe he was chasing me is so realistic, I'm praying like hell the hallway doesn't have cameras. If Alek was to see this, Ghost will be dead. "And our game is only just beginning, isn't it, Little Lamb?"

I would nod if his hold on my head allowed it. Since I can't, I stammer out, "Y-yes."

"Good girl." He pulls me back until I can see the bewilderment slashed across the stranger's face before Ghost shoves me toward his office. "I'm over playing. Get in my office and strip."

"B—"

"Did I sound like I was asking a fucking question?"

When Ghost's expression exposes his punishment will be far worse than the man watching our charade with joined brows, I shake my head before scampering back to his office.

I can't hear a word he exchanges with the man in the hall when I leave, but their discussion appears heated. Ghost's grin is mocking, and the longer it remains on his face, the angrier the dark-haired man becomes.

They almost come to blows until a small child exits a bedroom one spot down from Ghost's office. She rubs at her eyes, reddening the angry scar that travels from her hairline to her chin before she wraps her tiny arms around Ghost's leg.

The man accosting Ghost seems to get pleasure knowing the child is

ruining Ghost's plans, but he does nothing to alleviate it. He simply bids them goodnight before leaving with an extra spring in his step.

When Ghost returns to his office with the small child in his arms, he nudges his head to the sofa. "You will need to stay here for a couple of hours. He will be watching."

"He?"

I follow Ghost to a secret door at the side of his office. When it pops open to display a child's bedroom on the other side, my mouth gapes. Ghost doesn't seem the maternal type, but why else would he have a child's room next to his unless he is her guardian?

The truth smacks into me hard and fast when I recall Alek's shouted words before he stormed out hours ago. "She is Lera, your niece?"

Nodding, he tucks her in before he hands her a stuffed rabbit. "Sleep. There are still hours until the sun rises."

"Then?" she asks, making me melt with her adorable voice.

"Then you can raid my pockets." When her face lights up, Ghost murmurs, "But only if you sleep."

"Okay, uncle," she replies, her English worse than mine. "Goodnight."

She must really want whatever is in Ghost's pocket because she clamps her eyes shut and snuggles into her bunny.

Ghost waits for her breathing to level out before he exits her room, switching off the light on his way but leaving the door partially cracked open. I already feel like absolute shit, but he digs the stakes in deeper when he murmurs, "If you want to be angry at anyone for Alek not being there that day..." He nudges his head to Lera's room. "She seems the logical choice. If he hadn't hidden her, he would have killed her."

"He?" I ask again, my voice low with empathy.

"Her father." He walks around his desk and takes a seat on his chair. "The very man who would give anything to hurt Alek." He drags his tired eyes down my body. "Hurting you would hurt him."

“That’s why you pretended I was yours.”

I wasn’t asking a question, but he answers it as if I was. “Yes.” He works his jaw side to side before confessing, “I also wanted to test a theory Alek has been suggesting the past couple of months.” I can’t tell if he is relieved or pissed when he mutters, “He could be onto something.” He returns his eyes to my face. “For the first time in months, he seemed more interested in learning all about you than riling me about Katie.”

“Katie?” I hate being out of the loop, but I’m more curious than anything.

Bile scorches the back of my throat when Ghost utters while staring at the door that leads to the hallway, “Kirill’s current wife.”

“That was Kirill?” I’ve heard rumors about him in the past couple of weeks. None of them were good. He is an evil, vile man who kills without blinking an eye and only keeps people around who benefit him. That’s why I was so shocked to hear his name leave Stace’s mouth on more than one occasion at the poker tournament.

My eyes widen as I’m smacked with a theory. “Could he be Stace’s baby daddy?” When Ghost arches a brow but remains quiet, I update him on the snickering comments I overheard during the tournament.

“And Alek was there?”

I nod. “I’m not sure if he heard her, but it kind of makes sense that he did. He knew crashing into her would get Kirill out of hiding.”

Ghost takes a moment to think before digging his cell phone out of his pocket and dialing a number.

One hour later, he has every medical report filed under Stace’s name.

“Kliment works fast,” I mumble to myself while scanning the reports Ghost is scrolling through. “What are you looking for?”

If he trusted me, I’d say he would answer. Since he doesn’t, he mutters, “You should be right to leave now, but make sure you take the most indirect route to Alek’s room.”

I’m a curious being, always have been, but since I care more about Alek

than solving Ghost's riddle, I thank him for his earlier assistance with a smile before slowly exiting his office.

It is early, so the many corridors of the Bobrov compound are empty. I make it back to Alek's room unscathed before being hit by my second low blow today. The doctor was concerned enough to stay with him. He's asleep on the armchair in the corner of the room.

"Hey," he greets when my tiptoe across the room isn't as quiet as I am hoping. There are no machines attached to Alek, and no IV bag trickles, so even something as gentle as a swallow can be heard.

I stop at the foot of Alek's bed. "How is he?"

The doctor screws up his face. "He'd be better if he took his medication as prescribed." He stands before fixing his rumpled tie. "Episodes like this would be few and far between if—"

"He wasn't so damn stubborn."

He laughs before adding, "And stressed." He looks over at Alek before returning his focus to me. "I'm not a neurologist, but if I were, my diagnosis would be stress-induced seizures."

"Seizures?"

He jerks up his chin. "His previous TBI wouldn't help, but I believe this episode today was his body's response to his brain being overworked. It starts with seizures before it eventually expands to permanent paralysis."

"You mean he could die?"

The doctor swallows. It is understandable. My question sounded more like a threat than a way to seek answers. "Possibly. His brain will only take so much damage before it eventually affects his speech and movements. Once that starts, his capacity of life will diminish with them." I'm torn between telling him to get the fuck out and begging him to never leave Alek's side, but I don't go for either when he adds, "But simple management with medication and some lifestyle changes will lessen the chances of permanent neurological damage." He shifts his eyes back to Alek, the

fondness in them lessening my anger. “He just needs to stop being so damn stubborn.”

“We both do,” I murmur under my breath before thanking the doctor for his help and showing him to the door. I don’t want any witnesses to my groveling. I wouldn’t even hang around for it if I weren’t the one issuing it.

Once I’m alone with Alek, I toe off my shoes and strip out of the clothes I tossed on in a hurry when he left, then slip into his bed. His heart thudding against my ear is lyrical gold. It is strong and robust, incapable of being taken down.

“That’s what you need to learn,” I whisper in his ear, my words barely rustle in the air.

“Medication doesn’t weaken you. It makes you stronger.”

I realize I am going about my apology in the wrong manner when I tickle my fingertips over the fine hairs splayed across his chest. The tattoo there is tiny since her feet were only the length of a pen cap, but the detail placed into the artwork Alek got inked the morning I left him can’t be denied. It is our daughter’s feet I caressed and kissed with no thought that Alek might like to do the same.

Because I was so hurt, I used her as a weapon against him the same way my father did my mother.

“She was not my pawn to use against you, and I’m so fucking sorry I did that.” My tears splash onto his chest as I trace her perfect little feet. “I was lost, but that isn’t an excuse. You had every right to be there and to hold her. I should have never taken that away from you.”

For the first time in a long time, I am brutally honest. “I’m so glad you took her. She shouldn’t have been there. I was just so angry...” I quickly backtrack to make sure I am not placing the blame on his shoulders. “At myself. I was angry with myself. You told me not to go down there, but I didn’t listen. Her death is my fault. I slipped and crashed into the banister.” I frantically wipe at my cheeks, hating the wetness on them but also

understanding of them. “And I just wanted you. I didn’t want to move until you were there.” I breathe out heavily before murmuring, “If I hadn’t been so stubborn, maybe she would have made it.”

That is a lie. The doctor said she was too small to survive outside of the womb. I was only eighteen weeks, but the damage was too significant to fix. I just have a hard time remembering that when I recall how I refused to leave the laundry room for over an hour because I didn’t want to deliver her without Alek holding my hand, promising me he would make it better.

“I’m so sorry,” I mutter again, my heart shattered. “I’ll make it up to you. I will never stop trying.” The final crack to split my heart in two is heard in my sob when I utter, “But I understand if you never forgive me. I’ll never forgive myself, so I don’t deserve—”

I almost sob when Alek mutters, “Shh... *драгоценный*,” but the doctor said I need to lower his stress, not double it. Him seeing me cry will certainly do exactly that.

“Why are you awake?” I drag my hands across my wet cheeks before trying to say as neutral as possible, “The doctor said you need rest.”

“That’s all I’ve been fucking doing of late.” The mattress springs creak when he rolls over. He tries to hide it, but I see the slightest sliver of pain dart through his eyes when he props his head on his bent arm. “You sleep when you’re dead.”

“Which will be far sooner than I want if you don’t start taking your medication.”

“Nah.” His smile digs itself through the grief bombarding me. “You’d never be so lucky to get rid of me that easy.”

“Ale—” He shushes me this time by pressing his lips against mine. I act like a coward by opening my mouth to the lashes of his tongue instead of apologizing while he is awake, but I am defenseless to this man—utterly and unequivocally hopeless.

After kissing me until the wetness pooling in my eyes is burned off for

lust, Alek drops his lips to my neck. He sucks gently at the skin, smiling when it responds by blistering with goose bumps before he lowers his mouth even further.

When he sucks my nipple into his mouth, my back arches, but my head knows what my heart doesn't want to admit. "We need to talk."

"Not yet." He twirls his tongue around the stiff peak of my nipple before he peers up at me through the valley he's demanding every ounce of attention from. "Not until we've made up the only way we know how."

"I wasn't fighting with you for the make-up sex." He makes a liar out of me when he trails his lips down my stomach. I spread my legs apart so he can wedge his wide shoulders between them instead of clamping them shut. "Alek, baby, we really need to tal..." My words shift to a garble when he spears his tongue between the folds of my pussy before he swivels it up to my clit.

Air wafts against the sensitive skin when he blows a hot breath over me before he dedicates a heap of attention to my clit. He licks, sucks, and grazes it with his teeth, but not once does his pace step past lazy. He takes his time enjoying my squirms and begs for more—patient and increasingly torturous.

"Alek..."

"Soon," he promises as one long finger scoops up the residual of my arousal from my pussy to circle it around my clit. "So fucking responsive."

He breathes out heavily against my clit when it responds to the briefest brush of his fingertip with an urgent jolt. I'm soaring toward ecstasy, and he is hardly touching me. I'd be frustrated if I weren't so intrigued by how he gets my body to respond so eagerly.

It's never been like that with anyone else. There were dull sparks of lust and sometimes a wish to explore them a little deeper, but nothing that made me want to drag them into the backroom of a club and ravish them.

I haven't even kissed anyone since Alek.

I knew they wouldn't get me off, so I refused to give them the chance.



My head sinks into the pillow when Alek returns his fingers back to the opening of my pussy. As he slips two inside, his tongue tortures my clit with slow, purposeful licks. His speed is excruciating but also mind-blowing. Combined with the slow pace of his fingers as they slide in and out of me, they have me racing for climax in an incredibly quick time frame.

I usually like to savor the ride, to make it as drawn out as the waves of pleasure that roll through me, but this time I can't. The buildup is too quick, the explosion blinding.

Within seconds, the fluid rocks of my hips smooth as a blistering of lights spark above me. I shudder and moan, the sensation gentle but overwhelming.

Since the buildup was so quick, the aftermath is long and shattering. By the time I come down from the unbelievable relief that it is Alek bringing me to the highs of ecstasy, I am sated and boneless.

Alek doesn't seem to mind. After wiping up the evidence of my long climax from his hairy chin, he yanks down his sweatpants, curls my seemingly weighted legs over his shoulders, then brings me to orgasm all over again with the same mind-hazing slowness.

He doesn't increase his pace or let his desires go wild. He savors every moan, shudder, and spasm his dedication encourages until his needs eventually bring him to his knees.

With his eyes locked on my face and his hand under my backside to arch me up to him, he slowly enters me with the same tortuous pace he did while bringing me to climax an incalculable number of times.

“Fuck, драгоценный. How is it possible you get tighter every time I take you?”

I savor the full feeling of being stretched so wide before pulling him down for a chaste kiss. The power he is exuding to hold back is felt in the tremor of his lips. It is taking everything he has not to pound into me with everything he has, and the knowledge has me wondering what I missed.

“You heard me,” I murmur when I see the truth in his hooded gaze.

He pushes in deep, commanding all my senses before faintly nodding.

I choke back my shame, but I can't hold back my shock that he doesn't hate me after what I confessed.

I killed our daughter.

How can he not hate me?

He must have mind-reading capabilities. "What happened was an accident, *драгоценный*."

When I shake my head, he thrusts in deeper.

"It wasn't your fault."

I should hate that he is using my libido against me, but when he pushes in and out another three times, my fight is nowhere near as strong.

"I shouldn't have kept you away from her."

"You didn't." An involuntary shiver racks through me when he adjusts the span of my hips so he can take me deeper. His speed remains the same, though. "I had time with her. If anything, I stole her from you. She's been with me for years." His thrusts slow when he places my hand on the tattoo on his chest, but they're still mind-numbing. "She's always been a part of me." A familiar tremor hits the lower half of my stomach when he murmurs, "As have you."

We never named our daughter, but the instant we learned she was a girl, Alek gave her the same nickname as me.

*Precious.*

That word is woven around the intricate design circling her feet.

"I love you, Alek," I murmur, realizing I was as wrong to keep that from him four years ago as I was his right to see his daughter.

"I know you do, *драгоценный*." His smirk almost pushes me over the edge of orgasmic bliss, but that doesn't mean he will make the fall less dramatic. "But that doesn't mean I'll go faster." When I pout, he sucks my protruding lip into his mouth before releasing it with a pop. "For the first time, you didn't run when we fought. You stayed. That proves you're not

going anywhere, so I can take my time with you.”

I love his playfulness, but it won't stop my snappy side from trying to get a rise out of him. “We will need to eat at some stage.”

“Oh, don't worry, *драгоценный*. We will.”

Before I can recognize the glint in his eyes, he withdraws and then buries his head back between my legs to ensure there isn't an ounce of confusion about what he plans to live off.



## ALEK

When Ghost's husky snicker reaches my ears, I shoot him a riled, shut-the-fuck-up glare. Anastasia was so convinced she was going to be a shit mother when we found out she was pregnant not long after her nineteenth birthday she offered to have an abortion.

I wouldn't hear of it.

I'm a believer that everything happens for a reason, so although the pregnancy was a shock, and her loss fucking gutted me, I'll never manually steer the arrow of my trajectory.

Furthermore, the way Ana has taken care of me the past few weeks shows she will be an awesome mother. I love her to fucking death—even when she is ramming tablets down my throat and making me swivel my tongue to ensure I've swallowed them like I'm a patient at a hospital for the criminally insane instead of the man who brings her to ecstasy all hours of the day and night.

While returning my medication to the bag she makes me carry everywhere I go, Ana asks, "Have you had any water this morning?"

I return my tongue to my mouth instead of where it really wants to be—in any of Ana's crevices—before jerking up my chin. "Sir Anal threatened to waterboard me if I didn't drink the bottle Vera arrived with this morning."

Ghost smirks but acts as if the paperwork in front of him is the only thing

of interest to him. It is a believable act when you realize what he's reading—the hospital report of Stace's admission the night I rear-ended her pride and joy with my car.

No, I'm not a fuckwit who takes his anger out on pregnant women. It was my confrontation with Yev that steered my interest back to Stace. I don't know how her pregnancy came up between me warning Yev I was about to beat his brains out and attempting to do exactly that, but it saw Yev more confused than Anastasia was when I told her about Lera's existence.

How could that one vital piece of information be left out when it was invaluable to my case?

Although I still wanted to beat the living hell out of Yev for not getting all the facts on what happened that day, my focus shifted when he asked me why I believed Stace was pregnant.

I thought the bump in her midsection made it obvious, but Yev was adamant it was bloating.

“It had to have been. I saw her at the club a few days back. Her stomach was as flat as a tack,” he said, suspending my fist midair. “Don't believe me, look.” He showed me pictures on his cell. Stace wasn't the only face I recognized. Kirill was there along with his number two, Watermelon Head. I think his name is Walter, but I prefer Katie's nickname for him.

I was updating Ghost on Yev's discovery when Kliment called. He is head of surveillance and the first man to side with us when Ghost discovered he implanted the hidden camera in Katie's room. Would he have jumped teams if Ghost wasn't threatening to kill him? Probably not, but he's been an invaluable asset ever since.

Every sense of Ghost's essence was obliterated when he watched the footage of Kirill holding Katie's head under the water of his overfilled bathtub. If it weren't for Yev and me holding him back, Kirill would be buried in a shallow grave by now, and Ghost would have been the target of every mafia hitman this side of New Jersey.

I bet it was hard for Ghost to hold back when the makeshift 'raid' of the Lenkov's assets forced Kirill into his trap, but one punch is better than letting him off scot-free.

It is the only reason Yev is still breathing.

If he had come to me and admitted what he saw, I could have told him he had it all wrong and assured Ana knew the same. But since I woke to a fucking shit show that doubled the pounding of my brain to my skull, *everything* was ripped out from beneath me.

I don't doubt Stace is feeling the same way, but it serves her right. When you fake a pregnancy, the truth will always come out.

Let's hope the same doesn't occur for fake relationships.

I was pissed as fuck when Ana and Ghost told me about their confrontation with Kirill, but once I calmed down, it made sense. I've been saying to Ghost for months that Kirill's interest in Katie has nothing to do with her sweltering curves and flawless face and everything to do with Ghost's instant fascination with her.

Turns out I was right.

Kirill has been spending more time at the compound than the monastery Katie sleeps at every night, and although discreet, he keeps tabs on Anastasia and Ghost's founding 'relationship.' He may even be forcing it to hasten.

Last week Ghost noticed the condoms that had been in his drawer for over a year were opened. The pin pricks in them were small but noticeable.

Kirill is playing games, and the only reason we haven't stopped them is because the more attention he pays to Ghost, the less he focuses on Katie. I fucking loathe that Ana is tossed into the mix as well, but I wasn't joking when I said last month that she can take care of herself. When her father couldn't take care of her anymore, she was raised on the streets. They made her smart as fuck and ensured she's an asset to Ghost's team, which is slowly growing.

Regretfully, I can't say the same for Sofia. She's suspicious of Ana's

relationship with Ghost and announces it to anyone willing to listen, which has left us no choice but to up the ante.

Ghost is about to get down on one knee and ask the question I was planning to ask Ana before she left. I'd be pissed if I weren't stoked Ana will suck the jealousy straight from my marrow later tonight. She loves when I act like a jealous fuckwit. I hate it. I know it is a ruse, but I'd be a damn liar if I said the little PDAs they do to authenticate their ruse don't make me a spiteful dweeb.

A groan barely seeps from my lips, but Ana whips around so fast you'd think I had been stabbed. "What was that?"

"Nothing. I didn't say anything."

"Don't lie to me, Alek." She's at my side quicker than I can click my fingers. "You groaned." Her fingers trace my brow as her eyes count the flutters of the vein in my neck. "Do you have a headache? Blurry vision? Are you achy?"

She slaps me on the chest when I mutter, "Something is achy. It ain't my fucking head. Well, actually..."

She smacks me again. "This isn't funny. You heard what Dr. Roche said. One more bad seizure and you might not..." She swallows then tries again. "You'll..." Her second attempt isn't any better than the first, so she settles with facts she is slowly learning she doesn't need to be ashamed to admit. "I can't lose you."

"I'm fine." I tug her in close, loving that she's so tiny, she tucks under my arm like it is her own personal nook carved into my body. "But I could go for a glass of water."

"Water? I can get you water." She pulls back then spins to face Ghost like her quick maneuver will have me missing the wetness in her eyes. She's been a little more sooky the past couple of days—somewhat hormonal. "Did you want anything?"

Ghost's brows furrow when he spots her ready to burst eyes, but like me,



he acts ignorant. "I'm good."

"All right. I'll be right back." Although there are bottles of water on the end table next to the sofa, she bolts for the door.

She clearly needs a minute.

My eyes sling from the door to Ghost when he mutters, "What the fuck is going on? The last time she asked if I wanted something to eat, when I said yes, she told me to grab her something while I was there."

That gets me laughing, although it does nothing to alleviate my confusion. I am truly lost to her rollercoaster of emotions of late. I first blamed it on my blackout, but that was over four weeks ago, so it can't still be playing havoc with her emotions.

She wasn't even this uneasy when I took her to visit our daughter's gravesite at the monastery. It is Bobrov territory, but the nuns were there decades before Kirill, and they will remain decades after him. I also thought the angel ornaments scattered throughout the garden were fitting for our little angel's final resting place. "She's been out of sorts a couple of days now."

I flinch like a soft cock when Ghost asks, "Has she bled this month?"

It only takes me a second to calculate a reply. I have my head buried between Ana's legs at least two times a day, so I'd know if she was bleeding. "No, but that's normal, right? She's only been here a month."

He leans forward until his elbows rest on his desk. "Not unless she was bleeding when you fucked her in your apartment for old times' sake."

"I didn't take her there to fuck her." I am a damn liar, and Ghost knows it. "But she wasn't bleeding then either, nor at the tournament." I'm curious but more anal about my privacy being invaded, so it fuels my next question. "How the fuck do you know I took Ana back to our apartment?"

"I asked Kliment to keep an eye on you when I heard she was back." Since he was more looking out for me than causing mischief, I let it go. "The cameras you had installed during renos are old as fuck but still functioning." When footsteps sound down the hall, I remember the reason I faked an

incoming migraine. “Use this tonight. It will make it more believable.”

“What is it?”

Ghost doesn't get the chance to open the box I toss at him. Anastasia has returned with empty hands and tear-free eyes. “I just remembered you have water on the side table. Silly me.” Her hands dart up to make sure her cheeks aren't wet when Ghost and I stare. Once she is reassured they're dry, she mutters, “What did I miss?”

“Nothing.” After flashing Ghost a quick grin, I ask Ana, “Do you wanna take a walk?”

A walk means does she want to fuck in any location I can get her, which in case you are wondering, is up to three times a day the past couple of weeks.

Ana's worries disappear as she smiles a mammoth grin. “I thought you'd never ask,” she murmurs before she loops her arm around my elbow and races us to the closest dark nook.



## ANASTASIA

*M*y hand shakes when I pull out the box I stole from the pantry earlier today. I'm not sure if Alek releasing in me as he did two times today will alter the results, but I can't hold back my curiosity for a moment later. I'm moodier than normal, my emotions are all over the shop, and although we have a lot of lost time to make up for, the last time my horniness was this rampant was the month I found out I was pregnant.

Add that to the fact we haven't used protection once in the past month, and you have one hell of a conspiracy theory.

I'm tempted to call Alek into the bathroom with me like I did last time, but I can't bring myself to do it. He's had a good month and seems as strong as an ox, but I can't stop what the doctor said from ringing through my head.

He's one blow away from death.

The remembrance guts me, but it also has me hopeful that this test comes back positive. I can't replace our daughter or make up for the preposterous way I acted the day she was born, but I can give Alek something to live for—someone who will make him reconsider volunteering when a ram-raid is added to the mission.

Once I've followed the instructions on the box to a T, I place the test upside down on the vanity and then drop my eyes to my watch.

Any girl will tell you that two minutes is never long enough until you're

staring at a pregnancy test. Then, it seems like a lifetime.

“Come on,” I murmur to my watch when Alek checks on me.

When I realize I still have a minute to go, I reply, “Go ahead. I’ll catch up.”

“Are you sure?” Alek asks. “I don’t mind waiting.”

“I’m sure. I…” When I can’t think of a better excuse, I get snappy. “Can a girl just use a bathroom without a damn audience? My God. I have to poo. Okay. There. You happy?”

“All right, *драгоценный*. Fuck.” His laugh makes me instantly regret my outburst. “You could have just said you need to use the bathroom. I wouldn’t have waited if you didn’t say you were reapplying your lipstick.” I glare at the door when he murmurs with a chuckle, “I was just curious to learn if it matches the shade at the base of my dick.”

He’s being generous. I can’t deepthroat him, but I sure as hell pretend I can when he gets butthurt about my ruse with Ghost. I know how much it hurts believing your other is attracted to someone else, and even though we’ve never kept Alek in the dark about our intentions, I will always make sure he never experiences the pain I did the day Stace arrived at my hospital room claiming she had finally stolen my man.

My smile is heard in my reply. “You’ll find out tonight.”

“Damn straight I will.” He waits a beat before telling me he will meet me at Ghost’s office. “Remember—”

“To take the most indirect route. I know,” I interrupt, hating that he needs to worry but understanding as to why he does. There’s some shady shit going on around here, and I feel as if we’re about to get to the bottom of it. “I love you.”

I hear him place his hand on the door separating us. “You’ll always be my most precious gem, *драгоценный*.”

That’s his way of saying he loves me back. He hasn’t been able to speak those words since it was the last ones his father said to his mother before he

killed her.

Once Alek's shadow clears from beneath the door, and I've settled my nerves enough to be sure I won't drop the test, I pick it up before slowly turning it over.

"Holy hell. I'm pregnant."

As my eyes scan the test like it may change the result at any moment, I suck in big gulps of air. I'm assuming Alek will react the same way he did the first time around, but I'm also a little bit panicked. Did he fight for her so much because I suggested an abortion and we fought for kicks? Or does he genuinely want children?

"I guess there's only one way to find out."

After another quick exhale, I dump the pregnancy test box into the bin, stuff the pregnancy stick into the fancy clutch I pretend is a knockoff even with its stitch being designer, then check my reflection in the mirror.

I don't look like the dirty street kid I was when Alek found me. My hair is glossy and pinned back to expose the long column of my neck, my makeup is subtle but enchanting, and my dress fits me in all the right places.

I am a perfectly polished gem.

Alek's most precious gem.

With more confidence than I've yielded over the past four years, I march out of the room I secretly share with Alek, then dart down the corridor that will take me the long route to Ghost's office. I'm so excited to share my news with Alek that I cut a corner too quickly, crashing straight into someone coming from the other end.

Mercifully, it isn't any of Kirill's men. She is feminine and petite, and I've not locked eyes with her in an extremely long time.

"Sofia, hi."

When she bobs down to collect the items that spilled from her hands during our tumble, I do the same. The stitch on my clutch wasn't as sturdy as it is detailed. It ripped during our collision.

She peers up at me sheepishly while gathering our things. I doubt she remembers me as we met in passing at a function two years before I moved abroad. She was as shy and demure back then as she is now.

“Should you be taking this many hormones?” I ask when I notice every one of the labels is prescribed to her. “They can cause premature onset of menopause.” Sofia isn’t much older than me, and from what I’ve learned over the past month, she only has the one child. Surely, she doesn’t want to go through menopause yet.

“That’s no concern of yours.” Her words are the whisper of a church mouse—weak and extremely low.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t meaning to pry.” I swallow down the rest of my apology when the big-ticket item I should have gone for first captures Sofia’s attention.

Before I can snavel it up, she beats me to the pregnancy test. “Whose is this?” she asks while glaring at the positive result.

“Um...” I could lie, but what’s the point? “It’s mine.”

Her eyes snap to mine so fast, if she were Alek, I’d be checking him for signs of a migraine. “You’re pregnant?”

I nod, the turmoil in her voice too shocking for a vocal response.

“Does Ghost know?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. I was just on my way to tell him.” I practically have to pry the test out of her hand to remove it. I’m shocked she’s so protective of something I peed on. Alek was the only one game to touch my last positive test. He had it framed. Everyone thought he was weird, but I love his quirkiness. “Please don’t tell anyone. I want *G-Ghost* to know first.” You have no idea how hard it was to say my last sentence. I almost said Alek.

“I won’t tell anyone.” She sounds deceitful, but what would I know? Alek has kept me away from her as much as possible over the past month, and his avoidance tactics were as stellar as years ago when we first met.

“Bye.” That felt odd. Rightfully so. I have a sudden feeling I’m starring

in a horror movie where the cast was requested to act impulsive and insane.

“You all right?” Ghost asks when I arrive at his office.

I nod before searching the expansive room for Alek. I’m a little shaken, but nothing he won’t fix in half a second. I find him near Ghost’s filing cabinet of horrors, but he isn’t alone. Kirill is standing next to him.

When he spots me, Kirill not Alek, he turns to me with a smile, then asks, “Shall we start proceedings? From what I hear, they’re going to go off with a bang.” His eyes barely drop a smidge, but my stomach revolts like he’s scarring my unborn child with the same knife he cut his daughter’s face with.

“Yes. You first.” I couldn’t care less about his supposed infamous reputation or that I’m meant to bow in his presence. I just want to get his eyes off my stomach before Alek finds out I’m pregnant by me vomiting on his shoes.

Kirill appears smug as fuck when I gesture for him to lead the way. He holds his head high while exiting the room, meaning he doesn’t see the test I slip into the pocket of Alek’s suit jacket. My clutch is busted, and I think our ruse might be as well.

“What happened between this afternoon and now?” Ghost asks after pulling me into his side like we’re the devoted loved-up couple everyone at the compound thinks we are. His suspicions are as rife as mine.

“Nothing. We were careful.”

He tightens his grip around my waist when Kirill peers back at us. He must hear our whispers.

Once Alek steals his attention by asking him a question, Ghost’s focus devotes back to me. “Are you sure?”

I nod. “Kliment walked me through every camera. I avoid them at all costs…” My stomach gurgles when something I hadn’t considered smacks into me. “Is the pantry monitored?” When Ghost jerks up his chin, I cuss under my breath. “I took something from there this afternoon.”

“Something?”



I wish he had mind-reading capabilities because I really don't want to tell anyone before Alek, but when his confused expression exposes he doesn't own those skills, I mutter, "A test." His nails dig into my hip when I alleviate his confusion with a whisper, "A pregnancy test."

Before he can announce his shock, we're walked into an ambush. Thankfully, this time it is minus the machine guns and grenades Alek and Ghost faced the last time they tried to deceive Kirill. There are banners and streamers and well-wishers popping blue confetti-filled party poppers.

Alek's eyes shoot to mine as quickly as Kirill's focus is devoted to Ghost. "I hope I didn't ruin the surprise." He locks his eyes with mine, forcing me to stop signaling for Alek to check his pocket. "You've tested, right?"

For the fear I might vomit, I nod instead of speaking.

"And?"

I almost lie until I spot a flurry of blonde in the corner of the space.

Sofia is a part of the celebration.

"It was positive."

When Kirill spins to face the men, his excitement oddly elevated, I return my focus to Alek. While Kirill shouts, "To the Bobrovs!" I nudge my head to the pocket of Alek's jacket so forcefully I look like I have an undiagnosed twitch.

He shoves his hand into the navy-blue material a second before Kirill's focus returns to Ghost and me. "I guess you better make an honorable woman out of her." My skin crawls when he snivels out, "We don't want the Bobrov name being tainted with a bastard."

Ghost acts as suave as a man with nothing to lose. With his grin unblemished and his head angled to hide the scarred side of his face, he drops to one knee and produces a box from his pocket.

I'm already struggling to hold back my emotions when I spot Alek's surprised expression as he pulls the positive pregnancy test out of his pocket, so you can picture how hard it becomes when Ghost cracks open the ring

box.

I've seen this ring before. It is the one I pointed out to Alek when I told him one day I'd marry a man rich enough to buy it for me. It was ridiculously priced, hideously ugly, and way above anything I've ever owned, but I acted as if it was the only thing I wanted in the world because I was angry he had turned me down the night before.

With everyone's focus on the ginormous diamond ring, I take a moment to bring my eyes back to meet Alek's across the room. I nod when he nudges his head to the test in silent questioning. Everyone takes it as my answer to Ghost's unvoiced question, then they sigh in sync when absurd, idiotic tears stream down my face unchecked as Alek finally awards me the three little words he's kept from me all these years. "I love you."



## ANASTASIA

“Congratulations. You must be thrilled?”

I dip my chin in thank you to the stranger offering her fake felicitations before veering to my right. I’m so over the forced niceness in the room I want to vomit.

“Two Bobrov heirs only months apart. How lovely,” a lady with an ugly hat murmurs before I’m finally freed from the phony parade by the last person I expected.

“Anastasia, come.” Kirill waves me over to his group, his smile friendly yet still slimy. When I join him, albeit hesitantly, I am introduced to two of the three men. “This is Dr. Marc and Professor Irving. Dr. Marc specializes in obstetrics. I was just telling him about your news.”

“Congratulations,” Dr. Marc offers. “How far along are you?”

As I spot Alek moving close, I answer, “Only a couple of weeks. This is all very new.”

A private exchange between Kirill and Dr. Marc doesn’t appear to go in Kirill’s favor. His jaw tightens when Dr. Marc inconspicuously shakes his head, but before tension can become strangling, Professor Irving tries to save the day. “There was an interesting study conducted a couple of years back that said the level of HCG can drop significantly from the morning to the evening. We’ve been wanting to debunk it for a while now. Would you be

interested in being a participant in a new study?”

“Um...” *What the hell?* “What would you require me to do?”

His smile is more sleezy than welcoming. “Just a simple urine test morning and night.”

*That’s it?* Alek made out their tests are far more invasive. “Oh. Um... yeah, I guess I could do that?” I don’t know why my reply sounds more like a question than an affirmation.

“What’s going on?” I startle when Ghost arrives out of nowhere. For a man of such height, he shouldn’t be as agile as he is.

While he devotes his attention to me like a husband-to-be would, I say, “Profess Ir—”

“Irving,” he fills in, smiling like he gets pleasure from my tongue twist.

“... was wondering if I would like to be a part of an experiment.”

“Not an experiment.” Kirill tsks me as if I am a child. “A study on the fluctuation of HCG levels during varying stages of pregnancy.” Something he said ticks Ghost off. His blood pressure surges as his grip around my waist tightens. “Dr. Marc is adamant that fluctuations are normal. Professor Irving is on the other side of the spectrum. I figured we may as well settle the debate since we have a willing participant for our study.”

Ghost *pffts* him. “You have plenty of women to test your theory on. You don’t need mine.” I swear I can hear Alek’s jaw ticking from a distance. There was a ton of possessiveness in Ghost’s tone, but since I am as confident his stamp of ownership has more to do with Katie as Alek, he doesn’t respond. “Come, Anastasia. We have plans to finalize.”

Ghost only spins me away half an inch before Kirill says, “We will start festivities tomorrow.”

“Why the hurry?” Ghost asks, his tone high with suspicion.

Kirill’s eyes drop to my nonexistent stomach for the hundredth time tonight. “Eight months will fly by, and we have a lot of steps to put into play between now and then.” Over explaining himself to a man he believes is

beneath him, he lifts his eyes to mine and says matter-of-factly, “See you tomorrow, Anastasia.”

I farewell him with a chin dip before leading Ghost’s exit of the room. It looks like he’s in charge, but it is my eagerness to leave doubling the length of his strides.

“That guy gives me the goddamn creeps!” I blurt out the instant we are in the safety of Ghost’s office. I shake off the unease that won’t stop trekking through my veins before spinning to face Ghost, who appears more pissed than weirded out. “What are you thinking?”

He doesn’t answer me. Instead, he slots his ass into his seat, pulls it in close to his desk, then brings up a report encrypted deep into his laptop files. It looks like the HCG study the professor wanted me to participate in. It shows lines of positive HCG tests, one negative, then another long line of positives.

“It’s because she only forgot about the canisters once, right?”

I’m lost as to what he’s asking me. I’m not even sure he’s seeking answers from me. He more appears to be talking to himself, but before I can clarify, his office doors open, and Alek steps inside.

He’s clearly missed the tension because with a grin as big as the moon, and his holler far too loud for the late hour, he races across the room, lifts me off the floor with a one-handed butt grab, then pins me to the wall to kiss the living hell out of me.

I’m not talking one of those sloppy, messy embraces that makes a mess of your face. I’m talking a heart-pumping, blood-pressure-rising kiss that drenches your panties and makes your worries insignificant. It is a kiss to rival all kisses, and by the time it’s done, Ghost is no longer in his office, and I don’t care who may walk in on us.

I want Alek more than I’ve craved anything in my life, and I am going to get my man.

“I need you naked like yesterday,” I force out through the greedy, needy

throb of my clit that's controlling every nerve in my body.

I'm so desperate, I'm clawing at his chest, dying to feel the heat of his skin under my hand.

Mercifully, Alek is just as impatient. After shredding my panties and slipping them into the pocket of his trouser suit, he adjusts his grip on my ass before pulling down his pants.

"Yesss..." I murmur on a moan when he pushes the head of his cock in an inch.

"Ah... fuck, *драгоценный*. You're not ready. I'll fucking tear you."

I'm about to tell him I'll happily face the pain if it will take care of the intense sensation roaring through me, but before I can, he walks us to the couch in Ghost's office like his pants aren't huddled around his feet before he splays me across the cool leather material.

Alek's eyes burn with lust when he lifts my dress so it sits around my midsection. "Fuck, *драгоценный*. How can you be so damn wet yet still so tight." He scoops up some of the glistening wetness around my folds then uses it as a lubricant to stuff two fingers inside me. "I love how wet my kisses make you, how fucking hungry." He widens and spreads me by scissoring his fingers while keeping his hooded eyes locked on my flushed face. "But not as much as I fucking love you. You drive me crazy, *драгоценный*. You are still my biggest headache to date, but I wasn't living without you. I was barely functioning."

As he presses on the spot inside me that makes my head blur with lust, he shifts his eyes from my face to the gigantic rock on my hand. "I bought that the day you left. Said if you ever returned, I'd give it to you." I quiver out a long, breathy moan when he squashes the base of his palm against my clit and swivels it. "I was beginning to think it would never happen." My ass lifts from the sofa when his most basic touch sets me on fire. "Now here you are pregnant with my kid." A beg sits at my lips when he murmurs with a grin, "I bet you taste even sweeter now."

When he scoots back, my knees naturally spread, but he pushes them wider with his spare hand, ensuring he can't miss my body's response to his fingers pumping in and out of me. "I'm going to watch you come like this, then you're going to come on my face."

"And then?" I murmur, aware there is always more when it comes to him devouring me.

His smile. Kill me. "Then we might have to do it all over again." Still smiling, he backhands my clit. When the spasm it entices tightens my thighs, he mutters, "Don't even think about it," before he wedges himself between my legs, forcing them to spread wide.

He pumps his fingers in and out of me in a rhythmic pattern, furling his fingertips when needed, and swiveling his thumb with every timed thrust.

In no time at all, my hands are clawing for something to grip, and my hips roll in synchronization with his pumps. I soar higher and higher until the vibrations stretching from my puckered nipples to my throbbing clit overwhelm me.

Gasping and panting, I climax suddenly and hard, but Alek's pace doesn't slow in the slightest. He continues to finger fuck me until I have no choice but to push him away. I'm too sensitive. Too tingly. I'm about to come for a second time, except his mouth is nowhere near my pussy, and I am as desperate for him to feast on me there as I am dying to be filled by him.

"Don't fucking deny me what's mine, *драгоценный*." Alek pushes away the hand I used to stop him from fingering me before he spreads the fireworks from the lower half of my stomach to all over my body by burying his head between my legs.

I almost vault off the sofa when he tugs at my clit with his teeth. I'm so damn sensitive, I climax before I am even aware of its imminent arrival. My eyes remain closed as I ride the waves of ecstasy rolling through me. They only pop open when Alek demands them to him, and the possessiveness in them augments the frantic rush blistering through me.



“Again.” My lips part to suck in desperate, necessary breaths when he pushes against my clit with his thumb. “Come over my lips again. I want your juices dripping off my chin.”

My hand flies to his hair when he blows a hot breath over the region of my body that feels as if it is on fire. Then he replaces his thumb with his tongue.

I chant so loud he has no choice but to clamp his hand over my mouth.

Then I detonate like the clock struck twelve on December thirty-first.

Alek doesn't stop, though. He massages my pussy with his tongue, both inside and out, dragging out the tremors shuddering from the roots of my hair to the tips of my toes.

By the time he slows down, I'm quivering, and my sentences make no sense. I can't string two words together.

Luckily for me, Alek doesn't need words to understand what I'm requesting.

After scooping me up and placing his naked backside onto the couch covered with the mess he forced out of me, he slots my knees on each side of his thick thighs before locking his hooded gaze with mine. “I need you to ride me, *драгоценный*, to guide how deep I can go.”

His fingernails dig into my flesh when he lifts me so the head of his fat cock braces at the entrance of my pussy. And before any of his worry can slap me hard across the face, I thrust down fast, forcing him to fill me fully with one quick descent.

He stretches me so wide it is painful but oh so fucking riveting. I love how full he makes me feel, and how not once has he made me feel dirty for my fantasies. He fucks me rough because he knows that's how I like it, and he will never make me ashamed of my choices.

“Fuck, *драгоценный*.” His hot words hitting my face grip me as well as the walls of my pussy cling to him when he rocks upward, stuffing another two inches in. “If you want all of me, you need to take me all.”

I don't think I can stretch any wider until Alek doubles the spans of his thighs, extending mine to breaking point. It gives my ass room to drop, meaning I sink down on him, taking everything he has to offer.

Pleasure rebuilds fast in my core when he lifts his spectacular ass off the couch so he can pound into me. Again and again, he rocks his hips back and forth. He drives me to the brink of hysteria while muttering a ton of naughty words in my ear.

Whore. Slut. Dirty little bitch. They all leave his mouth, but it is the final one that pushes me over the edge.

“Swallow my cock like the good girl you are. Give Daddy what he needs.”

As my back arches, I convulse through waves of pleasure. I scream hysterically when my walls pulsating around him set Alek off. He pushes in deep before hot wave after hot wave of cum spills inside me.

That word was the exact one that forced Alek to finally give in to the tension burning between us. He'd been a gentleman for months, but that wasn't what I wanted. Telling him I'd go find another 'Daddy' was the straw that broke the camel's back. He took me hard and fast over the couch my father slept on weeks ago while announcing with a heap of explicit words that I'd never have another 'Daddy.'

He took care of my every whim from that night onward.

It was my inability to remember the promises he made that broke us.

I won't make the same mistake twice.

I'm so spent by the time I come down from my umpteenth orgasm this week, I collapse onto Alek's chest to breathe out the shivers wracking through me while he continues thrusting, forever chasing the next release.

Then we're interrupted by a stern rap on the door.



## ALEK

*A*na's eyes snap to mine when someone knocks on Ghost's door for the second time. I don't recall locking it, but when our interrupter's impatience gets the better of them, it is clear someone did because the handle lowers, but it doesn't open.

It was foolish to bring my excitement into Ghost's office, but after following Ana around the impromptu party Kirill shouldn't have preempted, I couldn't wait a second longer. Knowing she's knocked up with my kid but unable to express my excitement was the best fucking game of chase we've ever endured.

I've had condoms in my wallet since I learned of Anastasia's return to Kronstadt with no intention of using them. If I was ever given the opportunity to knock her up again, I would not turn it down for anyone. They were put there purely in case Ana had other plans.

As much as I love to push and force Ana out of her comfort zone as often as possible, I'd never do anything to her she doesn't want me to do.

She didn't request protection because as badly as me, she wants to pretend the last four years never happened.

The past month has made it seem as if it didn't. We've matured and gotten a little wiser, and since we're slowly learning we don't need to fight to have unbelievable sex, we've barely had a bad word to say about each other.

Well, except the ones she wants to hear when I'm fucking her without control.

Just recalling how wet she got when I called her every dirty name I could think of has me wanting to sink into her for round two, but the fucker interrupting us won't give me the chance. They're coming in no matter what. The creak of a key being pushed into a lock promises that.

I stare at Ana like she is insane when she walks to the side of the room and opens a hidden door. I knew Ghost planted many different access points around the compound over the past year, especially in any rooms associated with Sofia and Lera, but I had no clue he had a secret room attached to his office.

"Fuck no," I murmur with a shake of my head when Anastasia suggests I hide like a coward.

For a woman with way too much strength for her tiny stature and weight, she shoves me into the room, squashes her finger to my lips, then nudges her head to a bed I only notice once my eyes adjust to the darkness. Lera is sleeping in a pink princess bed stuffed in the corner of the large room. She is cuddling a bunny, completely oblivious to the ruckus that was occurring next door.

I wouldn't have gone so hard if I knew she was sleeping close by. Although she sometimes reminds me of what I lost, I have a soft spot for Lera. She's fought to live from the moment she was ripped from her mother's womb—the same as Anastasia.

"I have to go out there," Ana whispers when I try to stop her. "They could have heard us. We weren't exactly quiet."

Before I can reply, she squashes her lips to the edge of my mouth, then darts back into the main part of Ghost's office. She makes it onto the couch with only a second to spare. It takes just as long for the person entering Ghost's office with a key to come into view since I can only peer through a sliver in the concealed door, but when I spot him, my expression switches to

murderous in under a second.

Kirill's lips raise at one side as his nostrils flare. The scent in the air is undeniable. It smells like raunchy sex.

Although Ana is covered with the dress she wore at her 'engagement' party, I'd give anything to have a gun when Kirill drags his eyes down her body. He's not stupid. He knows all the fragrance in the air didn't solely come from Ana. The scent is as virile as it is feminine.

"Where is he?" Kirill asks, his tone low and threatening.

"He?" Ana asks with fluttering lashes. She can pull off seduction like no one else, but she lacks the innocence she is trying to portray because I stole it from her years ago.

Kirill looks displeased but before I can bust our ruse more than I already have, a second and far more obvious door in Ghost's office cracks open, and he enters carrying a washcloth and a crinkled shirt.

He freezes as if he's stunned by Kirill's presence. I don't buy his act. He's wearing the same expression now he wore when he told me he didn't give a fuck about Katie.

He is full of shit.

"I wasn't aware we had company." He tugs on his shirt to hide the scars nicked over half of his body before he moves toward the couch Ana is splayed across. "I guess you'll have to clean yourself up." He tosses her the washcloth, his aim perfect when it lands on the apex of her thighs before he blocks her from Kirill's view with his body. "Is there something you need? We're mid-celebration."

Kirill's lips tug even higher before he mutters, "I was wondering if we should do a mutual celebration tomorrow."

"You got something to celebrate?" Ghost snickers out, his tone almost mocking.

The brothers stand across from each other with nothing but hate projecting for several long seconds before Kirill finally gives in to the

tension.

“Tests results came back. Katie is having a boy.” He steps closer to Ghost, his chest puffed out like a rooster. “Can you believe after all this time my plan finally worked?” He drinks in the scarred side of Ghost’s face as if amused by the carnage before muttering, “Figured I should include you in the celebrations since you made it happen.” He’s no longer suggesting they merge celebrations. He’s telling him that is what is happening. “Tomorrow at eight.” He slants so he can lock eyes with Ana over Ghost’s shoulder. “Wear something colorful. We don’t want anyone confused about the purities of the mothers-to-be.”

Ghost looks set to deck him, so you can imagine how badly I want to ram my fist into his face.

With a chin dip and mocking smirk, Kirill spins on his heels and exits Ghost’s office.

I enter it just as quickly. “What the fuck was that?” Too angry to rationalize who deserves my frustration, I utter out, “Were you in the bathroom the whole fucking time?”

Ghost shoots me a riled look before he forces my anger in another direction. “We’ve got a nark.” He tosses me his cell phone before he moves into the bathroom to close a secondary entrance. I’m not going to lie, even brimming with anger, his sneakiness is kind of a turn-on. I’ve often accused him of just rolling over and taking it up the ass for the past two years. His craftiness exposes I wasn’t on the money. “Someone heard you.” He bounces his eyes between Ana and me during that sentence. “And they knew enough to know she wasn’t with me.”

When he nudges his head to his phone in my hand, I drop my eyes to the screen. There is a message from an encrypted server. It states:

UNKNOWN NUMBER:

If you want to know the truth, go to Ghost’s office now. They’re in there. Fucking. The male grunts don’t belong to Ana’s fiancé.

“What the fuck?” I drag my hand over my hair before following Ghost’s trek to his desk. “Who knows how you grunt?” I answer my question myself. “Before Katie arrived, too many whores to count, but none of them would side with Kirill. They hate him.”

When Ghost *pffts* me, Ana backs me up. “I agree with Alek. You think he’s the only one on your side, but that isn’t what I’ve been seeing the past month. You have more support than you realize and some you shouldn’t want.”

Ghost knows immediately where Ana’s suspicions lie. “Sofia—”

“Isn’t exactly an innocent here,” I interrupt, stealing Ghost’s wrath from Ana. “Some shit isn’t adding up, G, but you’re not looking at the evidence with the same eyes as everyone else. She’s tainted your view.”

“Because he fucked with her head. He ruined her!” I realize not all his outburst is to do with his sister when he upheaves the files on his desk before his hand scrubs the scarred side of his face. “Katie’s HCG levels are rising.” He drops his hand before blowing out a hot breath. “Dr. Marc said they shouldn’t be doing that since the samples we supplied her with were taken at the same time.” He looks as gutted as I feel for him when he murmurs out slowly, “He thinks she might actually be pregnant.”

With Ana too stunned to speak, I say, “Could it be yours?”

He shakes his head before straying his eyes to his underfloor safe. His addiction was once so strong, he would have never placed his brick of cocaine in any drawer he couldn’t immediately access. It hasn’t been moved from the floor safe in months.

“Things might not be as they seem.” When Ghost *pffts* me, I try to rationalize with him. “You said Kirill was getting suspicious, so maybe he is fucking around with her tests to fuck with you. Wouldn’t be the first time he’s done that.”

With Ghost looking deeper into Kirill’s wish for a male heir, we’ve unearthed a lot of shit. One was an abortion he believed Sofia was forced to



endure during Katie's first month at the compound. It was staged. But the most shocking was the tests Dr. Marc conducted on the vials of sperm Ghost inseminated into Kirill's wives. They are designer as I hinted at last month. The thing is, there were no male organisms in the samples. Only female.

So no matter what, Ghost's agreement with Kirill that he will let Sofia and Lera go when he successfully impregnates one of his Virgin Marys with a male heir will never happen.

Ghost believes his deviousness is because he doesn't want to let Sofia go. I'm not so convinced. Sofia is as cunning as Kirill, but Ghost won't hear about it. He still remembers Kirill saving her from a violent rapist and forgets that everything he's done to her since that night has been just as vile.

"It might be time to adjust the goalposts," I suggest, aware he doesn't want to break the pledge he made but needing him to know any plan is better than none. "Maybe you need to start putting yourself first."



## ALEK

“*I*’m not sure if I agree with what you said to Ghost last night.” Anastasia’s confession must have been playing on her last night because instead of being snuggled up to my side as she has been almost every morning the past month, she’s once again on the couch, cuddled up to her sketchpad.

After nudging my head for her to join me back in bed before we have to spend the day apart so people will believe she is engaged to Ghost, I ask, “Why’s that?”

She places down her sketchpad, her fingertips black from the image of me sleeping she’s in the process of drawing before slowly padding over. “Ghost is all Lera has.” The coolness of her skin when she slips under the sheet exposes she has been awake for some time. “If he isn’t taking care of her, there won’t be anyone.”

“Sofia—“

“Isn’t fit to be a mother.” Since I agree with her, I don’t interrupt her as she did me. “Yes, love makes you crazy and stupid, and it has you acting reckless, but there comes a time when that eventually has to calm.” She peers up at me, blinking and confused. “Motherhood seems like a good reason to settle down.” I drag my finger down her cheek to gather a strand of hair clinging there before tucking it behind her ear when she murmurs, “I

mellowed, and that's partly why I believed Stace's claim you had been with her. I was forever worried you would get bored."

"Of your insatiable appetite for sex at all hours of the day and night?" I *pfft* her. "Please."

"That, and the fact a beach ball was slowly inflating in my stomach." When she laughs, it dawns that isn't her sole worry. It is her next confession that pains her the most. "And I thought I deserved it for not listening to you. That it was my punishment for carrying a basket down those stupid stairs."

"Ana... fuck." I roll on my side to face her front on, ensuring she can see nothing but honesty in my eyes when I say, "What happened was an accident. It wasn't anyone's fault. I thought we agreed on that last month?"

She bites on the inside of her cheek to add a bit of anger to her tone before replying, "No, you went down on me and made me forget that I was the one meant to be apologizing."

"Because I didn't need to hear it. You had no reason to apologize to me."

"I kept your daughter from you—"

"Speak shit like that again, and I will tan your ass." Her eyes widen as her pupils dilate. "I watched the footage from that hospital corridor on repeat for days after you left. Days, Ana. And do you know what I saw?" I give her a few moments to see if she wants to respond. When she doesn't, I say, "Fuckers who didn't even give a grieving mother fifteen minutes with her child." A salty blob drops down her cheek when I murmur, "You couldn't have kept me from her even if you wanted to. You were angry, and you lashed out, but you earned that right. They treated you like shit, so I did the same fucking thing when I hunted them down."

Ana struggles for air as her wide eyes bounce between mine. She's gasping through the shock of my confession, but she isn't upset about it.

Quite the opposite actually.

"I love you," she whispers a second before she seals her mouth over mine. "So fucking much, sometimes it hurts."

She gropes my cock through my boxers before curling her fingers around my twitching shaft and jacking me off over the top of the silky material.

“Are we in the fifth fucking grade?” When Ana peers up at me with a sultry grin before shaking her head, I murmur, “Then why the fuck are you stroking me through my pants?”

Precum soaks into the satin material when she replies, “Because I’m taking a mental snapshot for my sketches.” She returns her eyes to mine. They’re glistening with lust. “I can’t look at your big fat cock and not want to play, so I need to take mental snapshots so I can place it into my sketch later.”

Her comment makes me hard as fuck, but I play it cool. “You’re sketching my dick?”

When my question comes out more dorky than suave, I tug her lip free from her menacing teeth before dragging my thumb over the grooves it made in the meaty skin.

No one is allowed to mark her except me.

After playfully nipping at my fingertips, she shakes her head. “Not exactly. I’m sketching you sleeping, but I want to get the details right, and it’s rare for you to wake up without a boner.”

“That’s because ninety-nine point ninety-nine percent of the time I’m thinking about your lips circling my cock.”

While moaning a husky purr that has me wanting to pretend I only need a handful of strokes to get off, Ana drags down my boxer shorts, freeing my dick from the material holding it hostage before she dumps them on the floor.

She doesn’t stroke, lick, or fuck me with her mouth or hand—she just stares, which only makes me harder.

“You just gonna look, or are you gonna suck my cock like the good girl you are?”

A glistening bead pools at the end when a defiant gleam flares through her eyes a second before she murmurs, “I might.” She licks her lips,

highlighting just how plump they are before muttering, “Or you might have to make me.” A pulse zaps through my balls when she purrs, “Daddy.”

The hot breath she releases when my hand shoots up to her throat doubles the energy teeming between us. It is so fucking heated I could nudge the head of my cock between her lips now, and she wouldn’t display the slightest snip of disappointment. But when is it ever fun to take the fast route?

“You’re gonna be wishing you weren’t so defiant when you’re choking on my cock.” I wait for her lips to turn a fascinating shade of blue before loosening my grip. “But before then, get on your back and spread those fucking legs. Daddy is hungry.”

Her lips part to suck in a needy gasp before she flattens her back to the mattress then holds her thighs open wide. “Now watch me own this greedy pussy.”

I spread her wide with my fingers, then spear my tongue inside her before any of the smart-ass remarks in her eyes can be articulated. I can’t take my eyes off her as her back arches, and her long slender fingers grip the sheets.

She rears up when I circle my tongue around her clit, then hit it with back-to-back flicks, her body rocking while silently begging for more.

Silence won’t work.

We’re never silent.

“Give me what I fucking want.”

I tuck my hand under her thigh to tilt her hips upward before rolling the pad of my thumb over the sensitive bud. Her eyes roll into the back of her head when I toy with her clit until it is firm then I slowly circle my lips around it and draw it into my mouth.

She can’t hold back when I go slow.

“Fuck. Christ. Please.”

Ana lifts her hips, squashing her delicious pussy against my face, then rolls her hips, forcing the pace that will get her off. I don’t mind. She can ride my face until the sun disappears and rises again, and I’ll never stop her.

She tastes so fucking good. As sweet as candy but with a body hotter than sin.

Occupied with the need to have every drop of her sweetness coating my fingers, face, and cock drives me to give her the best damn orgasm of her life.

As I watch over the bouncing globes of flesh on her chest, I grip her thighs before rolling us over. A groan unlike any I've released before vibrates against her pussy lips when her drenched cunt lands heavily on my face.

Ana moans out a long breathy purr before attempting to stabilize her shaky thighs.

I won't let her.

"Fuck no. Ride Daddy's face. I want your juices over every fucking inch of me."

I almost come on the spot when she sinks down low before rolling her hips forward. She tastes like heaven, but I'm fucking obsessed with her confidence. She is so comfortable in her own skin, I'm confident she'll never believe another bitch's lie again that she isn't enough for me.

Everything I've ever wanted I have right now.

And I'm not going to let it go for anyone or anything.

"Fuck yes, драгоценный."

I curl my hands around her thighs and spread her wide before eating her until the sun disappears, and the sketches she was referencing at the start of our exchange are stuck to her sweat-slicked skin.





## ALEK

“*T*hese are really fucking good, Ana.” She chews on the side of her kiss-swollen lip as I continue drinking in the drawings she’s been doing the past month between helping Vera in the kitchen, taking care of Lera, and making sure medication isn’t the only thing keeping my blood levels stable. “So realistic.”

Drawing and cooking are two of her guilty pleasures.

They’re only trumped by one thing...

... sitting on my face.

“Have you ever considered selling them?” My voice is as husky as fuck, still strained from the grunts I release while fucking her to oblivion.

When Ana peers at me in surprise, it’s almost impossible to keep my focus on the task at hand. The sheet I wrapped her in when I mistook her shakes as her being cold is slipping, and the generous mounds of her breasts are once again becoming exposed to my ravishing eyes.

Somehow our fuck ended up on the floor, which bumped the coffee table Ana has been using as a sketch table. It exposes she doesn’t just do charcoal sketches of people. With a bit of shading, and a heap of talent, she can make anything look spectacular.

Even our daughter’s gravesite.

“You just can’t sell this one. It is going in my private collection.” I lift the

drawing I referenced only moments ago before taking in all the details. Even the blades of grass are impeccably crafted. “I’ve heard being an artist can be a lonely industry, but at least you won’t have to worry about anyone stealing it out from beneath you.” She acts confused, but she can’t fool me. “They judged you because of your age. I let them because I was a jealous fuck for every minute you were away from me.”

My chuckles bounce around my room when she mutters, “Then I guess I shouldn’t tell you I faked a lot of illnesses just so I could stay home with you.”

Ana carefully removes the sketch from my hand and places it into the folder before straddling my lap. I groan as my cock throbs. She’s not wearing any panties, and I left my boxers where she dumped them minutes after sealing her mouth over mine.

Although I’d give anything to plunge into her tight, wet pussy, our conversation is long overdue, and she deserves to say her piece.

“We had a lot of issues with jealousy back then, and if I were being honest, I’d say I’m afraid it will still be an issue for us in the future, but I’m hopeful we’ll work through it how we always did.”

“With lots of sex.”

She slants her head and cocks a brow. “With communication.” Just like she couldn’t fool me earlier, she can’t this time either. Her thighs shudder when she grinds down softly. “And perhaps sex. It is how we communicate.” When she feels my huff more than she hears it, she asks, “What?”

“Yev said the same. That sex is how we communicate.”

She may as well stab my erection with a fork when she murmurs, “He is a smart man.”

“A fucking dead man—”

“Who’d never once step over the mark because he adores you as much as I do.” When my brows wrinkle, she says with a laugh. “Not like that. I’m reasonably sure he isn’t gay. You saw the way he was following Polina

around like a lost puppy last month.”

“You’re not helping the kid stay alive.”

Her smile makes me hard in an instant, but it softens a smidge when she says, “He was there when I needed him. It’s not his fault Stace used him as a pawn. She laid it on thick, and made it seem as if it was more than it was.”

This is the conversation we need to have.

“That morning wasn’t as it seemed.”

“I know,” she assures, allowing me to breathe again. “I just hate that Stace got away with it for so long.” I feel her temperature rising where our bodies are joined. “And to fake a pregnancy. What was the point? She would have to know she’d eventually get busted. If not at the twenty-week scan any guy with half a brain would attend to authenticate her claim they knocked her up, she couldn’t stay fake pregnant forever. A birth would eventually have to be recorded.” My heart beats for an entirely different reason when she murmurs, “Do you think that’s why there was an ultrasound machine delivered this morning? Kirill doesn’t want to get blindsided again.”

“What?” My bewilderment is heard in my tone.

Ana inches back before dropping her eyes to mine. “Vera thought it was a new oven she ordered months ago. None of the ovens I’ve used have a monitor and an ultrasound wand.” She takes a moment to drink in my shock before continuing, “It was set up in the den before lunch. Dr. Marc tested it on Annika. She was shocked with what he found.”

Annika is a nice kid, but I’ve got more pressing matters to worry about than her shock. “They brought an ultrasound machine here?” When Ana nudges up her chin, I do the second most painful thing I’ve ever done in my life. I lift Ana off my lap. *Burying my daughter was the hardest.* “We need to tell Ghost before he’s bombarded at the party. Kirill didn’t have that machine delivered today for no reason.”

As she cusses herself under her breath, Ana races for the walk-in closet. “I forgot about his request for a mutual celebration tonight. I swear to God

my brain goes to mash when I'm pregnant." As she yanks a red dress down from the hanger, she murmurs, "Do you think this has something to do with Katie?"

I shrug, truly unsure. "I lost any sense of normality for that man when he cut his own daughter out of his wife's stomach."

Ana shivers. "I guess that makes sense of Sofia's..." she air quotes her last word, "... issues."

Issues is putting it nicely. She is several slices short of a loaf.

"Do I look okay?" Her cheeks are ruddy from the heat we generate while fucking, her lips are plump from our kisses, and her hair is extra voluptuous from where I gripped it while she sucked my cock.

She couldn't look more perfect.

When I tell her that, she plants her lips on mine before announcing she will meet me at Ghost's office.

She only just makes it out the door when her head cranks back to look at me. The noise trickling into my room from outside announces festivities have started early.

I realize my stupidity when my eyes drop to my watch. The party didn't start early. I simply refused to stop fucking Ana until she collapsed from exhaustion. That gobbled up most of our afternoon.

With the crowd thick enough to hide our mutual arrival, I follow Anastasia into the foyer where most of the guests are mingling. The shady shit that's been occurring the past two years is the strongest it's been tonight. You could cut through the tension in the air with a knife, and I'm not the only one noticing.

Ana cusses under her breath when the host arrives shortly after us. Kirill isn't alone, and despite Katie appearing as pure as an angel in a flawless white dress, there's a bump in her midsection you can't miss. It appears around the same size Ana's was when she lost our daughter. If you weren't looking, you wouldn't notice she's pregnant.

Everyone is looking, though, but their eyes aren't on Ana. They're fixed on Ghost, Katie, and Kirill.

Ana has never been overly close to Ghost, but you can't miss her sympathy for him when he joins Kirill and Katie at the end of the stairwell. "He thinks she deceived him."

I nod, agreeing with her. "I just don't understand why."

She squeezes my hand like we're not being eyeballed by Sofia from across the room before murmuring, "Because grief makes you foolish, and although Ghost hasn't lost her, in his head, he believes he has."

After a final squeeze, she exhales and rolls her shoulders before putting on her game face. She is about to commence the role of doting fiancée, but before she can, Kirill asks for Katie and Ghost to join him in the den.

I tug Ana back. As much as I believe her 'fake' presence in Ghost's life the past month has taken a lot of the heat off Katie, Kirill's expression is manic, so I refuse to let Ana associate with him until I fully understand his game plan.

"Stay here."

"Alek—"

"I wasn't asking, *драгоценный*. Stay."

She hates being barked at like a dog, but she also knows I wouldn't snap at her if I didn't believe it was necessary. I'm not a cunt just for the hell of it. I only bring out my assholiness when it is needed to keep her safe.

"What's going on?" I ask a dude with a head the size of a watermelon when I mosey up to him like he doesn't have the protective bodyguard stance down pat. "I thought the main festivities were happening out here."

I hear Ghost shouting something about Kirill being paranoid, but since Walter booms out, "Nothing that concerns you," I miss most of what he says.

"What the fuck crawled up your ass and died? I'm asking a question, not your mother's chest size." He looks set to pop an artery when I murmur, "I don't need to ask since I already know. Big enough to bury my head in

between them.”

That riles him enough to get him to move from his station, but regretfully, the person who has my back this time around isn't Ghost.

Ana slips behind Watermelon Head a second after my fist lands on his chin in retaliation for his missed swing and announces herself to the room with the confidence of a woman many years her senior.

“Honey, are you ready? Our guests are waiting.”



## ANASTASIA

I'm taken aback when my entrance into the room Kirill guided Ghost and Katie into has me stumbling onto Dr. Marc slouched on the floor. It is obvious he is dead. His chest isn't rising or falling, and there is blood splatter on the wall Katie's bed is braced against. But there's one good thing about spending your formative years on the street. Your shell hardens to unbreakable, and you become a pro at hiding your emotions.

I once used my skills on Alek, but with hormones and maturity altering my mindset, I can't do it as readily to him anymore. I'm more of a blubbing idiot, which is even more frustrating than how horny I become when pregnant.

Ghost appears appreciative of the interruption, although the relief is barely seen through the anger darkening the scars on the right side of his face. "I'll be there in a minute." After running his hand over his jaw, tracing the tic there, his eyes drink in the ultrasound fluid spread across Katie's stomach before they lift to Kirill. "Anything else? We have guests waiting." During the 'we' part of his statement, he nudges his head to me.

Kirill's focus doesn't shift from his phone when he dismisses Ghost from the room with a stern, "No."

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle when Ghost crosses the room in three quick strides before he bands his arm around my waist. I'm not



frightened by his forlorn expression. I am gasping in response to Walter's new position. He looks like he's napping. The bruises on Alek's knuckles expose he isn't. He's out cold, most likely for hours.

I inconspicuously wave to Yev as Ghost guides us to the hierarchy section of the table before nudging my head in the direction of Alek. From what I witnessed in the ultrasound room, Alek will need more than muscle to clean up the mess, and although things have been tense between Alek and Yev the past month, Yev doesn't shy away from owning up to his mistakes.

I also don't believe he should accept any blame for our downfall. He pleaded with me for hours to wait until I got Alek's side of events before responding. I was too heartbroken to listen. He's also the reason we found out Stace's pregnancy was a ruse. When she caught Kirill's attention, she finally thought she had hooked a big fish. Like all immature twits, she thought the only way she could keep him was by trapping him with a child.

She was wrong. Kirill only left that morning he tried to drown Katie because someone mentioned Stace's stomach falling out of her dress when she was wheeled into the ambulance.

Shockingly, she's still breathing. I'm not exactly sure why. Kirill has been rumored to kill women purely for wearing off-white instead of pure white. He is a menace to society, and the quicker Alek and Ghost get Lera away from him, the better it will be for all involved.

Lera is the sole reason I've continued my ruse with Ghost. That little girl was born fighting as I wish our daughter had. She deserves people in her corner, and for once, I realize that Alek has enough protectiveness for me and everyone else he cares about—including our unborn child.

After haphazardly shoving me into a chair, Ghost slumps into the one next to me. I doubt we will ever be close, he has a lot of issues to overcome as well, but I hate how twitchy he seems. He's a bomb waiting to go off. One wrong move will see him explode.

Detonation becomes imminent when Katie and Kirill arrive at our table.

Just like me, Katie isn't given a choice as to where to sit. She is placed on a chair directly across from me, so try as I may, I can't miss her groan when Ghost plucks me from my seat to sit on his lap.

I'll pay for his public display of affection later tonight, but since that will involve Alek's cock in some way, I'm more giddy than worried.

"What?" I murmur on a whisper before leaning in closer to Ghost. He whispered something but since Kirill commenced the first lot of toasts, I missed what he said.

"The test you got from the pantry." I inch back to stare him dead set in the face when he murmurs, "I need one of them."

To everyone not in our little bubble, we look super intimate. Only Alek knows we're not because he can see the panic on my face when Ghost's command reaches my ears.

He truly believes Katie deceived him because it is the exact same expression that reflected from the vanity mirror of my hospital bathroom when I ran in there to vomit. I was trying to convince myself that Yev lied, but the longer I stared at myself, and the more I hated what I saw, the more theories I added to Yev's confession.

Every one of them involved Alek and Stace being naked.

I was so very wrong that day, so I try to make sure Ghost doesn't make the same mistakes as me. "If she's taking hormones to authenticate—"

"She's not taking hormones." Ghost lowers his voice when I startle. "I haven't given her anything like that." He drags a hand over his head, its shake unmissable. "I just need a test."

"Okay," I promise, saying anything to snuff his anger before he blows our cover. "I'll get you a test."

Over the next hour, the odd sentiment I felt when Alek shadowed my walk toward the foyer continues. The men keep celebrating while Ghost commiserates. He hasn't touched a speck of food or drank a drop of alcohol. He's done nothing but stare at Katie until her squirms swap from needy to

scared.

I wonder if she is feeling the same tension as me. Ghost seems ready to pounce across the table and slide his steak knife from Kirill's left ear to his right. I'd say the only reason he's held back is because he is clinging to the hope not everything is as it seems.

That sometimes love is enough.

Ghost is saved from massacring his niece's father in front of her when Kirill's phone buzzes. His expression shifts from a man on the cusp of greatness to being handed the kingdom when he drinks in the name splashed across the screen.

"I need to take this. I'll be back to collect you in a minute." Ghost's growl is audible to anyone within a five-mile radius when Kirill leans in to press a kiss to the edge of Katie's mouth before he races for the closest exit.

It has Katie's pulse racing before it sees her fleeing the dining room as quickly as Kirill. "Please excuse me. I need to use the restroom."

Over fake pleasantries, Ghost mutters, "Get me that test," before he takes off after her.

As he grips her elbow and drags her into the bathroom, Alek plucks me behind a heavy set of drapes. "What the fuck is going on?" Usually, he kisses me senseless since jealousy is overriding his smarts, but tonight, his focus is on another neurosis. *Panic*.

"He wants a test."

Alek's eyes bounce between mine for several seconds before he mutters, "I'll get it." He guides me out of the drapes and down the hallway. "But I think you've had enough of the festivities tonight. Too much shady shit is happening. I don't feel comfortable with you out in the open."

Although I'd rather he come with me, I haven't stuck around the past month solely for Alek. Ghost did more than save Alek's body from being marked two years ago. He saved his life. A blast like the one Ghost endured when he threw himself onto a grenade could have killed Alek, and the

knowledge will ensure I will encourage Alek to help Ghost for as long as he needs assistance.

Furthermore, Ghost isn't as badass as he makes out to be. He cares so much for Katie he's willing to let her go just so she'll be free. Not many men in his industry would do that. I'm not even sure Alek would.

"Please be careful," I beg before pressing my lips to his, hating how hot they feel. "Did you take—"

"Yes." Alek intuits, his steps hastening when Ghost's loud grumble escapes the guest bathroom. "And I don't have any signs of a headache."

After a chaste kiss that will forever have me begging for more, he pats my backside, then reminds me to take the most indirect route to his room.

I'm halfway there when I discover more than invited guests are lurking in the halls.

The bitch who always smirked when I fell is meandering in the repugnant confinement of the Bobrov compound as if she is more than an invited guest.

"You must be pretty fucking stupid if you believe your presence today will go unnoticed."

When Stace spins around to face me, her faultless red locks swish against her back. "I had to discover if the rumors are true." I stiffen when she leans in to press her lips on my cheek like we're old friends. We grew up in the same area but went down incredibly different routes. "When I heard Alek brought a doctor here for an abortion for one of his whores, I thought she was you." Her eyes drop to my stomach, soundlessly acknowledging she is aware I am pregnant. "Guess that visit must have been for another one of his whores."

Her words sting, but I won't let her know that. "What are you doing here, Stace? If Kirill finds out you're here, you won't leave breathing."

She mocks me with a bitter laugh. "Please. Kirill needs me more than I need him."

"Right. Because every guy wants a girl to pin a fake pregnancy on them."

Her laughter is ear-piercing and ends with a snort. "I wasn't pinning

anything on Kirill.”

When she strays her eyes to the door we’re standing next to, my stomach drops to my feet. “Why would you want to pin a pregnancy on Ghost?”

She straightens my pendant so it sits in the middle of my chest while murmuring, “Because anyone in the know understands he’s the big fish around here.” Once it is nestled directly between my breasts, she raises her eyes to mine. “You should be careful. Men around here will make up any lie if it suits their agenda. They’ll even make it look like an accident when it wasn’t.” With her eyes on my stomach for the second time, she murmurs, “Don’t let it happen again. You might lose more than your daughter this time around.”



## ALEK

When Ghost enters his office with his eyes blazing and his fists balled, he glares at me as if I am a piece of dog shit on his boot. I smirk at him, aware I am in for the fight of my life but willing to give it a go since he's saved mine more than once.

I wouldn't have survived the boys' home without him. I had an attitude a mile long and a wish to take down anyone in my path. He was the only one who didn't put up with my shit, and on more than one occasion, he took the blame for stuff that would have seen me shipped back to my father's family.

Since they made my father the abusive shit he was, I bunker down and prepare for World War III when Ghost's cravings announce he wants more than a helping of Katie's cunt.

He's going back to the crutch I used to stop the pain that regularly rocketed through my head when Ana wasn't there to smother the pain with lust.

He wants the brick stored in his floor safe, and the tasteless cunt of a woman undeserving of his time. Stace has arrived at the festivities, and her unexpected presence has me unsure of who to direct my focus on.

I go for Ghost when he snaps out, "Move!" His voice is as lost as the lifelessness in his eyes. He is dead on the inside, a direct replica of how I felt when Anastasia's train clattered down the tracks.

“Gh—”

He cuts me off with a glare of a madman. “Move!”

“Fine.” While cussing under my breath, I step back with my hands held in the air. He’s so unhinged, I can’t be certain he won’t reach for his gun, and as much as I’d give anything for a second chance to prove I’m not the wimp he beat for the top bunk that was rightfully his for years before I demanded it to be mine, now is not the time. Stace’s presence tonight proves Ana isn’t safe. She’s far from being protected from the fuckers always out to get her, and I sure as fuck refuse to force her to struggle without me again.

“Fuck...” My lungs deflate like an airless balloon when Ghost dumps a pregnancy test onto his desk so he can remove the chair and rug sitting on top of his safe. Its positive sign is brighter than the one Ana stashed in my pocket yesterday. “You know—”

He cuts me off with a growl this time, then a heap of pained words. “Two months. Two whole fucking months I’ve been working to get her out, and for what? For her to switch her focus from me to him.”

Ghost acts tough, but in reality, he’s the unwanted boy no one cares about. He lived at the boys’ home full-time because no one wanted a kid with a scarred face. I know that, and so does he.

But Katie doesn’t see him in the same light as those fuckwits. She’s been good for him, and if he can’t see that, losing himself to drugs and a bitch like Stace won’t help the matter.

“Ghost.” I try to think of a way I can explain that Katie isn’t like every other useless fuck in his life, but when I fail to work out a way to do that, I use the same excuse I’ve given him the past couple of months. “She’s not like...” He stares at me like he wants to kill me, like my death will be the answer to the pain crippling him. Since it isn’t, I murmur, “You need to step back and look at things properly. Something isn’t right. You’ve been saying it for months.”

“Because you’ve been fucking with my head!”



He tosses open the thick safe door as if it weighs nothing, lifts out a brick of cocaine, and tosses it onto his desk. When his nostrils flare to suck in the white cloud puffing in the air, I know I've lost him.

"I ain't watching you go down this path again," I mumble under my breath while heading for the door. "You want to give that fuck-face exactly what he wants by fucking yourself over, go ahead, but don't expect me to watch."

"Did I ask your opinion?" Ghost asks, his voice a roar.

I spin to face him. "Nah, but if you did..." I nudge my head to the monitor at his side that shows Katie being guided outside by Kirill, "... you would recognize that she can't stand sitting next to that fucker." Nothing but pure rage is heard in my words when I shout, "He fucking stomped on her, so why the fuck would she lie with him?"

"Because she wants to live!"

I mock him with a bitter laugh before farewelling him a two-fingered salute. "You're fucked in the head."

I'm so fucking angry, I walk the halls for a couple of minutes, pacing and yanking at my hair. I can't go back to my room just yet because if I do, I'll take my anger out on the wrong person.

I refuse to do that, so I continue pacing while rambling incessantly under my breath.

*How fucking blind is he?*

*How can he not see that Kirill is fucking with his head?*

I swear I'm only muttering in my head but find it hard to believe when someone answers my quiet murmurs, "Because this is far more deviant than your little head can handle."

I've never had an interest in smacking a woman until this one stops in front of me. Stace is still wearing a dress that seems more suitable for a skirt, and a way too fucking haughty smile considering she left Ghost's office within ten minutes of arriving.

He can make out all he wants that he's a minute man, but I know he is full of shit. We shared a couple of girls back in the day. His staying power is as durable as mine.

When Stace's fake-ass nails rake across my chest, I snatch up her wrist then clamp down hard. "Don't fucking touch me." I glare at her long enough she gets the point that no woman but Anastasia can caress our daughter's feet before I push her away from me with force.

She skids across the pricy marble tiles, her slide only ending when she hits the wall. She looks set to scream out an array of cuss words but a commotion in the foyer steals our focus. Lera and Sofia are being guided out of the compound by Kirill.

Unlike the one time Ghost tried to free Sofia from her miserable existence, she isn't fighting Kirill or clawing his arms with her nails. She's leaving willingly, resulting in me having no choice but to follow them.

Ghost would never willingly let them go, and I owe him more than a pat on the back.

As I follow Kirill's SUV several spaces back with my headlights turned off, I send Ana a message.

ME:

Don't leave your room for anything or anyone.

She replies with a thumbs up, which is unlike her, but understandable if this pregnancy is anything like her first one. She spent most of her evenings with her head in the toilet.

After thumbing out the words I should have never kept from her, even with me believing my father used them to keep my mother tethered to him, I try Ghost's cell again.

It rings and rings and rings, only connecting when Kirill pulls into the back of the monastery Katie's been living in for the past two months.

"What?" he barks out, his voice indicating he went for more than three lines of coke.

“Thought drugs were meant to make you mellow?” I snap out before I can stop myself. He sounds miserable, but it serves him right. He could have chosen better.

Realizing now is not the time for a morals lecture, I snap out, “Kirill moved Sofia and Lera to the monastery.”

“What?” This one is more panicked than his greeting. A second after the creak of his office chair sounds down the line, Ghost’s deep huff booms into my ear. “What the fuck? How could I not have heard them?” I hear him scrub a hand over the stubble on his chin before he mutters, “Sofia was here only minutes ago. She didn’t say anything.” This is the perfect time for me to remind him to take a closer look at his baby sister, but I bite my tongue when he murmurs, “Is Katie there?”

Even spaced the fuck out, he can’t get her off his mind.

“Yeah.” I roll down the window, letting in some of the icy air making my breaths white. “She’s sitting by the window.”

I’m confused by the sound of paper crunching under his feet but don’t look into it further when Ghost asks, “Is she eating? She hardly ate a thing here. She must be hungry.”

He is anal about people eating because he was nothing but skin and bones his first ten years at the boys’ home. They didn’t starve him, they merely only had enough food for everyone to have one small plate per meal. Since his scar made him avoid crowded environments, Ghost ate once everyone left. That meant his meals usually consisted of scraps since some of the boys were pigs—myself included.

That’s why he reacted so fiercely when he learned the women we returned to Russia with were only fed the vegetable scraps usually thrown out during the early stages of food preparation. The ship was overstocked with food, so he was lost when he discovered Kirill had ordered the kitchen staff to go back to the methods his father overturned when he became head of the Bobrovs.

I'm reasonably fucking sure he was obsessed with Katie when his eyes first landed on her, but it became a full-blown obsession when she hid bread rolls down her nightie to feed the women locked in the orlop her first night on the ship. He wouldn't have said anything if Kirill hadn't forced his hand. He said he either punish Katie or he'd cut off one of Lera's fingers to ensure everyone understands the consequences of stealing.

Ghost forced Katie to go hungry for a night, and I think it just about killed him.

His analness about feeding the world is why I didn't bat an eyelid at Anastasia ordering double for any events she booked with her catering company. There was far too much food, but it was delivered to the homeless shelter closest to the event by Ana and me at the end of the catering job.

Seeing the joy on the people's faces while they were eating her meals Ana craved more than success, and their happiness sparked her love of drawing. She was often found in the corner of the shelter, sketching pictures of babies for their mothers. They didn't have fancy phones with cameras, but they had a keepsake they'd treasure for eternity.

When I notice Katie's hands are empty, I ask Ghost, "Do you want me to take her something?"

I imagine his head bobbing when a swoosh sounds down the line.

"Anything particular?"

With a grin, I remove my seat belt when he asks, "Can you manage a grilled cheese sandwich?"

I've made out for years I am a shit cook. In reality, I'm half decent. I just didn't want anyone to know that since it would give them a reason for Ana not to cook for them. "I'll give it my best shot."

I push my phone in close to my ear when unexpected praise leaves Ghost's mouth, "Thanks." After sniffing like he didn't just snort several lines of coke, he asks, "Do you want me to check on Ana?"

As much as I trust him, I say, "Nah, it's good. She'll most likely be

asleep.” He *pffts* me when I mutter, “I kept her up half the night *and* most of the day.”

My laugh echoes in the quietness of the monastery when Ghost mutters, “I thought those grunts were the pigs we brought in for composting? You forever prove me wrong. Fucking animal.”

As I slowly approach my daughter’s gravesite, I tell Ghost to sort his shit out before coming to check on his girl for himself. “I’ll make sure she eats, but I can’t help with all the other shit she’s wading through. Our women need dicks for that, and I’m now a one-woman-per-dick man.”

It takes him a minute, but he eventually stops cussing me out to murmur in agreement, then he disconnects our call.

I snap a quick picture of our daughter’s gravesite so I can prove to Ana how realistic her drawings are before entering the monastery I’d give anything to return to its roots.

Although it was never my home, Ghost hasn’t lived anywhere else.



## ALEK

*M*y grilled cheese sandwich was a fucking mess, but I think I made good head waves with Katie. Although certain she didn't 'step out' on Ghost, I'm just as confident she is up the duff. Her emotions are out of whack, her stomach is swollen, and she looked seconds from bursting into tears when I lifted the lid on her dinner.

It was two bits of bread slapped together with a piece of cheese, but she stared at it like it was a one-way ticket home.

I don't think she'd accept it, though. The ticket home, not the sandwich. She is as snowed under as Ghost, who thinks he's being sneaky slipping out the back entrance of the compound. It is a full moon, and although his hair isn't as white as it was when he was a kid, it is as bright as his scars shimmer when he isn't hiding them.

I wait for his two-wheeled ride to disappear down one of the dirt roads we regularly walked as kids before heading inside and veering for Kliment's bat cave. He assures me there are no bats, but I think he is full of shit. It is too dark to see anything, and the hum of his multiple computers could have him missing their squawks.

"Should I have knocked?" I ask when the first thing I notice upon entering his office is a tattooed ass.

Kliment cranks his neck back to peer at me. Considering he's been

working nonstop for the past two months, his grin is massive. “Ten minutes ago, fuck yes.” After ensuring all the liquid inside the syringe he’s stabbing into his ass has been drained, he pops the lid onto the needle, dumps it into a sharp’s container on his desk, then tugs his pants back up. “What’s up? I thought you’d be celebrating with your girl?”

He is one of a rare few who know Ana’s ruse with Ghost is all for show.

“Thought I should drop these off first.” I’ve lived a hard and fast life, but I’ve not once felt as dirty as I do while yanking out the panties Katie handed me earlier. They’re stained with a product that’ll see my jeans tossed into the incinerator by sunrise. “Don’t think I’d make it to brunch if Ana found these.”

When I dangle the scant material off my finger, Kliment looks amused until he spots their crusty stains. “What the fuck?” He steps back like you can catch cooties from soiled panties. “Is that what I think it is?”

I jerk up my chin. “Proof Ghost and Kirill are related.”

Kliment is lost since he doesn’t know Ghost added some extra product to Katie’s shampoo bottles. He can’t announce she is his until she is free from Kirill, but he can ensure she smells like him. “What the fuck do you want me to do with them?”

I wait for him to remove them from my finger with a pen before informing, “I hadn’t got that far ahead yet. Possibly DNA?” When his brows furrow, I mutter, “Katie got pregnant somehow.” I nudge my head to the panties she had stuffed at the bottom of her lingerie drawer. “I’m wondering if that’s the cause.”

“Sperm doesn’t last that long outside our nut sacks.”

Kliment’s eyes snap to mine when I murmur, “Actually...” I make sure I have his full attention before finalizing my reply, “... in the right conditions, those fuckers can last a while. Why do you think I told you to take your used condoms with you when you skip out on her?” He gives me a jeering look that makes me laugh. “You can thank me later.” I scrub at my beard, tired as



fuck but certain I won't be chasing sleep anytime soon. The past couple of hours is the longest I've been away from Ana in the past month. I'm craving the taste of her bodywash. "Keep this between us, though. I'll tell Ghost once we have solid proof."

Unable to take his eyes off the material making his gills green, Kliment jerks up his chin before telling me it will take around a week for the results to come in. "Though I'm doubtful we have that long."

When his reply has me retracing my steps—I was heading for the door—I ask, "Why's that? What did I miss?"

"It just came in." He hands me a tablet before ruffling through some papers on his desk. It is filled with an exceedingly extensive list of items. "That's not just a restock."

"It's a move."

He nods, agreeing with me. "I've got some ears to the ground. Nothing concrete yet, but I'll find you once I know more."

"Do you need help?" I'm a fucking prick for praying he says no, but you'd be a little lenient on me if I said more than my cock was starting to throb, right?

You'd swear my last lot of medication was made by a candy company. I've been taking them religiously for years but have suffered more blackouts and pounding migraines the past month than I ever have. There was only one time I've had a similar stretch of medical incidents—the week before Ana gave birth to our daughter. I thought I was fighting through it. Little did I know I was flat on my back struggling while Ana brought our daughter into the world, uncrying.

I hate myself that I wasn't there for her, but the guilt that still eats at me to this day ensures she will never face anything like that by herself again. I don't care if I'm on the verge of death, I will be by her side, holding her hand for *any* event she faces.

When Kliment replies, "Nah, it's good. You're better on the ground than

behind a computer,” I remember I asked a question

I scoff as if to say, *fucking oath I am*. I’m old school through and through. The day you see me typing on a keyboard is the day I’ll put a bullet in my head.

After a wordless farewell, I finally head to my room. I’m tired, and my head is achy, but more than anything, I’m dying to see Anastasia again. I don’t care if she’s too nauseous to fuck. I just want to hold her while fighting to ignore the throb of my temples.

“*драгоценный*,” I call out when my search of the main area of my room comes up empty. The sketches we fucked on are still spread across the floor, but there is a stack of papers on the coffee table that wasn’t there when we left in a hurry. “Are you showering?” When I fail to register running water, I head for the papers while saying, “I hope you’re not sick already. It will be a heap harder to keep my secret if I’m making pancakes at two in the morning during the first trimester.” The chuckle that arrived with my last sentence is sliced in two when I pick up the first piece of paper. “What the fuck is this?”

My stomach rebels when the second photograph confirms my suspicion. It is a timeline of Anastasia’s walk to the laundry room the day she lost our daughter.

Like a sicko watching a train crash, I flick through the images until I reach the last one. It is Ana being lifted out of the laundry room on a stretcher. The jeans she had to wear with the top button undone are dangling off the edge of the stretcher, and the sheet they used to cover her is stained with blood.

I hate the devastated look on her face, but more than anything, I hate that I wasn’t there for her both then and now.

Whoever shared these images with Anastasia wants to hurt her.

And I begin to wonder if they succeeded when my race into the bathroom has me entering another empty room.

“Come on, *драгоценный*, answer your damn phone,” I beg when my call

goes unanswered.

“Hey, you’ve reached Ana—” I disconnect before dialing a second number.

Yev answers two seconds later.

“Where is she?” I ask, not bothering to issue a greeting.

He sounds groggy while replying, “Ana?” He must hear my chin lift. “With you.” Sheets ruffle as his breaths pick up. “You said you didn’t need me anymore?” My brows furrow when I hear a woman in the background. I’d pay her more attention if she didn’t sound pompous and snooty. “I’ll be back,” Yev whispers down the line. “Don’t fucking run this time. I’ve been chasing your ass all over Kronstadt.” Once he kisses his female guest goodbye, muffling her reply with his lips, he asks, “Where do you want me to check first?”

Anastasia running when she’s scared isn’t unusual. I just figured she’d outgrown that during the past month. “Home.”

“Your apartment?” Yev asks, shocked. “I thought you’d check there.”

I shake my head. “No, the projects. She always goes home when she’s feeling lost.”

He tsks me. “Her home isn’t in that shitbox with her dad, Alek.” I worry something isn’t right when he murmurs, “It’s with you. It’s always been with you.” After waiting a couple of seconds for the honesty in his reply to sink in, he says, “I’ll check the penthouse.”

Again, I shake my head. It adds to the thump of my skull. “I’ll check there. You cruise any old haunts. The depot her catering trucks are at, the park she once called home, and…” this reply is so much harder to articulate than the first couple, “... the strip clubs she worked at. Keep in touch, and I’ll do the same.”

“All right.” I hear him requesting for his bed companion to hang around again before he disconnects our call.

I make sure I’m not overreacting by checking the kitchen and laundry at

the compound for Ana before I eventually sink into the driver's seat of my car. Speed limits weren't invented for a guy in a hurry. They're for the patient fucks with time on their side. I was forever told mine would be short when I woke up with a ton of bandages on my head and screws in my skull. The scar on my head is why I wear my hair long. I will tell anyone that listens that my father tried to kill me. I don't need to show them proof. If they don't believe me, that's on them.

Ana believed me without proof, and she's the only one I've ever shown my scar to bar Ghost. But he doesn't count since my head was shaved when I rocked up at the boys' home.

An uneasy feeling settles down on me when I arrive at my apartment block. The cars in the lot aren't fancy, but that doesn't mean Ana isn't here. She once used a skateboard with three wheels to evade me, and I followed her on a stolen bike for miles.

The memory has me smiling when I throw open the foyer door. I'm about to head to the elevator, but something tells me I'm going the wrong way, so I double back and move for the area that had Ana wanting to flee again.

“драгоценный?” I pull open the door then flick on the light before galloping down the first couple of stairs.

Just as I stumble onto a handful of shadows, my feet are pulled out from beneath me, and I tumble down the stairs, my rolls ending when I crash into the banister that tore my daughter from Ana's womb.

I'm twisted up like a pretzel, and my head is thumping, but there's no denying I didn't fall down the stairs. Someone hooked my ankle, but before I can grab my gun to force them out of their hidey-hole, a much more dangerous situation emerges.

Anastasia is in the laundry room as expected, except she isn't here voluntarily. She's strung up via a noose, and her toes are narrowly touching the chair saving her from asphyxiation. Her hands are bound behind her back, her ankles are tethered with the same rope digging into her neck, and she is

gagged.

When my eyes snap to her right, my nostrils flare. Death is plaguing the room, but it isn't coming from Ana or me. It is for the man I plan to skin like a fucking animal and his redhead sidekick.

“Aw... isn't this cozy?” Stace murmurs with a fake pout. “It is like a reunion.” She locks her eyes with mine while saying with a smirk. “Except you aren't hours late this time around, since you're not reeling in the aftermath of sugar pills in my bed.” As she butts shoulders with Watermelon Head, she murmurs, “We couldn't risk that stress wouldn't wipe you out, so we switched your medication for something a little less effective for your... *condition*.” Her pout doubles when she air quotes her last word.

Watermelon Head, who is standing between Stace and Ana, throws his fat head back and laughs. His nose is still wonky from where I broke it last night, and his eyes are black, but he laughs like a hyena not about to have his cock cut off and stuffed down his throat.

“You fucking—” Blinded by rage, I charge for Walter, confident my barge will bring him and Stace down together.

I barely complete a three-step hobble when my campaign is ended by a gun being stuffed under Ana's rib. Kirill was hiding in the shadows, and although I am aware Watermelon Head does nothing without his permission, I've never seen him get his hands dirty with the nitty gritty of his industry.

Once he's confident he has my focus, Kirill says, “With Katie being pregnant, I don't really care about your small claim for infamy this time around that could bump down the Bobrovs' rankings in the bratva, but I've worked too hard for too long not to succeed with my wish for an heir.” He digs the gun in deeper, making Ana whimper and ensuring I won't feel an ounce of remorse when I scalp his hair from his abhorrent head. “And since Ghost only listens to one man, I need to ensure he is being given the right messages.”

“I ain't—” A second dig and I shut my mouth like narking on Ghost was

on my resume when I signed up to be his best friend.

Despite Anastasia's belief, she will always hold the number one spot on my protective list. If I didn't have Yev sitting outside our apartment building the day Kirill and Ghost returned from the USA with a fuckton of tension, I would have never turned up to the compound that morning to discover Lera in an industrial bin at the back of the monastery and Ghost pleading to do anything to keep his sister alive.

Ana stares at me with pleading eyes when I ask Kirill, "What do you want me to do?"

She doesn't trust them any more than me, but she is aware they will kill her if I don't do as asked. Once she is safe, I'll get my revenge.

But not until then.

Not when her life is at risk.

"We—"

"Cut her down first," I interrupt, my voice exposing that this isn't a suggestion. It is a demand. "Cut her fucking down. *Now!*"

As my roar echoes around the laundry room, Kirill lifts his chin, soundlessly requesting for Stace to disarm me first.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," I whisper into her ear when she yanks the gun out of the back of my jeans by curling her arms around my back. "And I'm going to take my time with you that you'll wish you were back with the fucking john who stomped on you, except Ana won't save you this time around. She won't cook for you and help you get dressed when you're too sore to move. She will leave you withering on the floor like you fucking did her." With my anger too high to hold back, I say louder this time, "You fucking piece of shit, you killed my daughter? You fucking tripped Ana, didn't you?"

She tries to deny it.

When that doesn't work, she tries to act smug by grinning.

I wipe it straight off her fucking face with a fierce backhanded slap.

The crack of my knuckles on her cheek is lyrical gold to my ears, but it has nothing on the thump when she lands on the concrete floor with a groan.

Watermelon Head is forced to kick away my gun when Stace raises her hand to cup her cracked and bleeding cheek.

Kirill looks more amused than annoyed.

“Get up,” he demands a short time later, his tone as mocking as it’s ever been. “It was a fairy tap.”

“Can’t wait to see if you say the same when I beat your fucking face in.”

As he moves behind Ana to untether the rope from her neck, Kirill smirks. “You should pick your words more wisely.” He stops Ana from sprinting for me when her feet make contact with the chair by yanking on the rope he just loosened. “Because you were right to get angry that he steered me to that strip club.” I realize he’s referring to Yev when he leans in to sniff Ana’s hair. “She is very much my typ—” He doesn’t get to finalize his statement. Ana rams her elbow into his groin, causing his words to dangle in his throat along with his balls. “You fucking bi—”

“You touch her and you can kiss your fucking ruse goodbye.”

Kirill’s hand suspends midway through the air before he gauges the authenticity of my threat by staring me dead set in the eyes. He must see the wish to kill him spread across my face as he drops his hand, then shoves a file from a briefcase at his side into my chest. “We leave tomorrow. You need to make sure nothing stops us from leaving.”

He rattles off a heap of demands that follow a similar theme.

I’m his ticket out of Russia with Katie and Lera. Sofia never comes up.

“If Ghost makes any move to stop us from leaving, you are to inform me.”

“I get it. You don’t need to keep spelling it out.” Although I sound like a willing participant, I can’t help but ask, “But why should I trust you? Who’s to say you won’t kill her the instant I leave?”

His lips tuck at one side before he mutters, “I’ll leave you Katie. When

you deliver her to the ship, I will exchange her for Ana.” I feel like the biggest prick in the world when he says, “Ghost trusts you with her. He will never suspect that you’ll betray him.”

I can’t put Ana second.

I never will.

“We will exchange at the aft near the third stack of containers or nowhere.” Kirill is lost as to why I requested that specific area of his ship, but Ana gets it. The boat we hid on for days on end is just behind those stacks. There are more than condoms stuffed under the thwarts.

Kirill dips his head in agreement. “Tomorrow morning at ten.” He assists Ana from the ground with more sincerity than Watermelon Head does Stace before ensuring I won’t hunt him down the instant he leaves. “And don’t think we’re not watching.” He cranks his neck back just as he reaches the stairwell. “Or I’ll make her sketch her swallowing my cock. It’ll be sooo realistic...” he mimics my voice during his last sentence, “... you’ll know the exact moment she starts choking on it since the veins in her eyes will burst.”

I could waste the last three seconds warning him of all the ways I plan to kill him, but there’s something far more urgent to express.

“I love you, *драгоценный*. Don’t you ever fucking forget that.”

Watermelon Head doubles his shoves when Ana struggles to get free from his hold, but not even the gag stuffed in her mouth has me missing her reply.

“Kill them all, baby. Kill them all.”





## ALEK

“*H*ey!” Yev peels out of his fancy sports car and hotfoots it my way. “Why the fuck haven’t you been answering your phone?” Before I can answer him, he fires off another question, “Did you find her?”

I jerk up my chin. *In the last fucking place I wanted.*

“Where was she?” He shadows my walk to the back passenger side door of my ride, his steps way too fucking agile for my liking. Everything is pissing me off, even the dumb fuck at the lights who tried to rile me for running the red. He shut the fuck up when I pulled a gun out of my glove compartment and aimed it at the crinkle popped between his bushy brows.

“She was at the penthouse,” I reply while yanking my medication bag out of the pocket in the seat. Stace knew way too much about my condition for it to be a coincidence, and back then, I was taking my medication regular enough not to blackout for hours.

Well, I thought it was medicine.

“You fuckin’ bitch,” I grumble under my breath when I notice the manufacturer print on my latest medication doesn’t match the one I had filled before Ana returned to Russia.

After stuffing the sugar tablets back into the seat pocket with force, I race up the Bobrov compound stairs.

“Is everything all right?” Yev asks, following me.

“Everything’s fine.”

“You sure?” He slaps my shoulder like he’s my friend. He isn’t. I’m currently of the belief *everyone* is my enemy. “Because you’re not usually this tense after fighting with Ana.” He hits me with a cocky wink. “Usually, she’d drain the energy right from your veins.”

Pissed and too fretful not to take it out on people more deserving, I pin Yev to the wall by his throat, then glare at him. I try to tell him to fuck off, to express that he isn’t fucking needed because I got Anastasia into this mess so I will get her out of it, but I can’t speak when my eyes lock on the skin stretched across his jugular.

Three little words that assured Ana I didn’t need to tell her I loved her for her to know it was true. I showed it in other ways. Stupid, immature ways, but other ways, nonetheless.

*Ana’s throat here.*

The wish to fight back stops blazing through Yev’s eyes when I mutter, “Stay in contact, and I will too.”

His wide and suddenly concerned eyes bounce between mine for several painful seconds before he hesitantly jerks up his chin.

I drop my hand from his throat before straightening his clothes, which are way too pricy for a bottom-dweller gang affiliate, then I continue inside.

Mercifully, he seems to have understood my request to keep looking for Ana because instead of shadowing me inside the compound, he races back to his sports car, jumps into the driver’s seat, then tears out of the lot like a maniac.

I startle like a soft cock when I’m unexpectedly asked, “Everything okay?”

Ghost witnessed my exchange with Yev. His balled hands announce this, much less the wish to kill slashed across his face.

I lift my chin. “Yeah. He said some shit I didn’t like. I let him know it.” I shift the focus off me the only way I know how by shunting his attention onto

someone else. “How is Kate?” I can tell he visited her as he has every night the past several months because his eyes are nowhere near as pained as they were earlier, but I’m shocked he’s back so soon. He usually stays there until dawn.

Never one to talk about his emotions, Ghost answers me with a shrug before entering the compound. I follow him like I’m not counting down the seconds until ten o’clock this morning.

It seems centuries away when Ghost enters the bathroom attached to his office and cranks on the shower. He isn’t feeling dirty, he wants to talk in private, and I’m the last person he should be confiding in.

When I join him in the bathroom, he discloses, “There are rumors Kirill is getting the ship ready. We have no shipments scheduled. I had Kliment check.”

I feel like a dog when I mutter, “Maybe he’s picking up some new consignments? The prostitution conglomerate is killing it at the moment. We have more customers than whores.”

Ghost shakes his head. “Maksim closed his account. Some shit about his fiancée not agreeing with his business models.”

“Then maybe that’s what Kirill’s plans are about? Selling off the excess stock.”

He glares at me like I’m fucking stupid.

“What? It’s fucking two in the morning. My head doesn’t work at this hour.”

He continues to glare, finally clueing me on how Yev feels when I have a go at him. You know you can fight back, and you would give anything to do so, but you also know your stirring will eventually come back to bite you on the ass.

Although I’d give anything to tell him the truth, I can’t. Kirill kills his own fucking kids, for crying out loud. If he even caught wind that I’d narked on him, Anastasia’s body would never be found.

“What do you want to do, G? It’s obvious that there are steps in play, and considering he pulled Sofia and Lera to the monastery shows it is something significant, but I can’t say where we go from here because it isn’t my decision.”

Steam billows around us when he takes a moment to deliberate. I’m not surprised at the direction his theory takes. I would have gone the same way if Katie were my girl. It is why my guilt shouldn’t be as high as it is. “I need to get Katie out. I wanted to get her home, but I have no jurisdiction there. No fucking power.” He *pffts* himself while dragging his hands over his scalp. “I don’t have any here either.” He stares at the vanity mirror like he wants to put his fists through it, but he fights to remain calm.

It is the fight of his life when I murmur, “But we’ve got four... five of us, max. Kirill has an army. The numbers don’t add up.” After angling his head to expose his scars, he peers at me like he doesn’t know who I am. I get it. I was the one who pushed him to make a move two years ago. It resulted in half of his body being blasted into chunks. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t fight. I am just not sure you should go it alone.”

*Fuck, Alek. What the hell are you doing? Shut your damn mouth! You don’t need more people pulled into this mess.*

“What are you thinking?” Ghost’s interests are as obvious as the scars on his face—painfully on point.

I prop my ass onto the tub then brace my head in my hands. “Nothing. I was just talking smack.”

Even with me brushing my suggestion off as if it is a bad idea, Ghost runs with it. “I think you could be onto something.” He moves to the vanity across from me before folding his arms over his chest. “Tension has been hot for years. It wouldn’t take much to start a turf war.” I almost blurt out, ‘the war has already started,’ but he continues talking, foiling my endeavor. “For once, it’ll just be staged.”

“What?” I peer up at him, truly lost for words this time.

He flashes me a smirk I haven't seen in weeks. "I need to make some contacts."

When he switches off the shower and enters his office, I say, "I'll join you in a second." *To undo all your hard work.* "I need to head to my car for a tick."

"If you're going for..." He coughs, aware now we could be monitored and not wanting to share my secret. "You've got everything you need in there." He nudges his head to the medicine cabinet above the sink. When I take a stumbling step back after opening the cabinet and finding rows of my medication in untouched, original packaging, he mutters, "I asked Doc for a couple of sets just in case. There's another lot in my car and over three dozen on the ship." He shakes his head before unnecessarily slanting it. "Don't fucking look at me like that. I don't want to have to kill you to keep my rep."

His top lip twitches when I reply, "Or fight me for the top bunk." But he holds back his grin. It shows how badly he is snowed under.

I'm the same.

We're waging a war, except this time, we're not on the same team.

Ghost just doesn't know that yet.



## ALEK

Ghost's plan is solid.

He has his T's crossed and his I's dotted, but he left one fatal flaw in his plan.

He placed Katie's safety in my hands.

I almost fucking folded. I got so close to dragging him into the bathroom and telling him everything, but I held back when Yev dropped into the compound for some of Vera's famous syrnikis. He said he couldn't wait to devour three plates full but had to settle for eggs when Vera was nowhere to be found.

Vera usually travels with the crew when they're going abroad, so Ghost shrugged off his comment as a whine.

I couldn't do the same.

The throb of the vein in his neck exposed he wasn't solely talking about Vera. He hadn't located Ana's safehouse either, which nosedived the odds of me finding it. Yev knows every nook of this city, and he is closer in age to the youth willing to snitch on their mothers for a couple of dollars, so if anyone could sniff out where Kirill was stashing her, it would be him.

I had hoped he would have brought me something I could have used so I wouldn't have to advise Kirill of Ghost's plans, but it seems as if I don't have a choice.



My thumb hovers over the send button on the message I type out advising Kirill that Ghost plans to remove Katie from his watch under fake enemy fire, but before I can send it, Katie exits her bathroom.

Her hand clamps up to cover her mouth when she spots me lingering at the side of her room. “You really need to stop doing that,” she pleads, her words hardly audible through the fingers pressed over her mouth.

“Sorry. I knocked. You must not have heard me since you were in the shower.” You’d think lying would come naturally for how often I’ve done it in the past few hours. It doesn’t. That wasn’t the most pathetic one I’ve used the past twelve hours, but it is cutting it close for a top-ten position. My head is throbbing, I’ve had two nose bleeds in the past hour, and I’m about to snitch on my best friend, and that isn’t even the worst of it.

My girl could be hurt, and I promised I’d never let anything happen to her.

I’m a fucking liar.

Needing to get back to the task at hand before I burn down the city to find Ana, I say, “We’re heading out in five.”

“Heading where?” Katie asks, her voice high with suspicion.

For once, I can be honest. “The day I work out that man’s inner workings will be the day I’ll take my final breath.” Eager to leave, I highlight that she’s still in her pajamas. “Do you want to wear that or get changed?”

“What do you think?” She rolls her eyes without fear of repercussions. I’ve more looked out for her than made an effort to be her friend the past several months, but she doesn’t fear me. She thinks I’m playful.

I doubt she’ll feel the same way when I send the text burning a hole in my pocket since I stored my phone in there when she exited the bathroom.

My eyes snap up from the floor when Katie says, “Lera mentioned she’s going on a plane. Do you think that is what this is about?”

“A plane?” When she nods, I ask, “Does Ghost know?”

There was no mention of a plane in the file Kirill shoved into my chest. It

was standard travel the Bobrovs use when going abroad. A cargo ship full of whores and maids.

“I don’t know.” She twists her lips while touching her ear with her shoulder. “He was in the pantry when she said it, so he may have heard her.” After a brief pause that gives me nowhere near enough time to work out if Ghost knows I’m a snitching prick, she asks, “Did he stay here last night?”

Her sigh ruffles a strand of hair fallen in front of my eye when I shake my head. “He comes here every night, though.”

“To check on Lera?”

I laugh. It is what I do when I’m feeling manic. “Lera was only moved here last night. You, however, have been here for months. If you were two seconds later, you might have passed him in the secret stairwell.” Needing an excuse to leave, I nudge my head to her clothes splayed out on her bed. “I will wait for you outside while you get dressed.”

Katie walks me to the door, her stomach dropping as ruefully as mine did when she mentioned Lera going on a plane when she peers down the hallway.

Kirill has no intention of returning to Russia. He’s packing everything, including the paintings that were hung on the wall when I arrived on this monastery’s doorsteps with ringing wet hair and an ugly scar.

After moving into an alcove a couple of spots down from Katie’s room, I yank my cell phone out of my pocket and dial a frequently called number.

Ghost doesn’t bother issuing a greeting, “She’s right. They’re on a fucking plane.” The relief in his tone is mammoth, and I can’t wait to loosen the noose that commenced strangling me the instant it was freed from Ana’s neck. “Now we just need to... get... out. Everything is... set... I... ha.. t...”

“Ghost?” When he fails to answer me, I pull down my phone and check the screen. Our call is still connected. The timer is moving. “Can you hear me?” I ask after returning my phone to my ear. “Ghost?”

While cussing about the silence, I end our call before dialing another number.

“Did you check the airport?” I ask the instant my call connects with Yev.

A loud whoosh sounds down the line, closely followed by a request for me to repeat what I said.

“The airport? Did you check on that investment I bought at the local airstrip?”

“We’re heading there now. I got a tip-off that the owner may be shedding a few more shares,” Yev replies just as I spot a man at the end of the hall. His watch is so fucking obvious, the instant he realizes I’ve spotted him, he races down the stairs.

“Keep me updated.”

I end our call before Yev can reply before taking off after one of Kirill’s men on foot. I need to stop him from calling Kirill and announcing I’m seeking ways out of our agreement. If he makes contact with Kirill before I catch him, Anastasia is dead.

I’ve been dying for carnage for hours, so I don’t yank my gun out of my jeans when I catch up to the man pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. I slam his head into the brick pillar holding up the front veranda before punishing his ribs with back-to-back jabs.

When his phone lands on the floor, its screen shows his call has connected but that there are only a few seconds on the countdown.

I snatch up the phone, block the microphone, then warn in an extremely threatening manner exactly what I’ll do to him if he doesn’t blame his pocket for dialing Kirill’s cell.

Once the scent of his piss is drenching his jeans, I hit the speaker button on his phone’s screen, then tilt it toward his mouth.

His inability to hold his bladder when scared exposes he will follow orders, but he ups the possibility of him staying alive by murmuring, “They’re on their way to the docks.” As his begging eyes dance between mine, he adds, “No issues.” His caller thanks him for the information before saying they’ll meet him at the port. I wait for him to agree before

disconnecting the call.

“Where the fuck are they holding her?” When he foolishly shakes his head, I batter his ribs for the second time before adding to the graze the brickwork scraped across his nose by breaking it with my fist. “Where *the fuck* is she!”

Through the blood pouring out of his nose, he mutters, “I don’t know anything, man. I was just asked to advise when you’d left.” He whimpers when I belt into him for the third time.

He can barely stand by the time I’m done, so I grab hold of his shirt and bring him to within an inch of my face. “Where. Is. She?”

“He had her at the compound, some shit about hiding in plain sight.” He licks the blood flooding his lips before murmuring, “But I swear, man, I didn’t touch her. I couldn’t trust she wouldn’t clamp my dick off.”

He just signed his death certificate.

I was already struggling.

Snowed fucking under with worry.

Then he goes and tells me about my girl having another man’s junk in her hand.

Threatening to rip off a man’s appendage is how Ana kept herself safe on the streets. There were a handful who thought she was all talk. They’re too knowledgeable to do the same now.

They also have nothing left to brag about.

Ghost and I took care of their ‘package’ back then as I am tempted with this fool now. The only reason I don’t is because I don’t have time, and you need to mutilate it to make sure it can’t be sewn back on.

When I yank my gun out of my pants, his eyes widen before he repeats, “I swear, man, I didn’t touch he—”

His words are ended with a bullet, and I’m only just wiping the brain matter my kill shot splattered my face with when Katie breezily enters the foyer.

I dump the goon into the bushes surrounding the driveway before opening the door for Katie. “This way.”

As she takes a seat in the main SUV, my phone buzzes, announcing I have a text message.

I yank it out so fast, if Ana were here, she’d be waterboarding me with fluids to make sure the only pain I face the next twelve hours is a bursting bladder.

YEV:

That airport investment you bought stocks in crumbled. The kitty is so empty, only the homeless have taken camp on the grounds.

He’s keeping it in code since Kirill most likely has someone monitoring our phones.

ALEK:

Fucking great. Head home. I heard Vera’s syrnikis are on the menu today. We missed them earlier because they were being kept under wraps.

Yev drives like a madman, so I’m not shocked when I receive a message from him before we’re even halfway to town. There are no words. Just an image of a crumpled blanket under chains bolted to the icy cold walls of the dungeon in the basement of the compound.

“Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck!*”

Katie is too busy drinking in the scenery whizzing by her window to pay attention to my mini outburst. It makes what I’m about to do a smidge easier.

I hit send on the message I typed out hours ago.

I rat on my best friend.

*I am a fucking prick.*

When Kirill’s message displays it has been read, I try to lessen the guilt raking through me.

ME:

Get to the docks. Now!

Yev's reply flashes up almost immediately.

YEV:

OMW.

During the forty-minute drive, I try to come up with a solution that will work for both Ghost and me. It is an epic waste of time. One of us has to lose, but I have more at stake than him.

Ana is pregnant with my kid.

We don't know yet who knocked Katie up.

Besides, Anastasia comes first. There's never been any doubt in my mind about that.

I'm shocked when our arrival at the docks is relatively low-key. Ghost and a handful of Kirill's men are flanking the port as they always do during embarkments, but Kirill is nowhere to be seen even with the compound being closer to the docks than the monastery, and his men seem pretty blasé. They're not prepared for battle at all.

"Stay close to me," I whisper to Katie when I assist her out of the back of the middle SUV.

Her chin hardly moves when the plan Ghost worked on all last night begins. Gunfire rings from the hills behind us, forcing Kirill's men to pull their heads out of their asses.

"Keep your head down." A replica of the bulletproof vest I forced Ghost to put on before I left his office this morning digs into my stomach when I pull Katie behind a thick shrub before returning fire.

I don't aim in the direction gunfire is ringing from. I fire aimlessly while peering over at the SUV Ghost organized to have hidden at the side of the port. The keys are on the driver's seat, the door is flung open. All Katie needs to do is run.

I won't stop her. I kept my end of the bargain with Kirill. I told him

Ghost's plans. It might have only been thirty minutes before showtime, but I still narked.

"Now, Little Lamb!" Ghost demands when Katie remains frozen at my side, his voice booming over the endless gunfire.

When he spots her nimble headshake, he cusses before yelling, "Get her in the fucking car."

The desperation in his voice has me realizing how foolish I've been. Kirill can't be trusted, so why the fuck did I ever think siding with him was my only option. Ghost would have burned down all of Kronstadt with me to find Anastasia, but I've fucked up that chance now because all I kept thinking is that I couldn't lose her and my unborn child again.

I barely survived their loss the first time. I got so fucking strung out on drugs, Ghost found me OD'ing in my car. I had a needle hanging out of my arm and froth from my mouth, yet he still resuscitated me like our dicks weren't forever a minimum of three feet apart when we shared a girl.

There are no fucking sword fights in our stories.

I only just get Katie into the opening when I realize my awakening has occurred too late. Bobrov men flood the shipping yard from every exit and entry point. Unlike Kirill's men guarding Katie's arrival, these men are dressed for action. AK47s are strapped to their chests, and Kirill would never attend a party without his favorite ammunition—body-maiming grenades.

"Get her onto the boat," Kirill orders me like I'm one of his fucking lackies.

My vision is hindered by Watermelon Head tossing Katie onto his shoulder and sprinting on to the boat, but when Kirill mutters, "At the stacks in ten," no amount of camouflage will have me missing the confused crinkle between Ghost's brows.

My ruse is busted, but I'm too fucking desperate to get to Ana to explain myself.

Kirill arrived empty-handed, so where the fuck is the girl I'd go to the end

of hell for?





## ANASTASIA

“Get the fuck off me!” I kick out like I have many times since Stace and the goon Alek calls Watermelon Head ambushed me in my room.

Alek sent me a message not to leave. He never said anything about not opening the door. I thought the brisk knock was Vera arriving with some nausea-friendly foods. My thumbs-up reply was a clear indication I was battling through a severe bout of morning sickness that I suspect was brought on by Stace’s hint that the fall that ripped my daughter from my womb wasn’t an accident. I was desperate to seek answers, but that couldn’t be done until I could leave the bathroom without fear of vomiting on someone’s shoes.

Watermelon Head didn’t even try to pretend he was there for any other reason but to kidnap me. He directed his big gun at my head, its size so substantial it needed two hands to control.

That was his first mistake.

His showy gun left his groin unprotected.

When he dropped to the floor, howling like a baby, I tried to make a break for it. I got halfway out the door when Stace grabbed a fistful of my hair. She yanked me back like Kirill did last night when I tried to sprint for Alek, and although being hit in the groin is painful no matter your sex, it didn’t take her down long enough for Watermelon Head not to recover.

He knocked me out with the butt of his gun. I woke up in the laundry room of Alek's apartment building, dangling above a rickety chair with rope curled around my throat.

"I said don't fucking touch me." My shoeless foot lands harshly on the goon's nose, pushing him back a couple of paces, but the blood gushing from his nose only doubles his determination.

"I don't know what I want to do first. Hold you down and watch as the wish to live slowly fades from your eyes, or wait until you're so floppy and lifeless, you'll do nothing but stay motionless like a good little pet while I fill you with my dick."

His head snaps to the side when I spit in his face. "Fill would imply you have enough length for penetration. We all know that isn't the case."

As he drags his hand down his cheek, his eyes shoot daggers at the men who couldn't hold back their chuckles. Once he shuts them up enough, only the heaving of their lungs as they battle to control their laughter is heard, he shifts his focus back to me. "I might just do both."

"You'll be dead before then. All of you will be dead."

Before I can speak another word, I'm yanked across the sea-corroded floor by the rope around my ankle and forced to use my hearing to respond more than my vision since they shove a hessian bag over my head.

"Now I know why they kept her fucking gagged," murmurs a voice I'm certain I recognize even with me only hearing it a handful of times.

Yev and his younger brother have different fathers, so when their mother passed, Yev went to the boys' home and his brother, Feodor, went to live with his father, but it would take more than a change in zip code to keep the brothers apart.

The bangs and pops that rattled through the ship almost forty minutes ago make sense when I'm walked somewhere where the sun can shine through the stitch of the hessian. Gunfire is in the air, but it is minus the metallic smell usually associated with a bloodbath.

Once I'm placed on my feet, the hessian bag is removed. I blink several times in a row to adjust my eyes to the blinding sunlight while the cords stopping me from sprinting are cut with a knife.

I'm almost in for the race of my life before one word ends my campaign before it starts. “драгоценный.”

After blocking the high-hanging sun by stepping closer to me, Alek cups my cheeks, then drags his calloused thumbs under my eyes. I'm sure I look like a mess, but I am unharmed. Anyone game enough to get close to me paid for their stupidity with a foot to the face.

Once he's confident my pale cheeks have more to do with a squishy, empty stomach than anything, he shifts on his feet to face Kirill. “I did as you asked—”

Kirill cuts him off with a bitterly cold laugh. “You knew of his plans for *hours*, but you only told me after killing one of my men and stashing him in the hedge for the nuns to find.”

“She's fucking here, isn't she? That was our deal.” It dawns on me that Alek was stripped of weapons when he steps up to Kirill chest to chest. There is no outline of a gun in the back of his jeans, no bulge at his ankle. He is as disarmed as me. “And I didn't kill that prick for Ghost or Katie. I did it because he lied to me.”

“So lying is punishable by death?” Kirill twists his lips before slowly swaying his head from side to side. “Good to know.”

Before Alek can reply, we're joined by another couple, who are being led to the back of the ship via gunpoint.

Ghost's jaw tics out of control when his eyes land on Alek and me, but not a single quiver is heard in his voice when he directs his anger at Kirill. “You want to have a good fucking reason for dragging me out here after that showdown.” He jerks his head to the port slowly fading in the distance. “Sniper bullets can travel miles.”

Bile from the lining of my stomach races up my esophagus when Kirill

replies, “That would have been handy to know.” He yanks out a gun his blazer wasn’t concealing before directing it at Ghost’s heart. “Would have saved me the cleanup.”

“I’m your fucking brother. You can’t touch me—”

Kirill silences Ghost like I did the goon only minutes ago. Except he doesn’t use his foot. He takes him down with three seemingly slow-moving bullets to the chest.

“No!” Katie screams in a gut-wrenching cry before she throws herself onto Ghost to protect him from any additional carnage. “Hold on. Please.”

I’m torn from the heart-stuttering visual when Alek mutters, “Run, *драгоценный*. Now.”

My mind is already made up that I’m not leaving without him—especially after seeing how Kirill treated his own brother—but I am even more determined to stay when I learn the reason for Alek’s demand.

Kirill has a gun at his head, and there isn’t an ounce of hesitation on his face. Not even when Katie breaks away from the goon yanking her away from a motionless ghost. “Get her. But don’t hurt her. She is with child. *My* child.”

Taking advantage of his distraction, I push out with a hiccup, “I can’t leave you.” Alek’s eyes reveal he’ll go down fighting to make sure I am safe. His right hand is balled while his left is flat and braced against his trouser leg. His grab-and-punch routine will give me a three-second head start on Kirill’s men. I just don’t want a head start if it means a life without him. “Please don’t make me do this.”

The contents in my nose spill out when I shake my head to Alek’s inconspicuous nudge to the section ‘our’ boat is tethered. It is obvious, even from this distance, that the winch has been loosened. I doubt it would take much more than me landing in it for it to break free.

My heart breaks when Alek whispers, “Do it for her, *драгоценный*. Give our daughter the childhood we deserved but never had.”

There is no way he could know our unborn child is a girl, but he was right the first time, so I believe him this time around as well. “Alek—”

“I love you,” he interrupts a second before Kirill’s attention returns to us.

In slow motion he notches back the trigger. It’s halfway in when Alek grabs the barrel of his gun, pulls it in the direction opposite to me, then rams his fist into his face.

“Run, *драгоценный!*” he screams, that too in slow motion.

Tears threaten to run down my face as I race for the groove Alek scoured into the metal so I’d know the exact spot to throw over my leg. I feel as if I am moving at the speed of light, but someone is faster than me. They hook my ankle with a speargun, sending me toppling to the floor.

After crashing face-first, I skid across the sea-damaged floor. My collision with a stack of containers that end my slide temporarily dazes me, but I’d give anything for my memory to be wiped when my vision clears enough to see Alek gunned down similarly to Ghost. He takes three bullets to the chest before the asshole who tripped me aims his gun at Alek’s head.

Scared shitless I am on the cusp of losing everything, I force my legs into action before my head is fully onboard with my plans. I stumble more than I sprint while charging for the man going for the kill shot, but when I reach him, I hit him with everything I have.

Regretfully, it is too late. A bullet races out of his gun as the roar of a man fighting to live booms through the air just as quickly. Ghost is no longer on the ground. He’s sprinting for Alek like he can outrun a bullet, his campaign almost upended when the tip of a speargun rips through the scarred side of his face.

As the spear activates its hook mechanism, which shreds through Ghost’s skin like a hot knife through butter, Ghost barges Alek out of the firing zone. His hit is so forceful, Alek falls overboard, taking Ghost with him.

Regretfully, it is nowhere near the deep scratch I was racing for only minutes ago.

“That’ll save a cleanup.” Watermelon Head eats his words when I ram my palm into his nose before sprinting for the emergency box Alek ensured I knew about before he’d let me step foot on this ship. “You fucking...”

After yanking out the flare gun, I fire one flare into the air, announcing we have men overboard before directing the smoking barrel at the men surrounding me. I’d like to take them all down, but since I only have one flare left, I don’t hesitate to aim it at Kirill’s chest before yanking back the trigger.

When the first click fails to activate the flare, I fire again and again and again.

Nothing.

Not a single bang.

Not until Watermelon Head knocks me out like he did last night, except this time, he uses the back of his hand instead of his gun.





## ALEK

“Careful. The water felt like fucking concrete when we hit it.”

As Yev and a handful of boys I’ve never met before assist Ghost into a floatable boat not big enough for three let alone the dozen men he rustled up in a hurry, I drag my hand under my nose to remove the blood that hasn’t stopped running since my brain rocked against my skull. It clings to the fingers I press to Ghost’s neck once they get him on the thwart to check for a pulse.

My head is fucking pounding, but I only needed to keep Ghost afloat for around twenty minutes since Ana activated a flare. It alerted the men at the docks that we’d gone overboard and saw Yev stealing a fisherman’s inflatable boat.

I know the flare came from Anastasia because no one else on that boat gives a fuck about us. It was proven when I searched it for Ana before Watermelon Head stripped me of my weapons. The fuckers working with Kirill only care about two things. Money and whores. Drugs are a close third.

“Is he breathing?” Yev asks, his voice shuddering because of how wet he got dragging us into the boat. The water is fucking freezing, but some good has come from the icy conditions. It solidified the wounds on Ghost’s face better than glue and saved him from bleeding out while we waited for help.

After feeling the slightest flutter under my almost blue fingers, I mutter,

“J-just.”

I stare at the shipping container that is only a blip on the horizon before cranking my neck back to the port. We’re much closer to the docks, but I can’t leave Ana. She is as strong as an ox, and has more gall than any of Kirill’s men, but the wild in her eyes is one of her most attractive features.

Men will give anything to snuff it.

My inner turmoil is given a moment of reprieve when Yev announces, “I got a guy onboard. He was closer to the docks than me, so I asked him to move in, in case we didn’t make it on time.” As he rakes his fingers through his hair, he stares down at Ghost who is obviously unconscious but not giving any physical indicators as to why. “I’m fucking glad I did.” He returns his eyes to mine. “Feo doesn’t have as much experience in this life as us, but he’ll keep an eye on Ana until you get there.”

“Feo? From Maksim’s crew?” I cuss more from rolling Ghost over than Yev’s head bob confirmation.

Ghost saved my life again, and now his is at risk.

“Fuck,” Yev murmurs under his breath when he spots the bullet hole a couple of inches across from Ghost’s spine. It is just below his bulletproof vest. “Was it a through and through?”

I shake my head before digging my fingers into the wound. His chances of dying are higher if we leave the bullet in. He won’t get lead poisoning. That shit is rare. But if fragments impinge on his nerves, he has an increased risk of an embolism.

Trust me, something so insignificant can kill you.

“Fuck, man. You’re really digging right in there, aren’t you?” Yev sounds like Ana did when she struggled to finish the meals I prepared for her at two in the morning. She knew she was going to bring it all back up, but she didn’t want to seem ungrateful.

“I have to—” I stop talking when a coolness colder than Ghost’s body temp brushes against my fingertips. “Come on, you son of a bitch.”

Yev looks on the verge of bending in two when I yank out the bullet. It isn't the goop coating my fingers, making him green at the gills. It is the squirts of blood now pissing out of the hole.

"It nicked a fucking artery." While aimlessly hunting for the vein responsible for the whitening of Ghost's skin, I stray my eyes to the ship I can barely see before swinging them back to the port. "If we don't get him help now, he will bleed out in minutes, but I need to get back to the ship."

Aware I can't place Anastasia last no matter how fucking dire the need, Yev makes the decision on my behalf. "Get us back to the docks *now!*" he yells before he drops his focus to me. "Feo will keep her safe. I promise..." His words fall short as his eyes fall on my lips. They're coated in blood. Mine not Ghost's. "Alek..."

"I'm fine," I mutter, my sways undermining my assurance.

Yev takes a moment to ponder before he barks out orders like the captain of a ship. "What is taking so long. Move this fucking piece of shit... *now!*"

"We can't get past a couple of knots," replies the young guy behind the wheel. "We're carrying too much weight."

My skull is pounding so loudly, I can't confidently declare that Yev doesn't say something, but a second after he spins to face the troops, they commence dropping like flies.

He doesn't kill them. They dive into the frigidly cold water voluntarily, stunning me that they're willing to risk death for two men they hardly know.

"Just hold on. A few more minutes, all right?" Yev pleads when obvious signs of a blackout presents.

My brain is swelling, and my blood pressure is too high not to flood it with blood. I'm seconds from passing out, but I hold on for dear life because the last time I blacked out in the middle of a war, I lost everything I've ever wanted.

I refuse to do that this time around.

"We're almost there." Yev's voice wavers in and out with the rolls of the

waves before they're eventually replaced with Ana's.

*"Think about anything else. My breathing. The flutter of the air conditioning vents. The splashes of the ocean when its lolls rock you to sleep."*

As I pinch the vein flooding my fingers with blood, I lean in the direction Ana's voice is coming from. I have no idea it is Yev's thigh until he mutters, "We're here. You made it. We're back at the docks."

I'm blinded by the sun peeking out from behind a cloud when the boat is once again swarmed with people.

"Are you still with us, big boy?" asks a familiar yet still strange voice. After peeling open my eyes enough I can see him, Asher Yury signals for his men to get a medic.

Although I'm almost certain my brain is about to explode, if Ghost hadn't charged for me, I wouldn't be here to say this. "Gh-Ghost... artery."

When Asher follows the sluggish movement of my eyes, he cusses under his breath. Ghost and I are close, but I wouldn't keep my fingers shoved under the scarred skin on his back for no reason. "I knew we stayed for a reason." He looks me dead set in the eyes while saying, "And although you'll probably want to kill me for this, from what Ghost told me, it'll be for the best."

After clamping his hand over my mouth, he stabs a needle into my chest and squeezes down on the syringe until the murky liquid inside races through my bloodstream, and I black the fuck out.



## ANASTASIA

With my feet bound because the men don't want to risk another foot to the face, the man who taunted me before I was seconded to the stern of the ship cockily approaches. I'm in a similar lower-level room as I was yesterday, but there are more women filling the rooms surrounding mine. I'm no longer alone, although from the gleam on the man's face, I wish I was.

He has the creeper vibe down pat, and I've been fighting for over forty-eight hours. I'm tired, and I am not the only one noticing. "What happened, princess? Did the cat get your tongue?"

I'd smile at him sweetly if I wasn't also gagged. Kirill's men are weak. They can't handle a woman like me. That's why they chained me to the wall of the orlop before tying my feet together. They think it will slow me down. Little do they know two feet hurt more than one.

"You fuckin' bitch," snarls the man with a long snout and pointy chin.

He should thank me for the instant swelling my kick awards his face with. It makes him not look like such a rat.

Too scared to approach me alone, he orders one of the two men he arrived with to grab my feet before telling the other to keep watch. "I ain't fucking waiting. It is time for this bitch to learn a lesson."

I can't see the third man's features. He's in the shadows of the windowless, lightless room, but I can feel his tension when the goon with a

scar down one side of his face fights past the thrashes of my legs until he pins them to the ground with his chunky weight.

“Get the fuck off me,” I try to scream through the gag. I kick, scream, and wail so much, within seconds, my arms are on the verge of being popped out of their sockets for how far they’re forced to stretch, and the shirt I tossed on after changing two nights ago rides up high on my stomach. “No.” I wiggle and fight when the rat-faced man shifts his focus to the fastener of my jeans. He doesn’t pop it open. He digs the dip of his blade in next to the zipper, right around the area my uterus sits.

I realize this is about far more than rape when he angles his head so I have an unobscured view of his face before he tugs out my gag. His lips arch up as a vile, heinous gleam glares through his eyes. “We can go about this two ways. A quick, relatively painless jab or drag the bastard out of you from the inside out.” He takes a minute to drink in my whitening cheeks before saying, “I’d rather option A. You’ll still be a good fuck even with your gut cut up and bleeding, but the second will be a quicker recovery. Though I doubt you’ll want that when you learn how many men are lining up to fuck you.” I yank away when he brushes a strand of hair clinging to my sweaty cheek. “They’ve been dying for the chance since Alek announced you couldn’t be touched. Some are coming up to an eight-year wait.” He drags his hand from my face, over my breasts, and down my navel until it stops at the apex of my pussy. “So what’ll it be, precious?”

I spit in his face when he dares to use Alek’s nickname. “Only one man has ever called me precious, and he will remain the *only* person to call me that.”

“He’s fucking dead.” He angrily wipes at the ball of spit on his cheek, missing the rueful shake of my head. I’d know if Alek were dead—I would feel it in my bones. He’s coming back for us. I just have to keep us alive until he does. “Dead men can’t call you jack *fucking* shit.” His expression turns stoic as he digs the knife in deep enough to stain my jeans with a red blotch.

“And I’m done playing nice. Kirill wants your bastard taken care of, and I want your blood coating my cock for reasons other than an abortion, so I guess we’re going with option one.”

A scream bubbles in my chest, but before I can release it, a knife juts across leathery skin, silencing both my panic and the goon’s vicious taunts.

As the man holding my legs down eyes dart up, the third man removes a gun from a holster. He doesn’t get the chance to plead for forgiveness. He barely squeaks out a P when Feo takes him out with a bullet between his brows.

I suck in breaths like I am on the verge of a panic attack. I’m not. I am more relieved than worried, but I’d have to book myself for a mental evaluation if I didn’t respond to someone’s brain splattering on my face.

“Fuck.” Feo stores his gun away before pulling the second goon off my legs. After checking the coast is clear, he uses the blade he skidded across the first assaulter’s neck to remove the rope from my ankles. “I thought I’d just have to keep an eye on you.” He *pffts* himself like he should have known better. “They don’t waste time, do they?”

I don’t know if he’s asking a question or summarizing, so I stay quiet.

It is for the best. It means we have no issues hearing the stomp of feet projecting from outside my room.

“Scream, *now*,” Feo demands, his voice a whisper.

The screams I was desperate to release earlier bounce off the sea-corroded walls before echoing in my ears.

Feo adds to the men outside beliefs that I’m being assaulted by grunting before telling me to stay fucking still. “If you haven’t had a rabies shot lately, I suggest you get one before coming in here. The fucking bitch just bit me.”

The shadows remain under the door for several painful seconds before they eventually disappear. Then, just as quickly, Feo removes the chains bolted to the wall. “I was meant to just keep an eye on you, but he...” he nudges his head to the guy with a drooping smile slashed across his neck, “...



wasn't lying when he said they have a lineup." When he steadies my sways by grabbing the top of my arms, I realize just how many features he shares with his brother. You'd have no clue they have different fathers. They could be twins. "Are you all right? Can you walk?"

I nod. "Yeah. I think so."

"All right." He breathes out slowly, ruffling a black tuft of hair that has fallen down over his forehead. "Now we just need to work out where the fuck to stash you until they catch up with us."

He also believes Alek is alive, and it makes me sigh in relief.

"You weren't seriously having doubts, were you?" He cocks his brow at me like he did when I asked him to pretend to be Yev so Maksim would let me work at his strip club. "That man is a tank. I doubt anything could take him down, especially when it places distance between you two."

After taking a moment to settle the inane tears his assurance pricked my eyes with, I advise, "There's a safety boat moored off the stern. It's got blankets, batteries, and food. We could survive a couple of days in it."

"We can't launch it into the ocean, Pip." I have no clue why Feo calls me Pip, but he's done it since the day Yev introduced us. "We've been sailing for two days. We're in the middle of nowhere. We'll never be found."

"Two days?" I ask, shocked.

When he jerks up his chin, the dizziness plaguing me makes sense. My room has no windows, and the door leads to a windowless corridor, so I assumed time was going at a snail's pace. I had no idea two days had passed.

"Have you heard from Yev?" They talk every day, so my question is understandable. The next one is a little pointless, though. I don't think Alek even knows Yev has a brother. "Alek?"

"Yev made contact a couple of hours into the voyage."

"And?" I encourage, hating that he's leaving me hanging.

"And?" He drags his hand over his head, his fingers raking through the thick mane. "There was a lot of shit going down. Ghost was shot and was

nonresponsive, and Alek was being taken into surgery. Some shit about needing to remove a piece of his skull.”

“What?” I’m usually smarter than this, but tell me how you’d handle a situation like this with barely any sleep and no food in two days. You would be as bewildered as me.

“He said he’d call me once he knew more.” He shrugs. “I lost reception not long after that.”

“What about the satellite phones? Ghost has one in his office. Alek might even have one in his room.”

I curse Kirill to hell when Feo replies, “Their cabins were stripped of devices before I got here, and there are a ton of fucking cameras watching every nut scratch. I won’t get close to that area of the ship without being spotted.”

“He knew they were never attending this voyage.”

He hums, agreeing with me. After a quick lick of his lips, he asks, “Do you think you could survive on the boat for a couple of days if it wasn’t launched?” He grins at my shocked expression. “Yev told me about the days you spent out there. It is as cold as a witch’s tit outside, but it is warming up the more we cruise toward the US coastline.”

“We’re going to America?”

Again, he lifts his chin. “We seem to be taking the long route, though, but that could be more about bringing people into line before we dock.” His grin is far too playful considering we’re having this conversation with two dead people wedged between us. “Katie is giving him hell. Heard it’s the Petrovs’ way.”

I’m completely and utterly lost, but before I can demand further explanation, another set of boots encroach. They don’t knock. They twist the handle without a syllable seeping from their lips, forcing Feo’s wide eyes to mine.

He doesn’t need to repeat his earlier question. His expression exposes

everything he wants to relay.

I nod. I can survive on the boat dangling off the stern for days. The blankets are as thick as a mattress, and the food is nonperishable. I made sure it could last decades when Alek was unsure if he was going on its first voyage with Ghost and Kirill. I couldn't understand how such a large ship could stay afloat, so I made sure Alek had a way out.

*"Get ready to run,"* Feo mouths when the door to my room slowly creaks open.

I'm not surprised when my eyes lock with a head as fat as a watermelon. He sat with me for hours in the dungeon of the Bobrov compound. Although he didn't taunt me like the other men, he did nothing to stop them. In my eyes, that makes him just as bad.

"What the fuck—"

Feo isn't fast enough this time around. Watermelon Head grabs his wrist a second after his knife digs into his neck. The fighting skills both Yev and Feo harness quickly get Feo out of his hold, but I only see him get in one punch before he screams for me to run.

I hesitate for only a second before I sprint through the minute gap. I'm not leaving Feo defenseless. I'm diving for the gun Watermelon Head stuffs down the back of his trousers each morning.

His fist suspends midair when I squash it to the back of his head. I'm at that flabby bit of skin holding his fat head up because he's too tall for me to reach any higher.

"You even think about touching that trigger, girlie... the next time you see my gun, I'll be shoving it up your cunt."

Feo's fist saves me from adding killer to my list of skills. He knocks Watermelon Head out before dragging him into the room with the other motionless bodies.

"Give me that." He removes the gun shaking in my hand before he closes the door and fixes the lock into place. After storing the key in the pocket of

his blood-stained jeans, he asks, “Which way to the boat?”

I take a moment to register the difference between my sways and the lolls of the boat before answering, “This way.”

We run like we’re being chased. Down the corridors with women whimpering for us to help. Through the stacks of containers used to conceal the luxury of the ship’s insides, and across the floor still splattered with droplets of blood I’m praying isn’t Alek’s.

“What the...” My hands shoot up to wipe the sweat from my brow when my eyes lock with nothing but a turbulent, rocky ocean. I inch back to make sure I am looking at the right markings. When the exact spot Alek scratched at with a screwdriver for hours presents, I crank my neck to Feo. “It’s not here. It is gone.”

I spin to face the voice interrupting us, my footing unsteady.

“Because I knew they weren’t working alone.” Kirill looks well-rested despite the turmoil currently running rampant through his crew. Not even a demand as simple as forcing a woman through an abortion are being upheld because his crew has no respect for him. And neither do I. “And where else would you take her than the boat you delivered her to once a week for months of restorations.”

Feo doesn’t announce that he has him confused with Yev. He tugs me behind him in a protective manner before replying, “She is carrying Bratva blood. You can’t touch her.”

I don’t flinch at his reference that I am carrying mafia royalty. The bratva bloodline stretches incredibly far. If you look deep enough, every street kid in Kronstadt could have some lineage. It is the order that makes it important. A standing I didn’t realize could be a possibility when Kirill spits out, “Perhaps in Kronstadt but that rank means nothing here.”

“Henry—”

“Doesn’t run this ship!” Kirill is so angry the veins in his forehead look set to burst, and spit flies out of his mouth like venom.

And the chances of him exploding doubles when Feo mutters under his breath, “Yet he’s still had you jumping on cue the past week.”

I’m not exactly sure who Henry is. I’ve heard his name in passing, but I try to keep out of this side of Alek’s life. But Feo’s mock pisses Kirill off to no end, and he doesn’t take any prisoners when he’s annoyed.

I suck in a sharp, painful breath when he takes Feo out with a kill shot to the head. There’s no warning and no possibility of survival. The bullet races through his brain before exploding out the back of his skull and whizzing past my ear.

I can’t hold in my screams this time around. They tear from my throat with a sob as I fall to my knees to cradle Feo’s rapidly whitening cheeks in my hands. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. You should have never been a part of this.”

I brush away the dark tuft curling down his forehead that Yev always gels into place a second before I am pulled away from him.

I’m too tired to fight, but that means I’m left defenseless when the man we locked in the room with two of his ‘brothers’ rams his fist into my stomach. It rockets pain through my midsection and has me certain Feo’s life isn’t the only one I’ll lose today.



## ALEK

Vomit sits at the base of my throat when I groggily detect someone approaching me. I feel like I've been hit by a truck, and I'm not even sure I am not dead, but nothing will stop me from reaching out and grabbing the fucker whispering shit I don't want to hear.

"I'm old, but I am not that fucking old."

Against the screaming protest of my head, I crack open my eyes. Yev grins that his rile forced me to respond. From the smell of my pits and the thickness of the stubble on his chin, I'd say I haven't done that for a while. "Brain damage, my fucking ass." As he pries his shirt out of my fists, he murmurs, "This guy is a tank. He'd need more than a little brain bleed to take him down."

As I sit up, once again against the directive of my head, I ask, "Where the fuck am I? And what the fuck did they do to me?"

It smells like I'm waking up in a hospital, and the bed underneath me is as uncomfortable as the one I rested in for weeks after my father cracked my skull, but I don't know any hospital that allows men to openly display their weapons.

Yev is weaponed up for a fight.

"We're at one of the Yurys' offsite compounds."

"The Yurys?" I double check, certain I heard Yev wrong. Don't get me

wrong, for the right amount of coin, Asher was willing to come to the party for Ghost, but they've fought for Bobrov turf for years. There's no way he'd just forget their biff to keep two of his enemies alive.

My eyes pop fully open when I recall it wasn't just me fighting to live. "Gho—"

"Was wondering when you'd wake the fuck up." He's quick to hide the flare of pain crossing his face when he stands from a chair at the corner of the room to hobble to my bed. Don't tell him I said he was hobbling, or he'll break my knee to ensure he isn't the only one showcasing battle wounds.

When he stops at the end of my bed and unshadows the scarred side of his face, I cuss again. His face is shredded to pieces. The speargun one of Kirill's men tossed in for fun ripped through his skin as much as the grenade he jumped on during his first family war.

After waiting a minute to settle the fury in my voice, I ask, "How long have I been out? And what the fuck did Asher stab into my chest?"

My eyes dart to Yev so fast, I almost fall back into the land of the space cadets when he replies, "Three days." He waits a beat before saying, "And technically, he killed you. He had to stop your heart before it flooded your head with too much blood. Your pulse was barely a trickle for hours."

Although shocked, it isn't the first time I've been told I had to die to live. The same happened when I was rushed to the ER with a cracked skull. But the first part of his confession is shocking.

"I've been out for three days?"

When Yev nods in confirmation, I yank out the flimsy drip and shit attached to my arm and throw my legs over the bed.

Since there's no longer a mattress keeping me upright, my knees crumble out from beneath me, and I drop to the floor like a bag of shit.

Won't stop me, though. I'll crawl to the fucking docks if I must.

I've left Anastasia without help for *three days*.

I'll never fucking forgive myself if something has happened to her.



Aware that there is only one person who will slow me down, Ghost shoves a photograph under my nose. “It was taken yesterday afternoon around four. They were keeping her in the orlop before that.”

Ana is standing near the scour I placed in the metal railing of the Bobrov ship. I didn’t want her hooking her leg over anywhere. Although the ship was docked during renovations, our boat was on the side facing the ocean because we didn’t want nosy dock workers spying on us. The fall could have killed her, so I lessened the possibility of that happening by marking the spot with a screwdriver and refusing to let her climb first.

She never visited the boat unless I was with her.

“Yev talked to Feo not long after we got back to shore. He’s keeping an eye on her as promised.” Ghost nudges his head to the image, highlighting Feo standing next to her. His stance is somewhat protective. If Yev wasn’t staring at me to gauge my reaction, I would swear I was looking at him. That’s how closely they resemble each other. “We lost contact shortly after this, but if the trajectory is right, we should pick them up again sometime tonight.” He twists his torso to peer at someone over his shoulder. “Right?”

Kliment nods before dragging a hand over his clipped hair. “We’ve just got to hope Henry’s help doesn’t start before they dock.”

“Henry Gottle?” When Kliment nods, I ask, “Why would he help them?” Henry Gottle is the boss of all bosses. He rules fairly but sternly when you’re on his side. The Bobrovs haven’t been there since Milo, Kirill’s younger brother, was pinned for the murder of Henry’s brother. Milo and Kirill’s father were killed the same day we were banned from trading in the US.

Ghost notches up his chin, soundlessly demanding for Yev and another guy I’ve never met to help me onto a chair before he answers, “Katie’s not-so-clean past is why Kirill won’t let her go.” Unlike the hundreds of times I’ve hinted at this over the past couple of months, Ghost’s comment this time around sounds more like a confirmation than a question.

After stuffing me into a chair like I’m a ninety-year-old geriatric, Yev

spreads a family tree across the bed next to me. Just like the Bobrovs' mafia ties, the Gottles' lineage spans for centuries.

"What the fuck?" I murmur, my voice still groggy, when Yev places the Bobrov family tree on top of the Gottles'. Because it has been traced onto see-through paper, you can see several branches of the Gottles' trees extend further than the Bobrovs'—including the Petrovs', Katie's direct bloodline.

"Henry being the boss of all bosses already bumped his family's rankings, but even if it hadn't, Katie and any children she has will still rank higher than the Bobrovs' on overall mafia rankings."

My eyes shift from Yev, the person endearing to lessen my confusion, to Ghost when he says, "The kid in Katie's gut is Kirill's key back into trade in the United States." He works his jaw from side to side before saying, "The Petrovs debunked around the same time we were kicked out, but their turf remains."

"Their turf is Katie's hometown?" I clue in, my brain finally clicking back on.

Ghost nods. "Yep."

"So what happens when it comes back that she's not carrying his kid?"

When Ghost remains quiet, his trust still low, I shift my eyes to Kliment.

He shrugs before muttering, "I was still waiting on the results when I was booted out."

*Booted? What the fuck does he mean he got booted?*

"The compound and monastery were burned to the ground," Ghost confesses, his jaw ticking. "They didn't give a fuck who was inside when they set it alight."

My second attempt to walk isn't any better than my first, but since Yev instantly props me up, I don't land face-first on the floor.

"Where the fuck are you going?" Ghost asks, his voice a roar. "There's nothing left. It is piles of ash."

"My daughter is fucking there," I admit before I can stop myself. My

voice cracks with emotions when I mutter, “I ain’t leaving her there. If I’m never going back there, she shouldn’t be there either.”

I don’t need to speak another word. Ghost lifts his chin in understanding before demanding for Kliment and Yev to go with me. “We can’t be sure he didn’t leave people behind in case we made it back to shore.” He waves his hand around the sterile room. “That’s why we’re here.”

Although I want to deal with my unease about how heavily we’re leaning on the Yurys right now, I need to get my daughter first.

“Call Storm. She’s been with Henry for years, but she looks past the shine to find the treasure beneath.” An ill-timed smile crosses Ghost’s face when I mutter, “Just don’t tell her it is coming from me. She still hasn’t forgiven me for Ana.”

Storm and I were somewhat ‘friendly’ before I hooked up with Ana. No girl likes to be pushed aside for another, especially when that girl is a decade younger than you.

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SOOT AND RUBBLE are all that remains from several centuries of hard work. Not even the concrete pillars of the monastery survived the blaze intact. The heat must have been immense, so you can picture how low my heart rate is when I gingerly make my way to my daughter’s final resting place. It is in the back garden away from prying eyes but surrounded by angel ornaments.

“I’ve got it,” I assure Yev when he drags away a branch as black as the tar slowly seeping through my veins.

Debris are spread from one corner of the yard to the next, and a handful of the monuments I stared at in awe as a kid now look like Satan’s spawn. They’re black, melted, and covered in ash.

“Here, try this.” Yev hands me a stake that’s lost the rose bush it was holding up. Its spiky end digs through the dirt better than my hands, and soon

has me making good headway through the ground separating us.

When the hard end of the spike makes a ‘ding’ noise, Yev says to Kliment, “How about we go check if they missed anything in the underground bunkers?”

He leads him away before he can answer, awarding me the privacy I am so desperate for. My hands are shaking like a soft cock, and I can’t talk for fear my voice will crack.

She’s been in the ground so long, the little pink box I buried her in is covered in dirt. I rub it away with my fingers before tracing the engraving I had etched into the wood.

*драгоценный.*

Although tempted to open the box, I don’t. I don’t think I’d survive seeing how tiny and fragile she is a second time. I wanted to kill anyone who crossed my path the day I removed her from the jar the hospital had placed her into and put her in this wooden box.

“Let’s get you home,” I murmur before gingerly standing.

I don’t know what the fuck they did to me when I was under. My head feels a smidge better, but my body is on the other end of the spectrum. I can barely walk.

“Then we’re going to get Momma.”

I’ve only just tucked her box under my arm to keep it free of the soot of the monastery when Yev bolts out of the underground bunker. “Did you upgrade that old-as-fuck security system at your apartment block?”

I shake my head. I never saw the point. It was installed during the build, but before it could be upgraded, Ana left. She was the only one I needed to protect, so I canceled the new system.

“Then we might have a way of downloading the Bobrov servers.” He holds up a square brick-looking device while waggling his brows. “Kirill is as cheap as you. Anything he recorded was stored on a hard drive. That’s why Kliment couldn’t access them remotely.”

I am completely fucking lost, but since the apartment block is where I was planning to go next, I gesture for him to lead the way.

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AFTER ENSURING my daughter's coffin is stashed at the very back of Anastasia's closet with all her keepsakes, I join Yev and Kliment in the storage closet hidden under the stairwell. It is dusty as fuck down here, but the shit its dated equipment unearths is nuts.

"They're Katie's panties, right?" asks Kliment while pointing at a grainy black and white image of Kirill in the storage room he stashed all his vials of sperm. He's loading her panties up with swimmers, thankfully not in the old-fashioned manner I had suspected.

When I lift my chin, Yev mutters, "What the fuck did I miss?"

I could answer him, but I have more pressing matters to attend to, "But that isn't Kirill's sperm." Yev finally feels a part of the conversation when I say, "After the insemination Kirill did to Katie, Ghost replaced all the vials with his own swimmers. He'd rather knock Katie up with his kid than have any part of Kirill near her."

"He knocked up a few bottles of shampoo as well."

Kliment snickers about Yev's murmur before asking, "So there is a possibility Katie's baby is Ghost's?"

"Yep," I murmur, equally shocked and hopeful. Ghost was already at the point of burning down the city for Katie. This will push him to do it more effectively and efficiently. "Can you download that onto a floppy disk or something?"

Yev bursts out laughing. "A floppy disk? How fucking old are you?"

I crack him up the back of the head before locking my eyes with Kliment's. He wishes he could give me some good news, but he can't. "These girls are too old. They're like VCRs. If you don't have a VCR to play

a VCR tape, you can't watch it."

"Then I guess it is lucky Ghost will take your word on it," Yev mutters, slapping me on the back.

---

GHOST TAKES the news as expected.

With complete and utter upheaval.

He opens the makeshift command center Kliment has been working on since he left the compound with nothing but the clothes on his back and a laptop before he shifts his focus to the vanity mirror. He pounds into it with his fists, his roars both painful and remorseful.

He hates that he ever doubted Katie, but he's also pissed he can't do a damn thing about it. When he reached out to Storm as suggested, things didn't go as planned. She thought she was talking to a ghost—a literal ghost since Henry had placed a hit on Ghost's head a week earlier.

Ghost had no clue who Katie was when he bid on her, but Kirill didn't make it out like that. He digitally proved to Henry that Ghost bid and won Katie before he made out that he saved her from Ghost as Kirill had Sofia from his father.

He's acting like a fucking saint, and it has me itching to kill him as much as Ghost. The thing is, we can't. Even the Yurys are pulling back their support because no one wants to go against Henry. The last time they tried, he wiped out over a dozen families. He has an army in the millions, and more than the CIA and FBI in his pocket.

As much as it pisses me off to admit this, he is not an opponent we can win against.

We're not exactly sure what Kirill's next step will be, but until he trips up and gets himself pushed out from underneath Henry's umbrella, we can't fucking touch him. Ghost's punishment won't just fall on his shoulders if we

do. His entire lineage will be eradicated—cousins, uncles, aunts, sisters. Fucking anyone with a droplet of his blood—including Sofia and Lera.

Ghost stops swinging when I say, “He will fuck up, G. He can’t help himself. He’s way too fucking cocky, and it will have him making a mistake.”

While he grips the sink the doctors scrub their hands at, he sucks in long, ragged breaths.

He’s broken.

Lost.

But he’s got something more to fight for now than a long-lost sister and niece.

After a beat, he loosens his grip, allowing his knuckles to once again fill with blood before he shifts on his feet to face me. “Until then, we go for Anastasia.”

When he drifts his eyes to the dark-haired man I learned is Asher’s younger brother, Wyatt, Wyatt holds his hands in the air before heading for the closest exit. “I can’t say shit if I have no clue what the fuck you’re planning.”

Ghost waits for the door he walked through to stop swinging before he shifts his focus to Kliment and Yev. “If you want to—”

“Fuck, no,” Yev interrupts, preempting he is giving them an out. “Besides, I can’t leave all this on my little brother’s shoulders. He might only be eleven months younger than me, but what kinda big brother would I be if I were to walk away *after* asking for his help?”

Ghost is lost by his ramblings, but he takes his first two words as an allegiance to our cause. “What about you, Klim?”

If he wasn’t already over the line, Ghost’s shortening of his name pulled him over. Ghost rarely gifts nicknames. That’s why I knew Katie was under his skin the instant he called her Little Lamb. “I can’t shoot for shit, but I’ll find ways into networks you would have never thought about without me.”

Yev slaps him on the back, an obvious sign he's now one of the elite. "I'll teach you how to fight so well, you won't need to fire a gun."

When Ghost's eyes meet with mine, I notice how pained they are, but there's a determined gleam in them I've seen more times than I deserve. The two most notable times were when he saved my life by placing his in the firing zone, and the third was when he arrived at my apartment with a coffin small enough to fit into his palm.

He knows what needs to be done.

We just need to implement it without placing Anastasia and Katie at any unnecessary risk.





## ANASTASIA

*A*s the women trapped in the orlop with me rummage through the scraps of food dumped through the slot in the door you'd expect to find in a prison, I place a shaky hand down the front of my panties and trickle my fingers over the opening of my vagina.

Although the damp feeling I've been experiencing the past two hours could be sweat—it is extremely humid when you have several bodies in one place—but I'm terrified it isn't.

I've been cramping bad since I was punched, and it is becoming too painful to pretend it is part of the grieving process. I'm dreading telling Yev his brother was killed protecting me. Their bond is thicker than blood. They're best friends.

I yank my fingers out when Katie returns to my side. She was shoved into the orlop with the rest of us a couple of days ago. I think three, but don't quote me. One day is merging into the next.

Things weren't even awkward between us for two seconds when our eyes locked across the damp space. She was as deep into her grief cycle as me, so we more comforted each other before slowly merging to bigger things like how I wasn't Ghost's fiancé. That it was all a front while he was endeavoring to get her out.

My confession seemed to worsen her grief, so I shifted my focus to

getting her to acknowledge the bump a handful of other women have in the orlop. If she can put her child first, perhaps she will eat a little more. She's fading away before my eyes.

Katie must have realized I'm not feeling the best because today she offered to collect my share of the food. It looks like she foraged through the scraps well. Her hands are full.

"Vera must have cooked extra today. There are quite a few good things in the stack if you're willing to dig." She sits down next to me before handing me two bread rolls, a barely touched apple and a carrot stick—the entirety of her scavenge. "I wasn't sure about your stomach, but I doubt you want to eat ragu off the floor." She stops, breathes out harshly, then dumps the food into my lap. "What is that?" She grabs my hand then stares down at the red blotches coating the tips of my pointer and middle finger. "Is that blood?"

The lump in my throat is too firm to dislodge, so I nod my head instead of speaking.

"Where from?" I don't speak a word, but the quiver of my lips gives away the words I can't speak. "Oh, Anastasia. I'm so sorry—"

She's interrupted by the clanging of locks.

As per usual, the man entering doesn't pay attention to anyone but Katie and me. He looks more amused than angry today. Even more so when he notices the stain on my underwear the high rise of my shirt can't hide.

"Let's go." Watermelon Head plucks Katie off the ground like she doesn't weigh a thing before marching her out of the orlop.

I'd usually put up more of a fight, but I don't think I could get off the ground even if I wanted to. I am burning up, and my legs feel the weight of lead.

"Please tell me you'll be here soon," I whisper into the air like I did a handful of times in Sicily. I was homesick and missing Alek like crazy, but my esteem was too badly battered to work out that he would have never betrayed me so he had no reason to seek my forgiveness miles from home.

“You too.”

I drop my eyes from the paint-peeled ceiling when a man who usually shadows Watermelon Head’s every move stops in front of me. He drinks in my sweat-dotted forehead and white cheeks for half a second before he bobs down to toss me onto his shoulder.

As he walks me out of the orlop, I swish back and forth like a ragdoll. I’ve never felt more drained in my life. I honestly feel worse now than I did when I woke up in a pool of blood the day our daughter was born.

“Eat!” booms into my ears when I’m walked toward a room brimming with aromatic food.

As I’m lowered down the front of a goon’s body and joined by another with biceps bigger than my head, Katie is shoved onto a seat across from Kirill. I’m kept upright by them gripping my arms. One for each side of my flopped frame.

Kirill drinks in Katie for several long seconds like he can’t comprehend how she could be so disheveled before he says, “If you eat, I will feed the women in the orlop along with you. If you don’t...” he pauses like he has all the time in the world, “... I will kill one woman for every meal you refuse.”

“What?” Katie’s voice is as brittle as the one in my head screaming for me to run when Kirill shifts his focus to me.

“Starting with her.”

My legs fall back behind me when I am dragged into the dining room and dumped a foot from the table.

When Kirill asks, “What will it be, Katie?” I want to tell her to save herself, that I won’t need anyone’s help once Alek gets here, but I’m too drained to talk, and relatively sure my panties are soaked through with blood. The instant I was forced to stand, liquid gushed into my panties.

I internally high-five Katie when red hair curtains her face as she shakes her head. The moment I saw her, I understood Ghost’s fascination. She is gorgeous but a fighter.

She'll need to be to survive this world.

“Okay,” Katie shouts when Kirill waves his hand through the air, granting permission for the man with his gun squashed at the back of my head to fire. “I’ll eat. I will do as you ask.”

To lessen Kirill’s suspicious glare, she plucks a bread roll out of the basket, tears it apart, then swallows a massive clump.

“More,” Kirill demands before she’s finished half the bread roll.

When she commences eating the pasta dish placed down in front of her, I’m ordered to be returned to the orlop.

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I’M NOT EXACTLY coherent over the next couple of days, but I’m kept alive by the women who should hate me.

One of Alek’s main jobs was the distribution of stock. The only stock the Bobrovs had were women. We had many fights about it, and right around the time I started to get through to him—by using his unborn daughter as an example—the world was pulled out from beneath my feet.

We never discussed anything after that day.

“Ana, wake up. They’re coming.” I’m nudged awake just as the locks to the orlop crack open.

We’ve been fed well the past two or three days but not once have the doors been opened since Katie left. Kirill got what he wanted—an obedient wife—so the rest of us were left alone to fend for ourselves.

“Single file.” Watermelon Head’s big voice booms over the quiet sobs of frightened women. “If you run, you will be fired at. If you survive the gunshot wound, you will be gifted to the men for them to do whatever they like with you. The workers will not help you. They are paid to turn a blind eye. So are the police.” He bobs down low so we meet eye to eye. “So don’t think about running. It would be such a waste of a pretty face.”

“Careful,” Maryanne mumbles before helping me to the door.

“I said single file.” After glaring at Watermelon Head, Maryanne soundlessly apologizes to me before stepping into formation behind me.

I yank up the pants I was dressed in when some of the women switched out my drenched-through clothes for new ones. I’m still bleeding, and the cramps are worse today than they’ve been all week.

“Just a little while longer,” I murmur to myself while lowering my hand to my flat stomach. “This is not the end of our story. We still have many chapters left. We just need to put one foot in front of the other.”

I hold up my hand to block the rays of sun beaming down on me. The salty air is fresh and welcoming but my stomach recoils instead of relishing it. This place smells nothing like home. It is too clean and pure, two things I’ve never been.

I slow the shuffle of the sex-trafficked women when something shimmering off the water captures my attention. It throws out a similar hue to a gem being held up in the sunlight. It is odd to be coming off the seemingly empty ocean, but I seem to be the only person who notices it.

All the women’s heads are down, and most of the men are barricading the SUV Kirill and Katie are being guided to. A sniper would have to take down two dozen men before they’d even get close to Kirill. There are just as many men on Watermelon Head since he’s gripping Katie’s arm.

“In. Watch your head.” A goon checks me off on a clipboard before placing his hand on my head and stuffing me into the back of an SUV crammed with women. After directing a woman I’ve not officially met into the seat next to me, he slides into the SUV, then signals for the driver to leave. “We’ve got consignments to deliver.”

Watermelon Head is an asshole, but he is not proven a liar when our SUV glides past a police car with its lights flashing. Our vehicle is overloaded with women of all ethnicities. Our faces are grubby, and many of them are crying, yet they let us pass without a single question being asked.

I'd spit at their feet through the cracked open window I'm squashed against if my mouth wasn't bone dry. I think dehydration is one of the reasons I'm so weak. It isn't that I haven't wanted to drink. I just bring up anything I touch within minutes of it hitting my stomach. It is why Alek always had shaved ice at the ready. It was the only thing that kept me hydrated once I hit six weeks last time.

My crazy morning sickness is why I'm still clutching hope with both hands. I stopped feeling ill the instant I was wheeled into the maternity unit. I've vomited every day I have been held in captivity. I believe that may also be why I've been left alone. Not even monsters as vile as Kirill's men want to be covered in vomit during sexual activities.

"What's going on?" I ask no one in particular when our SUV suddenly stops in the middle of a dusty road, and the man with the clipboard tosses it to the floor before yanking out the girl seated next to me by her hair.

I watch in disbelief when he hits her with so much force she lands on the dusty ground with a thud before he removes his gun from the back of his pants and pops a bullet between her bloody brows.

With my wish to live kicking back into gear, I kick, scream, and punch when he leans back into the stationary vehicle with his target firmly set.

When he drags me out of the SUV with a rueful tug on my hair, several strands are ripped from my scalp. My knees are cut by the loose gravel laid over the dirt to give it more traction when I'm forced on my knees in front of him, but he stops me from running by yanking my head back so far the sun's rays blind me more than the shimmers in the distance.

As I struggle to work out what the fuck is going on, he burns the skin under my chin with his recently fired gun.

Why keep us alive only to kill us within minutes of our arrival in the US?  
It doesn't make any sense.

For the first time, I am genuinely in fear for my life. I shake like a leaf, but confusion is my primary emotion when the SUVs tailing us recommence

their trip.

“Katie,” I murmur to myself when I spot her in the first SUV.

My heart pains for her when I realize what they’re doing. They are using the captive women to keep her in line. The apologetic stare she issues me and the women silently sobbing in the SUV as hers slowly glides by exposes this, not to mention the wave she directs at me.

She knows what I don’t want to admit.

This may be the last time we will see each other alive.





## ANASTASIA

Once Katie's SUV disappears behind the shrubs protecting the coastline from the winds whipping off the ocean, the goon grunts for me to return to our SUV before he orders the driver out to help him place the deceased woman into the trunk.

The goon who shot her without remorse has only just grabbed hold of her feet when he suddenly stumbles forward. Just like when he backhanded the unnamed blonde, I stare in bewilderment when blood trickles from his mouth as he spins to look at something behind him.

My hand shoots up to clamp my mouth when his twirl exposes the reason for his shock. He's been shot in the back of the head, but he is somehow still standing.

A second bullet that rips through his chest does what the first bullet didn't. It immediately buckles his legs out from beneath him and puts goon two on high alert.

He grabs for his gun before he reaches for a shield I refuse to give him. I kick him with everything I have when he lurches for an Asian woman seated across from me, stupidly believing his life is worth more than the women who kept me alive by dribbling water into my mouth and regularly changing my soiled clothes.

I am weak and fighting to stay alert, but my kick is strong enough to force

the goon out into the open. The bullets whizzing from the direction the shimmer came from keep him out.

As my brain scrambles on what to do next, I remember Alek saying something about Kirill converting a cargo ship because there's no mafia jurisdiction on the water. That is pirate territory, a completely separate entity to the bratva.

With this in mind, and despite the shudders making me a jittery mess, I climb out of the SUV and attempt to drag the men into the cab. What happens on the sea stays on the sea, so if these men's deaths are Alek's doing, he can't be punished if it didn't happen on anyone's 'turf,' right?

"Come on," I scream through the pain tearing me in two. The man is too heavy for me to budge on my own. I can barely shift him. "Thank you," I praise Maryann when she climbs over the row of seats in front of her to help me.

We're soon joined by another two women who help us squeeze the driver into the empty passenger seat.

Once we have everyone on board, I slot into the driver's seat before firing up the ignition.

"It's okay," I promise when a handful of the women's sobs start up again when they realize I am steering us toward the ship instead of away from it. "They won't hurt you. I promise." Most don't believe me. It is understandable when you learn what they've been through. The stories they shared were horrendous, and it has me petrified of the life my daughter would have had if she were born breathing. Alek would have protected her, but there is only so much one man can do.

The knowledge has me wondering if I was too harsh on my father while growing up. I wanted everything, but he didn't have a penny to his name, so he tried to get some by gambling.

When my crazy careen down the slopy surface is eyeballed by a handful of dockworkers, I line up with the gangway of the ship instead of the parking

lot at its side.

I need us on the boat, not next to it.

The women scream when our race across the gangway only has two of the SUV's tires connecting with the ground, but it has nothing on the squeals they release when the clipboard the goon dropped wedges under the brake pedal.

Our race doesn't slow in the slightest when I push down hard. We speed toward a large stack of shipping containers with nothing in the way to retard our speed.

"The park brake!" Maryanne yells with only a second to spare.

I yank it up just as the back wheel of the SUV snags on the mesh safety barrier meant to stop passengers from plunging to their deaths.

The combination of the safety barrier and the implementation of the park brake brings our SUV to a screeching halt an inch from a stack of containers.

Shocked and surprised, I slip off the driver's seat before sliding down the container I almost collided with headfirst to sit at the base. I'm clammy, on the verge of vomiting, and another emotion I can't quite understand is bombarding me, but I am alive. Just.

I've only sucked down a handful of breaths when I spot a good person to dispel my unusual surge of emotions on. Alek, Ghost, and a handful of men are climbing aboard the ship like pirates. They board via the railings closest to the ocean.

Alek has an automatic rifle harnessed over his chest and is wearing a two-gun leather holster similar to Ghost's. His shirt is see-through since the waves they sped through drenched it, meaning every perfect line of our daughter's feet is displayed in glorious detail.

As he orders the men to hand out bottles of water and blankets to the women mingling around who are looking a little lost, he scans the port, taking note of how much attention my race down the dock awarded us. There are more armed men on the dock than the ship, and they look prepped for

battle but, for some reason, aren't storming us.

"Let's get out a couple of miles before he changes the rules." Alek's deep timber waivers at the end of his command when he spots me huddled against a rusty shipping container. "драгоценный."

With my pain forgotten, I scramble to my feet and sprint for him. I crash into him so hard and fast the wind is knocked out of my lungs, but I hold on for dear life, refusing to let him go for anything. I won't even let him check me as he pleads multiple times to do.

I knew he would come.

I just knew it.

As the ship slowly departs the port, dragging us away from men I'm certain are part of Henry's crew, the Bobrov flag is lowered before it is replaced with a not-so-Russian one. It is a huge step for Ghost to take but one in the right direction.

As is his command for the women once held captive. "There are cabins on the port side of the ship. Pick one. Once the sun goes down, we will commence charters to land. If you wish to leave, you will not be stopped." He shifts his focus to me for barely a second before he tells Alek he needs to check if Kliment has unearthed Katie's proposed destination.

Alek nods before tugging me in closer. "We'll join you soon."

Ghost's fresh scars shimmer in the low-hanging sun when he shakes his head. "You're not needed there yet." His stare tells Alek what his mouth won't speak. *Ana needs you more.*

Alek's relieved sigh exposes this, not to mention how he hugs me tighter. His heart is racing a million miles an hour, and I don't think it is solely my shudders jutting into his impressive frame. He's a little shaky too.

"Your medication—"

"Already taken." He doesn't sound pleased that I'm more worried about him than myself, but he'll have to deal with it. I always knew he was coming for me. I just had to give him time.

We stand motionless for several long minutes. Alek tries multiple times to inch back, but I refuse to let him go. I don't even loosen my grip when Yev joins us on the upper deck. His smile is massive, and the adrenaline pumping through his veins makes his eyes the blackest I've seen them, but his euphoria slowly tapers when his numerous wordless requests for me to update him on his brother's whereabouts have my expression changing from relieved to remorseful.

When I shake my head, too guilt-ridden to speak the words out loud, Yev takes a step back. "Where the fuck is he, Ana?" A salty blob threatens to leak from my eye when he murmurs out, "No. Fuck, no. He was—"

He stops talking when Ghost and a man I haven't met before return to the top deck to teach us that Kirill doesn't dump evidence overboard. He likes to brag far too much to let a murder go by without fanfare.

"I found him in my office," Ghost mutters, his tone full of silent apologies as he locks eyes with Yev.

"No..." Yev mutters again when Ghost unzips the bag, and the tuft of dark hair he always gave Feo shit about pops out first.

When he falls to his knees next to his brother, his face a wash of devastation, I bury my head into Alek's pecs. I'm not a crier. Excluding the occasional sneaky tears when my emotions are being overrun by hormones, I never cry, but this may very well break me. Feo is dead because of me, and Yev, my only friend, may never forgive me.

"Hey," Alek says, drawing me back so he can lock his eyes with mine. "This isn't your fault."

"It is. I..." I take a moment to regain my sea legs before trying again. "I..." Nope, sea legs aren't the issue. It is the amount of blood I'm losing. My panties and the inner material of my pants are soaked through, and there is a puddle of blood under my shoeless feet.

I thought I was feeling extra warm because I was wrapped in Alek's arms. It isn't the first stupid assumption I've made, but it could be the last.

“Ana,” Alek roars a second before everything goes black.

## **EPILOGUE**



ALEK

## **Eighteen months later...**

*M*onths of turmoil seem like a walk in the park when, “I lied, so now you have no choice but to punish me,” sneaks out of the crack at the bottom of Ghost’s office door.

We toed the line.

We played the game with honor.

And now we can finally claim victory.

Although I’ve already been professing our triumph to anyone who will listen for months—ten, to be exact.

I won’t lie. It was a close call, especially when Ana collapsed within minutes of displaying what I saw in her eyes when she stood across from me for the first time, giving me cheek, but a win is a win no matter how many obstacles you barge through to cross the finish line first.

Our victory didn’t come without sacrifices. Blood was shed, and lives were lost, but like every tragedy, there was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Her hair is as fair as her mother’s, her eyes as icy as mine. She is the very epitome of strength and determination, which Anastasia insists she inherited from us both.

I’m not so sure I agree. Anastasia is nothing like her father, so how can our daughter adopt any traits from me?

“Don’t even think about it,” murmurs a sweet yet lusty voice at the side, her tone without a single quiver.

She doesn’t fear me like the men I killed to keep her safe and the ones I massacred for placing unnecessary miles between us. Ana never has. She gets way too much satisfaction riling me to provoke another response.

Ana’s smile heats my back when my hand freezes partway into the crib our daughter is sleeping in. Kira has grown so much over the past ten months

I'm considering swapping her crib for a bed. The only reason I haven't is because she mastered the art of crawling over the past month, and although I want to spend as much time with her as possible, I crave her mother's attention just as much.

"I'm not going to wake her." Only a fool would wake a sleeping baby, especially when the tension is as white-hot as the energy zapping between Ana and me.

She has always been my kryptonite.

My challenge.

My biggest fucking headache to date.

But I wouldn't change a single moment that has occurred over the past eighteen months.

When we thought we were losing Kira, we were forced through a remake of the event that should have occurred many years earlier. Since my medication wasn't replaced with placebos, I held Anastasia's hand through every examination, ultrasound, and doctor's visit. And I wiped away the tears of joy that spilled from her eye when the doctor the Yurys gifted to us explained Watermelon Head's hit caused a hematoma to Ana's uterus and not the miscarriage as suspected.

Mercifully, the abscess was several inches away from Kira nestled in her sac, which means it was drained without incident before Ana was placed on a month of bed rest.

This will make me sound as cocky as fuck, but so be it. The no-touch order the doctor evoked killed Ana more than me. Whenever her blood is thickened with extra hormones, she is extra horny. She wanted to fuck sunup until sundown, so it killed her to keep things basic.

Lucky for us both, the month flew by with only the occasional hiccup, then we were given the all-clear to resume normal activities.

We made up for lost time in every possible location. In between the stacks of shipping containers, on the couch in the rec room, and at the cubes

with the lighting just right so we could see everyone, but no one could see us.

We even fucked in a nook closest to her father's cabin because Ana couldn't wait for us to get back to our room to show her appreciation.

I didn't bring Andrei here because he's an upstanding member of society who deserves to be a part of his daughter's life. I did it because the only gambling conducted on this ship is done with pretzels and M&M's, and I'm over Anastasia paying for that fucker's debt.

With us no longer having roots in Russia, and Ghost unwilling to put more than five miles between Katie and him, Anastasia agreed it was best for us to make the shipping container our home until we rebuilt bigger and better than ever.

As much as this sucks to admit, Ana's father is part of her family as much as the tiny box in the safe of our room.

I'll string him up and ship him out the second he pisses Ana off, but for the most part, Andrei plays the role of devoted grandfather and father well. That may have more to do with the fact he often brags about how he put us in contact with the sniper we used to take out two of Kirill's men without stepping foot on US soil.

Matvei's bullets traveled over two miles that afternoon, meaning they were not fired on Henry's turf, so he had no reason to retaliate.

And let's not forget Ana's gall. You can't prove a death without a body—just like you can't deny a murder with one.

Yev hasn't been the same since the day he fell to his knees at his brother's side, but Feodor was honored as the hero he was, and his legacy will live on in the son he didn't know existed when he mistook Kirill's reputation as righteous.

Kirill didn't rule like Maksim, and Ghost won't rule like Kirill.

Katie's embarkment tonight will ensure that.

After the quickest ruffle of my daughter's dead-straight hair, I spin around to face Ana. My dick hardens in an instant when I rake my eyes down

her body. She's wearing a teeny tiny little nightgown that's made of sheer material which can't hide her fit body, her hair is wet and hanging halfway down her back, and the only bit of makeup she is wearing is the lipstick she forever leaves circling the base of my cock when she sucks me off.

Now Kira's early bedtime makes sense.

It's time for Daddy to have some alone time with Mommy, and I won't even need to dodge a hundred and one grenades to achieve that.

Fighting isn't our foreplay anymore.

Ana's body is.

With her shoulder propped against the doorjamb of the bathroom that separates our room from Kira's like she isn't preparing to flee, Ana summons me to her with a crook of her finger. Her gleam is as hungry as the rake of her teeth over her bottom lip, but it has nothing on the appetite that surges through me when my eyes eventually reach her feet.

She's wearing running shoes.

With the rebuild of the Bobrov name slow, we have more empty cabins than full, meaning she has the pick of any room in this corridor to run to. She won't go far. For one, I'll catch her before she gets five feet away from me—I'm too impatient to have her writhing beneath me for more—and two, she never veers far from Kira's side. Even with Vera stepping into the role of doting grandma, Ana is always within earshot of Kira.

"I could have sworn I gave you dick before I left?" As my eyes drink in her budded nipples pressed up against the lacy cups of her nightie, I mutter, "Yet here you are, acting as if you haven't had any in a week. So fucking greedy."

Sparks of rebellion flare through her eyes when she slants her head and arches a brow. "You gave me dick..." my lips curve when she adds with a lusty purr, "... which was fabulous, by the way." She waits until the ridge in my pants can't be missed. "But if I recall correctly, you mentioned something about dessert before you left me high and dry to gallivant across a touristy

destination with the rest of the oldies?”

“Oldies? Ouch.” I’d be hurt if I couldn’t smell how badly she wants me. I haven’t even touched her, yet she’s dripping for me. The damp marks on her sheer panties display this clearly, let alone her glistening folds. “Then I guess I should trim your head start by a couple of seconds since I’m so old.” Her eyes bulge when I mutter, “Three...”

Excitement beams out of her, but she won’t make me anywhere near as hard as she does if she doesn’t give me some sass. “Three? You can’t start at three. I’ll barely make it to the door.”

“Then you better run real fucking fast...” Electricity cracks between us when I mutter, “Two.”

The T scarcely leaves my mouth when Ana spins on her heels and races into the main part of our bedroom.

It is the fight of my life not to immediately take off after her, but I wait until I’m out of Kira’s room and have partially closed her door before murmuring, “One. Ready or not, here I come.”

I only make it halfway into the bathroom when something on the vanity sink stops me in my tracks. There is a pregnancy test sitting upside down on the edge. It is out of its packet, and the cap is loosely placed back over the part women pee on.

Memories of the euphoria that pumped through me when I finally understood Ana’s request for me to search my pockets the night she got ‘engaged’ to Ghost blisters through me when I gingerly pick up the test and turn it over.

Two lines.

Two. Bright. Fucking. Lines!

*Fuck yes!*

My eyes snap to Ana when she murmurs, “Congratulations, Daddy.” Her purr is a mixture of the one she uses when falling into ecstasy and when she’s riling me to force a response. “It seems as if your juice can still get the job

done. You're not shooting dust as believed."

I could take her jab with the maturity of a man in his mid-thirties.

But where the fuck is the fun in that?

"Five..." she gulps but remains still, aware this isn't the tone I use when giving her a head start, "... is how many times I'm going to spank you for calling me old."

"Four..." I wait until the needy scent of her cunt can't be excused, "... is how many times you're gonna scream my name while riding my face."

Her knees curve inward when I say, "Three... is the number of holes I'm going to command while coating every inch of you with my old-man dust."

She grins during the last half of my sentence.

"Two..." this delay is the longest of them all, "... is the number of people who'll be standing at the end of the aisle when I make it more official than tattooing my teeth marks on your ass and my initials on your snatch."

Anastasia's breath hitches in her throat when I fall to my knees in front of her before adding, "One... is the total number of women I have loved and will ever love." When she attempts to interrupt me, I mutter, "Excluding our daughters. But they'll never be women in my eyes. They'll always be Daddy's little ladies."

After digging out the most hideously ugly ring I could find in Procida, I hold it up to Ana and utter the words I'd practiced on repeat the night before she left me, "Marry me, драгоценный?"

When she spots the ring, she laughs so hard she snorts. It is the showiest, most pompous piece you could imagine, but suits our relationship to a T. Many marriages are like fake gems. They can be manufactured and forced before being held together by commitments neither party want, but the most sought-after gems are formed organically by being pressured to the point of cracking and surviving the blast.

Then they're beautiful, rare, and strong.

The most precious gem you'll ever own.

That is my relationship with Anastasia.

Pressurized, splintered, but as everlasting as the hideous diamond I slip onto her wedding finger when she bobs her head while muttering, “Yes,” on repeat.

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**The end!**

**Love what you read? Would you like more of the crew. Yev’s book is next. You can pre-order it here: <https://mybook.to/Deviousintentions>**

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## AFTERWORD

Wow! I really loved writing these two. It was a hot, fiesty story that had my fingers typing at a million miles an hour.

I hope you loved it too!

It's been so much fun going back to the mafia men I love. The only bad thing about writing in a Russian setting is the names. They're all long, hard to spell, and usually consist of a three letter nickname. Yev, Ana, Feo, etc. It is getting hard to keep up. I am also running out of Russian names. If only I could call them all Nikolai (sigh).

We had a lot of changes with our publishing house the past couple of weeks, which has been a challenge but also a blessing in disguise. I've been able to write a lot more, but I also have to stop and occasionally check on how things are running with me not at the helm.

They're managing—somewhat.

I'm already in the process of writing Yev's book, and by the time you read this, I am hoping to have him off my desk and onto the editing team. It initially started at the same time as Ana and Alek's reunion, but I decided to switch things up bring it forward. The prologue is just before Feo's passing, and chapter one is six months after. I thought it was going to be a really hard book to write, and it is, but Yev's love for his girl surpasses his grief, and his need and drive to protect her is sexy and inspiring.

We get the Yev we're grown to love in the Sinful Intentions, but in a more moody, mature aspect.

It's been fun! All my books are a pleasure to write, so I guess I should probably get back to writing them.

Until next time,

Shandi xx

PS: I thank everyone and everything.

I love you all!

## ALSO BY SHANDI BOYES

### Perception Series

Saving Noah (Noah & Emily)

Fighting Jacob (Jacob & Lola)

Taming Nick (Nick & Jenni)

Redeeming Slater (Slater and Kylie)

Saving Emily (Noah & Emily - Novella)

Wrapped Up with Rise Up (Perception Novella - should be read after the Bound Series)

### Enigma

Enigma (Isaac & Isabelle #1)

Unraveling an Enigma (Isaac & Isabelle #2)

Enigma The Mystery Unmasked (Isaac & Isabelle #3)

Enigma: The Final Chapter (Isaac & Isabelle #4)

Beneath The Secrets (Hugo & Ava #1)

Beneath The Sheets (Hugo & Ava #2)

Spy Thy Neighbor (Hunter & Paige)

The Opposite Effect (Brax & Clara)

I Married a Mob Boss (Rico & Blaire)

Second Shot (Hawke & Gemma)

The Way We Are (Ryan & Savannah #1)

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Lady In Waiting (Regan & Alex #1)

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Enigma: The Wedding (Isaac and Isabelle)

Silent Vigilante (Brandon and Melody #1)

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Nikolai: What's Left of Me(Nikolai & Justine #3)

Nikolai: Mine to Protect(Nikolai & Justine #4)

Asher: My Russian Revenge (Asher & Zariah)

Nikolai: Through the Devil's Eyes(Nikolai & Justine #5)

Trey (Trey & K)

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### **One Night Only Series**

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Hotshot Neighbor

### **The Bobrov Bratva Series**

Wicked Intentions (Katie & Ghost)

Sinful Intentions (April 25)

Devious Intentions (June 13)