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TWISTED EMPIRE

J. TARR

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To the good girls who like their men as complicated as their coffee orders—this one's for you. Who needs a knight in shining armor when you can have a rogue in red flags?

“In love and shadows, the line between captor and savior blurs, leaving us lost, willingly.”

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK HAS A FEW
CONTENT WARNINGS
INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED
TO:

Dubious Consent

Violence and Murder

Implied Sexual Violence (not by the MMC)

Implied Death Of A Child

Knife Play

Mention of Suicide

Implied Forceful Drug Use (not by the MMC)

Scenes of Depression and PTSD



Mikhail - 35 / Gabriette - 25

MIKHAIL

I look at the blood splatter on the walls, the red a stark contrast to the white color scheme of the bedroom itself. Her dark curls laid out over her pillow, those tresses I would have wrapped my fist around in another day or so.

Normally, a suicide wouldn't get my blood boiling since I see it as the coward's way out of their problems. But this time it's different; this time, it's fucking personal.

"What exactly am I looking at here?" my voice echoes through the room and I watch as her father, Alberto, visibly stiffens. "A promise sealed in blood has ended in blood as well, Alberto?"

He turns around to face me, his eyes wide at what I have just implied. Swallowing deeply, he shakes his head and walks toward me, a pleading look in his eyes.

"N-no! Definitely not! I can rectify this and our agreement will remain in place," he says, swallowing deeply, and I narrow my eyes at him.

"Unless you have a way to bring a woman back from the dead, then I say our deal is through. It's a pity. I was looking forward to what you had to offer me other than your daughter," I say, placing my black-gloved hands into the pockets of my coat.

This should have been a fucking simple transaction; a ring on his daughter's finger would mean safe dealings in territories the Bratva cannot cross, and the same for him as well. It would have kept both sides happy, and now it's all a fuck up.

“I have another daughter,” he says, and I blink at him, confused. “One who no one knows about—”

“A bastard? You’re offering me one of your bastard children?” I say through gritted teeth, my fingers itching to grab my Beretta and pump every single fucking bullet into him.

Not only is this fucking suicide a slap in my face, but now he wants to rub an illegitimate daughter onto me. Who does this asshole take me for?

His face goes pale, and he shakes his head, holding his hands up in surrender. “No, she’s not a bastard! She’s my daughter, but she’s not part of this life ... But I can bring her back.”

My eyes widen slightly at this; a hidden mafia princess?

“Hmm, if your word is your honor, then give me her address. We still have a wedding tomorrow, so—”

“I’ll collect her myself and bring her to you,” he interjects and I fucking see red.

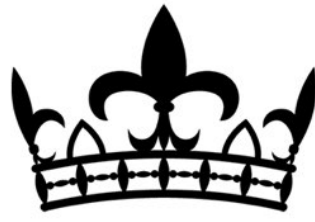
Ignoring his men raising their weapons, I grab him by the throat and slam him against the wall where his daughter lay dead, my hand squeezing his windpipe.

“If there’s one thing I hate to my very core, it is being interrupted,” I grit out, my grip on his throat tightening. “So, unless you want to insult my family even more that you already have, you will give me her fucking address or so help me God, the next one to join your daughter will be your wife.”

His face reddens, and he sputters, grabbing at my hand while nodding his head as spittle flies everywhere. Disgusted but feeling satisfied with his answer, I let go of him and he coughs as he falls to the floor.

“She’s...”

I grin when I get the address from him, then I leave the bedroom to collect my dead fiance’s replacement.



CHAPTER
ONE

GABRIETTE

The lights in the intimate concert hall dim, and the rustle of the crowd stills while my heart thrums in my chest. My fingers dance over the strings of my cello, each note flowing from my heart.

As the bow traces the strings, it paints a picture of the dreams I long for—freedom, love, passion. The cello’s voice is mine, a voice unfettered by the chains my last name holds.

For that brief moment, I wasn’t the youngest child of a Chicago underboss; I was a musician, alive and free.

The final notes resonate throughout the hall, and the audience erupts into applause. My heart pounds, not just from the thrill of the performance, but also from knowing I am finally living the life I want, no matter how trivial it may seem to others.

The venue is small, but every performance is a step toward my dream. The crowd’s appreciation is genuine, and I find warmth in their smiles, something I rarely experienced growing up. I gave a slight bow, my eyes meeting those of a man in the front row.

My security detail, discreet yet ever-present, watches from the shadows. My father insisted on it. It’s a constant reminder of a world I am no longer a part of and one I’d never return to. But the security detail was a reminder of my father’s love, his way of caring from a distance.

Thinking about my family at this moment sends a pang of guilt through my heart, and I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from crying.

I'm the youngest of two daughters. My sister Sophia made an agreement with my father for me to have a normal life away from the one we were born into. She sacrificed her own happiness and freedom for me, knowing the type of men we'd be married to, and I have no way to repay her for it.

To this day, I still don't know what she traded for my freedom, and I doubt she'd ever tell me.

After I take a bow, and the crowd disperses, the stranger from the front row approaches me. He's dressed elegantly and suave, with a glimmer of excitement in his eyes.

My eyes flicker to the two burly men who are walking toward me, ready to draw their weapons, but I shake my head and focus on the man in front of me.

"Ms. Smith, I presume?" he said, extending a hand. "I'm Martin Walsh, a scout for the city's philharmonic. Your performance tonight was extraordinary. I've been looking for a talent like yours for the longest time."

His words hit me like a baseball bat to my stomach, but in a good way! Wait, that came out wrong.

"Thank you, Mr. Walsh. It's an honor," I reply, hoping I don't appear eager, even though I want to scream right now. The city's philharmonic! I haven't been able to get their attention for the longest time and now this?!

"I don't normally do this, but someone recommended I come here tonight, and honestly, I was blown away," he seemed to gush while my heart felt like it's being squeezed.

A thank you came out of my mouth again and I know I must sound like an idiot, but he simply chuckles and offers me a smile.

“I would like you to come in for a performance interview,” he continued, handing me a card with the details. “If you pass, you’ll join the ranks of my Philharmonic. Think about it.”

Holy shit, what?!

“I will, thank you,” I say as I take the card from him, my voice barely above a whisper while I try to remain calm. “It was lovely meeting you, sir.”

“Oh, it was my pleasure,” he says, drawing my hand to his lips and kissing it. A sliver of disgust shoots through me since I hate being touched, but I keep the smile on my face, anyway.

As Mr. Walsh departs, I turn to see one of my guards, Jackson, his face serious but kind. He’s been with me since I left home, a quiet supporter. I grin when I see him, then I do a little dance while letting out a squeal.

“Did you hear that, Jax?! An interview! A real one!” I exclaim, holding his biceps and literally jumping up and down. My other guard, David, grabs my cello and the case while Jax speaks with me.

“You did great tonight, Reginetta,” he says, patting my arm. “Your father would be proud.”

“Thank you,” I smile, knowing that in his own way, Dad was supporting my dreams. “Can you imagine this? Someone recommended me!”

“Why wouldn’t they? You are Gabriette Lombardi—”

“Shh, Jax,” I say, looking around in case someone heard him. “You know not to use my real name here.”

Jax sighs. He sees it as me hiding and not being proud of my name when it’s the complete opposite. If those close to me

here had to find out my father was Alberto Lombardi, they would all stay clear of me.

Here I am Bella Smith, a nobody with a boyfriend and two best friends who mean the world to me; not Gabriette Lombardi, mafia princess.

As we left the venue, the city's nighttime glow bathed the streets, a world of possibilities unfolding before me. A normal life, filled with music, was within reach, and I had the courage to grasp it.

My past might be a shadow, always lurking but never overtaking me. But my future now was a symphony, and I was ready to write my part in it.

It was a song of hope, and it played just for me.



CHAPTER
TWO

GABRIETTE

Emma's practically vibrating as she lays out a spread of hors d'oeuvres like she's competing in some Food Network challenge.

"Come on, Bella, it's a celebration! You landed an interview with the philharmonic!"

Lucy, the more down-to-earth one of the pair but still full of pep, adds her two cents. "This is a big deal, Bella. You deserve to enjoy it and to celebrate it!"

I should be ecstatic, I know. Hell, a week ago I would've killed for a chance like this. But now? Now I've got an interview with Mr. Walsh, the Mr. Walsh of the philharmonic, and I'm twisted up inside like a pretzel.

Double the nerves, double the stress.

I muster a smile, but it feels more like a grimace. "I know, I know. It's just... what if I fuck it up? What if I'm not good enough?"

Emma wraps me in a hug that's so tight I'm momentarily distracted from my internal freak-out. "Oh, cut the 'what ifs,' you're going to kill it."

Lucy pats my shoulder, and a ripple of disgust shoots through me. I hate having this reaction to being touched.

"Walsh is not an idiot and wouldn't come all this way if you weren't worth it, Bella. Stop doubting yourself. He knows talent when he sees it. Stop freaking out," she says.

Hearing their sincere words makes me smile, genuinely this time. They have no clue about who I really am, yet they're

going all out for me.

It gnaws at me—the guilt, I mean. They don't know Gabriette, and if I'm being honest with myself, they probably never will. No chance in hell.

“Speaking of guys who aren't idiots,” Emma says, wagging her eyebrows, “will Damien make it tonight?”

I can't help but grin like an idiot when Damien's name comes up. “Nah, he's caught up with some work. His boss has him on a tight leash,” I assure them before they can spin it into a Shakespearean tragedy.

Damien's my rock, my first real friend when I landed in this city as Bella. He doesn't know the full story either, but I think he knows I've got secrets. And even though he can't make it tonight, knowing he'd be here if he could, comforts me.

As the night rolls on, the apartment fills with music geeks like me, toasting in my honor. It's a warm feeling, but under my skin, nerves are jumping like live wires.

Fast forward to the party. It's the kind of cozy get-together that should make you feel like a million bucks, only I feel like I owe someone a million bucks and the debt collector's coming.

Friends from my music circle, people who really matter in the industry, they're all toasting to my 'bright future.'

After some wine and chit-chat, Lucy's eyes light up like Christmas lights. “Bella, play that piece from last week!”

My cello's over there, elegant and unassuming in the corner. I can't say no. “Fine, one piece. Then I'm saving the magic for tomorrow.”

I can feel my pulse picking up as I grab the bow and start playing. The second I play that first note, it's like stepping into another world.

Just me and the music. No lies, no secrets—just sound. But even as I lose myself in the melody, doubt sticks around like a bad smell.

The music is supposed to soothe me, but it doesn't erase the doubt lodged in my gut like a splinter.

I finish, and the applause is instant, but so is the return of my jitters. Can I pull this off tomorrow? Do I even deserve to?

Emma and Lucy stay till the bitter end, offering a shield of positive vibes. "Tomorrow's going to be great," Emma assures me.

"You've worked so hard for this, Bella. You deserve all the success," Lucy adds as well.

I love them for it, really, I do. But the pit in my stomach doesn't go away.

I'm grateful, but even as they leave and I pour myself a glass of wine, my heart's still racing like I've chugged a gallon of espresso.

Tomorrow's a monumental day, my shot at changing my life as Bella. I just have to get through it without the world knowing I'm actually Gabriette.

I'm left alone in my apartment, wineglass in hand. I sit down on the couch and take a deep breath.

Tomorrow's another day, another lie, another note. And who knows? Maybe tomorrow I'll be good enough for all three.

So I take a deep breath, trying to push the worries to a corner of my mind. If only lying to everyone didn't make this whole "new life" thing feel like walking a damn tightrope.

But this is my passion, this is what I live and breathe and nothing will ever feel more perfect than my fingers and bow meeting strings. I worked damn hard to get here all by myself, and I deserve this as much as anybody.

There's a knock on my door just as I walk into the kitchen to wash out my wineglass, and I frown. It's after ten pm, no one should be knocking on my door.

The only knocks you get at this hour are either bad news or, well, worse news.

I set my glass down and move cautiously to the door, feeling a chill crawl up my back. But as I peek through the peephole, my heart does this weird somersault thing. A mop of brown curls and a dimpled smile are staring back at me.

Ah, trust Jackson to vet late-night visitors.

"You planning on inviting me in, or are we playing peekaboo?" Damien's voice dances through the door, accompanied by a roguish wink.

That charming bastard. He knows he's got me, even after all this time. My heart kicks up its pace, and I can't help but smile.

That wink could melt glaciers, so I swing the door open and lean against the frame, arms crossed, trying to look unimpressed.

"You sure have a funny way of defining 'I can't make it tonight.'"

“I had an epiphany,” he says, cocking his head to the side. “Some things are more important than last-minute paperwork.”

His eyes lock onto mine, making the air between us feel like an electric field. “Such as?” I prompt.

He grins, unveiling his hidden hands to reveal a bouquet of stargazer lilies. “Celebrating the night before my girl’s big day.”

Holy crap, they’re beautiful. “Damien, these are amazing!” I gush, plucking the bouquet from his hands and smelling its sweet aroma.

Before I can overthink it, he’s already around me, his arm locking my waist in a tender vice grip. He’s the only one I allow this close without feeling the urge to vomit when he touches me. If that doesn’t say a lot, I don’t know what does.

“That’s not the only amazing thing in the room,” he says softly, then seals his words with a lingering kiss that sends my thoughts scattering. I let out a soft moan into his mouth and feel myself becoming a puddle.

“Wow,” I finally manage as he pulls away. “You’re laying it on thick, aren’t you?”

“If it’s making you smile, then it’s just thick enough,” he replies with a smirk. “You should know all about how I lay it on thick.”

I roll my eyes at the innuendo but a shiver shoots up my spine, because boy ... do I know all about his thickness.

“Now, are you going to invite me in or not, beautiful?” he says when he sees the blush on my face.

“Oh, I suppose I can,” I say, stepping aside to let him enter and we walk inside my apartment. Luckily for me, I live alone, so I don’t have to explain myself to anyone.

It’s a good thing too, because I already have to remember so many lies.

I place the flowers on my kitchen counter and raid my cupboards for a vase before I turn back to him. “So, staying for a drink, Mr. Epiphany?”

He arches an eyebrow. “Is that a subtle way of asking me to help you with your pre-interview jitters?”

“Me? Jitters? You’re looking at Fort Knox here, buddy,” I bluff, waving a hand over myself after putting the vase down.

Damien laughs. “Fort Knox, huh? Impenetrable and full of gold?”

“More like closely guarded and hard to crack,” I counter.

His eyes soften, and he walks towards me, taking my hand in his. “Well, in that case, I’m glad you granted me access.”

Okay, he won me over. My arms find their way around his neck, pulling him in close. “Think you can handle all this security?”

“I’ve got top-level clearance,” he murmurs, leaning down for another kiss, this one flavored with the promise of what comes after uncertainty, after questions, after nervous knocks on the door.

“For the record, I’m really glad you’re here,” I confess, once we part.

“And I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else,” he replies, giving me that look that turns my insides into a butterfly cove.

Now, my jitters are replaced by something else—something that feels a lot like hope, something that makes tomorrow’s uncertainties seem conquerable.

After placing the flowers in a vase, Damien and I settle on the couch. Each nursing a glass of wine, sharing the kind of comfortable silence only possible when you’ve got nothing to prove.

Tomorrow’s looming event is a shadow in the corner of the room, but for now, in this moment, I allow myself to feel the moment with him. He didn’t have to be here, and yet he was.

“You really think I’ll do well tomorrow?” I ask, breaking the silence.

He sets his glass down, turns toward me, and takes my hand. “Bella, you’re going to do more than well. You’re going to own that room because when you play, it’s like the world stops to listen.”

It’s cheesy as hell, but it’s also exactly what I need to hear.

“Well then, world, get ready,” I say, lifting my wine glass.

Damien clinks his glass against mine. “To stopping the world.”

“And to us,” I add.

“To us,” he echoes.



CHAPTER
THREE

GABRIETTE

The entire morning is a haze of anticipatory nerves, like I'm waiting for the jury to deliver a verdict on my life. I go through the motions, dressing up, picking the right shoes, fixing my hair. Every second ticking by is a reminder that it's almost time.

Damien drops me off at the venue bright and early so I can have my heart attack and internal meltdown in public. "You got this, Bella. Knock 'em dead," he says, stealing a quick kiss before I get out of the car.

I force my legs to carry me inside, clutching the handle of my cello case so tightly it's as if I'm hanging onto a lifeline.

While I'm walking inside, I see Jackson up ahead and feel David at my back, their presence offering me comfort when I need it most

Jackson gives me an encouraging nod as I pass him. I told him to get here before me so Damien could drop me off himself. Damien still thinks they're only close family and doesn't ask many questions about them.

"You'll do great, Reginetta," Jax says, kissing me on both cheeks.

"Thanks, Jax," I mumble, my eyes scanning the grandeur of the entrance hall. He's probably more confident in me right now than I am.

I get ushered into a waiting room, where other musicians are tuning their instruments, some lost in their thoughts, some practicing scales. I find a corner to sit in and take deep breaths, trying to center myself.

But every inhale comes laced with ‘what-ifs’ and every exhale seems to fan the flames of my inner turmoil.

Finally, my name is called. I snap back to reality, gripping my cello as I walk into the interview room. It’s both bigger and smaller than I imagined—larger in space but smaller in the sense that now it contains just me and a panel of impassive faces.

They nod, introducing themselves in a blur of names and titles, barely registering in my heightened state.

My fingers rest on the strings of my cello, the bow hovering above. The silence stretches thin, like a tightrope walker calculating the risk of the first step.

“Whenever you’re ready, Ms. Smith,” says the head of the panel, smiling kindly yet scrutinizing me with an intensity that feels like it could dissect my soul.

Here goes nothing.

I pull the bow across the strings and plunge into my piece. My hands shake at first, but as I lean into the music, something miraculous happens.

The room fades away, the faces blur, and all that’s left is the conversation between my cello and me.

Each note is a plea, a prayer, an assertion, a declaration. I pour every hidden corner of myself into the composition, Gabriette and Bella converging in a symphony of sound and silence.

When the last note vibrates into stillness, the room is hushed. I look up, realizing I’d closed my eyes at some point, lost in the music.

The moment stretches into infinity. The panel's eyes are on me, and I realize that I'm holding my breath as if the slightest exhale could change their minds.

My fingers, just moments ago deftly guiding the bow across the strings of my cello, now grip the instrument like a life raft.

“Welcome to the Philharmonic, Ms. Smith,” says the head of the panel, breaking the magical silence. The words are simple, but their weight is monumental.

The pause is probably just a few seconds, but it feels like years. Time has the audacity to slow down when you're waiting for a verdict that will define your next chapter. My heart is racing, doing laps around my ribcage like it's on a track field, each beat a question mark reverberating through me.

You know that feeling when you're on a roller coaster, climbing the steep slope to the first big drop? Anticipation and dread intertwining so tightly, you can't separate them?

That's me. Right now, in the suffocating silence of this room, I am a human roller coaster, teetering on the edge of elation and panic.

They're not saying anything else. Did they change their minds? I mean, shit, they have the power to, don't they?

What if the guy who said, “Welcome to the Philharmonic, Ms. Smith,” now says, “Sorry, we actually meant to say Mrs. Smith, not Ms.?”

It's irrational, I know, but doubt is a seasoned thief, always knowing when to strike.

My cello is still in my hands, and I feel the sweat forming on my palms. The bow is slightly heavier, or maybe my arms

are just tired.

It's as if the room is holding its collective breath, waiting for my reaction.

My nerves, which had settled into a sort of numb serenity as I played, surge back into life. There's a weird mixture of dread and hope swirling inside me. What if they change their mind?

I become hyper-aware of every small sound—the faint hum of the air conditioning, the subtle shuffling of papers, the soft clearing of someone's throat. Each one amplifies my anxiety, ratcheting up the tension notch by excruciating notch.

And then, finally, the head of the panel smiles. A genuine, warm smile that crinkles the corners of their eyes. It's as if that smile releases all the pent-up tension in the room, a palpable sigh of relief that echoes my own internal release.

It's only then that I manage to respond, my voice shaky but audible. "Oh, my gosh! Thank you so much!"

Mr Walsh smiles at me and nods his head. "Leave your details with Martha at the front desk, Bella. We'll be in touch via email with everything you need to know," he says.

"Yes, of course! Thank you again!" I say with my heart in my throat and tears springing into my eyes.

As I gather my cello and exit the room, those two simple words linger in my mind, grounding me, reminding me that this is real. I did it. I actually did it.

Still, it's not until I'm outside the room, away from the intensity of that moment, that the significance truly hits me.

I lean against the wall, feeling its solid, cool surface against my back, and let out a breath I didn't even realize I'd

been holding.

I'm in. I really am! I got here all by myself, too! The Philharmonic is going to be a part of my life, a part of both Gabriette's and Bella's stories.

And it's all because of that room, that panel, and that nerve-wracking silence that stretched on forever but was over in an instant.

I exit the building after leaving my details and the world outside seems brighter, lighter, a place of boundless possibilities. I'm almost floating in euphoria as I search for Jackson's familiar face or the comfort of the car that should be waiting for me.

But he's not there. A sudden chill rushes down my spine, the bubble of my newfound happiness bursting in an instant.

Jackson has never left me alone; not even when I needed to go to the bathroom in a public place. Come to think of it, I didn't see him in the auditorium when he's usually everywhere I am.

"Jax?" My voice catches, shaky. My hand scrambles for my phone, but I can't find it in my pocket. Did I take it with me this morning? I can't.... wait...

The edges of my world dim. A chill slices through me. Something's wrong. I can feel it, a darkness seeping into the corners of my joyous moment.

"Jackson!" I call again, louder this time, my voice filling with panic. My heart races, each beat drumming out a rhythm of fear.

And then, just like that, the world tilts on its axis. I reach out, my fingers clawing through the air, seeking something, anything, to hold on to.

But there's nothing. And as darkness swallows me whole, I
have just enough time to think, what now?

And then, nothing



CHAPTER
FOUR

GABRIETTE

The air smells stale and heavy, like mothballs and damp carpet. I squint against the dim lighting, my vision blurred at the edges. My head throbs, each pulse a jackhammer in my temples.

A slow sweep of my surroundings confirms it—this isn't my bedroom.

Generic motel art hangs on the walls, and a nondescript dresser sits opposite an equally nondescript bed, its sheets rumpled. I'm wearing what I remember from my interview, but how I ended up here is lost to me.

A shiver creeps down my spine, cold and unnerving. I leap to my feet, the action leaving me dizzy and my stomach churning. Nothing feels broken or sore; no wounds or marks.

Thank God. I take a shaky breath and get to my feet, walking towards the door. But as I take a cautious step, the door swings open and my heart plummets to the pit of my stomach.

He walks in.

My eyes lock onto the jagged scar that slashes down the side of his face. A scar that should, in normal cases, have made him look ugly. But somehow, it only enhances his features.

He's tall, broad and muscular under a perfectly tailored black suit. His hair, long, blonde and curled naturally in a way women pay for, frames piercing heterochromia eyes that could be charming in any other circumstance.

Those mismatched blue and green eyes settle on me, and the temperature in the room drops below zero.

“Awake at last, Gabriette,” he says, his voice tinged with a coldness that chills me to my core. “I wish the circumstances were better for our first meeting, but time is of the essence and we need to talk.”

I blanch at his words, dread curling inside of my gut. My mouth falls open as the realization hits me harder than I expected.

He just used my real name.

This guy is from the world I ran away from, the one my sister sacrificed her life for; the one I was supposed to leave behind. No one else knows my name here.

“If we needed to talk, you could have done the civilized thing and met me for coffee!” My voice shakes, my nerves barely contained. “Why am I here? Who are you?”

His eyes slightly widen with amusement at my words, then he chuckles at my discomfort and crosses his arms.

“My name is Mikhail Baranov, and I have business with you, Gabriette,” he says, the dangerous timbre of his voice sending a shiver up my spine.

Oh my fucking god, he’s Russian Bratva, he must be. I look at his tattooed hands, one bearing the snarling head of a tiger and the other a rose wrapped in barbed wire, and the sight of it scares me more than anything.

I haven’t been in that life for years. What business could he possibly have with me?

And what did my father do for the Russians to be at my doorstep?

“Business with me? I don’t ... I don’t even know you,” I stammer, fear creeping deep into my belly because I know this man isn’t someone to trifle with. The grin on his face tells me everything I need to know.

“Hmm, where do I start?” he says, sauntering over to me with his hands in the pockets of his slacks. “You see, your father promised me a bride. Your sister decided she’d rather be dead than live up to that promise. Now I’m stuck with you as a second choice.”

Grief crashes over me like a tidal wave, threatening to pull me under in front of this stranger, but there’s no time to drown. Not here, not in front of this man; even if I want to burst out into tears.

“My sister is dead and you expect me to just step into her place?”

“That’s exactly what I expect,” he smirks, settling one hand in the pocket of his suit pants, his eyes predatory. “It’s either you do this, or everyone you love suffers. Is that what you want?”

His words hung in the air like a dark cloud, their weight heavy on my shoulders, making it hard to breathe. There’s no doubt in my mind he means them.

My world feels like it’s disintegrating around me. My sister’s dead, and now I’m captive to this terrifying man, but if there’s one thing Sophia has taught me, it’s to never show your fear.

“So, what? I say ‘I do’ and become a part of this twisted world again?” The words come out sharper, tinged with bitterness.

“Exactly.”

I can't help but scoff at that arrogant word. Everything in me is screaming out for me to run away, to cower in front of this man because I have a feeling those tattooed hands have snuffed out more than a life or two.

"Why me when you could quite literally have your pick of any other mafia princess? I haven't been in that life for over six years!" I explain with a scoff, but then I step back when he slowly walks over to me.

"I don't give a fuck if you haven't been part of this life, a Lombardi woman was promised to me by your father, and I expect my bride to come willingly," he says, literally spitting daggers at me, expecting me to cower, but something in what he just said gets my attention.

He needs a Lombardi woman; if Sophia is dead, then that only leaves me. We have no other blood ties.

"What happens if I say no?"

Mikhail blanches at my words, the look on his face telling me he's never had anyone, much less a woman, tell him no.

"I already told you what happens if you say no—"

"And you also told me you need me as a wife, more specifically, a Lombardi woman," I say, crossing my arms. "And since I'm the only Lombardi woman left, you can't throw around idle threats. You're the one who needs me, Baranov."

My mind races, trying to find a way out, but my options are as dim as the room I'm standing in.

I look at Mikhail as he walks over to me, this man who thinks he can own me, and feel a white-hot surge of rage.

He backs me up against the wall and goosebumps pucker all over my skin at the proximity. Then he let out an amused chuckle.

“Oh, it’s going to be fun breaking you, Gabriette,” he says, taking my chin in his hand and a sliver of revulsion shoots through me. “This smart mouth of yours would look exquisite wrapped around my cock.”

Breaking me? I’ve been broken before and I’m still here. Who the hell does he think he is? “I’d rather die than be your wife—”

“Don’t be melodramatic. You’ll marry me, or else the people you care about will pay the price; more specifically, your mother or perhaps your two friends, Emma and Lucy, is it? I don’t think you want that on your conscience, do you?”

“You’re a fucking monster! I never asked for this!” I exclaim, trying to push him away, but the smirk on his face tells me he’s relishing in my discomfort.

Mikhail leans in closer, his face inches from mine. “You misunderstand me, *Malyshka*. This was never about what you wanted or asked for. This is about duty, about legacy. Your sister understood that; she just didn’t have the stomach to follow through.”

The audacity of him, blaming my sister for not wanting to be a part of this madness. It’s too much. “Well, maybe her stomach was smarter than you give it credit for.”

He grins, a predatory smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Perhaps. But you’re not your sister. You have a choice to make.”

I look at him, staring into those cold eyes. A choice? No, it’s coercion at its vilest. The room feels heavy, each word he

utters adding weight to the air.

He seems certain, resolute, like a wall I can't break through. But that doesn't mean I won't try.

"My choice is to have nothing to do with you or this underworld nightmare you're part of," I state unequivocally.

"Then you condemn your family and friends to suffer the consequences of a broken promise," he says flatly. "Is your freedom worth their lives?"

I take a shaky breath. He's cornered me and he knows it. "Is forcing someone into a life they don't want what you call keeping a promise?"

Mikhail raises an eyebrow, and for the first time, I sense a crack in his composed facade. "Life rarely gives us what we want. We play the hand we're dealt."

"Well, I'm reshuffling the deck," I reply with fake confidence, hoping I look as strong as I feel.

Then he chuckles, and it's a dark sound, devoid of joy. "You're not scared of me, are you?"

"Should I be?" I challenge, locking eyes with him.

"Most people are," he says, with no hint of emotion in his voice. "You'd do well to remember that."

"Most people don't know how to fight back," I say, my voice wavering. "You might control a lot of things, Mikhail, but you don't control me. You can't just force me into this!"

The hand that was on my chin now slides to my neck, where he wraps it around my throat and gently squeezes. "You'd be surprised what I can do, *Malyshka*."

Terror and anger wage a war inside me and I'm not sure which side to lean in to. This hand at my throat could easily snap the life out of me, but I know it won't. He needs me, even if I have to be dragged to the altar.

“Since threats seem to be your forte, know that once that ring slips on my finger, I am going to make your life a living hell,” I say through gritted teeth. “You better sleep with one eye open, Baranov.”

He chuckles at this and as he presses against me; I swear I can feel his cock harden. The hand at my throat tightens, but I don't allow myself to look away from him. He won't get the satisfaction of my fear.

“Oh, you've just given me more incentive to break you, wife,” he says with a grin, leaning close to my ear. “I'll have you purring like a kitten even while you show me your claws.”

I chuckle mirthlessly. “I'm not your wife yet, and you will never get the satisfaction of breaking me.”

He leans in again, so close that his breath mingles with mine and I can tell he's just accepted the challenge as he says, “Watch me.”

Then he turns and walks out, leaving me alone, stranding me in this nightmarish reality. I'm torn between the life I've painstakingly built and a terrible destiny that I can't seem to shake off.

His image, especially that haunting scar, sticks in my mind as he leaves the room, locking the door behind him. It's a visceral reminder of a world I thought I had left behind, a world that now seems determined to claim me, no matter how far I run.



CHAPTER
FIVE

GABRIETTE

As the door unlocks and swings open again, I half-expect to see Mikhail's menacing figure. Instead, two bulky bodyguards enter the room.

They gesture for me to follow them and every fiber of my being wants to resist, to scream, to fight back. But the rational part of me knows it would be futile; I don't want them touching me.

I've seen Mikhail's world before; I know the kind of control he wields. Besides, I don't know if I'm even in Seattle anymore.

Resigned, I let them lead me out of the dark room and into the glaring mid afternoon light of the outside world.

We walk across a gravel lot to a sleek, black SUV. One of the bodyguards opens the door for me, and I climb into the back seat.

Mikhail is already inside, sitting as far away from me as the space allows. He doesn't acknowledge my presence, his eyes focused on a smartphone.

The drive is painfully silent, except for the sporadic bursts of Russian Mikhail speaks into his phone. I try to pick up phrases, words, anything that could give me a clue about what's happening.

But it's no use; my Russian is rusty, and his words are like shards of glass that I can't piece together. The entire ride feels surreal, like a never-ending tunnel with no light at the end.

Finally, the SUV pulls up in the underground parking of a tall skyscraper.

This is no ordinary building; it's a towering symbol of power and luxury, and I realize that this must be Mikhail's home; his penthouse.

The elevator ride up is another stretch of suffocating silence. When the doors finally slide open, I'm greeted by a different scene entirely.

The penthouse is an extensive and luxurious space with floor-to-ceiling windows that offer a panoramic view of the city, sleek modern furniture, and abstract art that is likely to be more expensive than a small house.

But what really catches my eye is the group of women assembled in the living room area, a mix of ages and appearances, all impeccably dressed.

"They're here to prepare you," he addresses me directly for the first time since this nightmare began.

"Prepare me for what?" Even as I ask, I already know the answer.

"The wedding, Gabriette. Our wedding." His words are final, a decree rather than a statement, as he looks at his watch. "In about three hours."

My stomach feels like it's just fallen into my fucking knees. Three hours?!

He sees the look on my face and smirks, then he takes my face in one of his hands and squeezes. "Be a good girl and let them pretty you up for me, wife. And be sure to wear something sexy and easy to get out of tonight."

My heart drops. "You're not touching me—"

"Oh, is that for you to decide? The last time I checked, you're in a city under my rule," he says, and I am left

sputtering for a response because he's right.

The deep chuckle he gives after I just stand there with my mouth hanging open lets him know he's won. Tutting, he looks over my shoulder and calls to the women behind me in Russian, then he leaves.

I'm shaking when the women approach me and, without another word, they lead me to a bedroom that's larger than my entire apartment.

A room with racks of elaborate gowns, tables covered in cosmetics, and every accessory from veils to shoes. A room where my fucking life as I know it ends.

They start the process of transforming me into a bride, and I can do nothing but stare at myself in the mirror. I feel a new emotion rising, one I haven't felt in a long time: despair.

I'm a doll, a prop in Mikhail's world, being dressed up for a performance I never agreed to be a part of. But even as I want to cry and burst out into tears, nothing comes. I don't know if it's shock or just me submitting to the fact that I have no say over my life anymore.

Because the truth is, Mikhail owns my life now, no matter how much I fight him.

They leave and I look at my reflection in the full-length mirror when they're done, but a stranger stares back at me; a beautiful, elegantly dressed woman ready for her wedding day. But my eyes are vacant, devoid of joy.

It's the emptiness of a person who has been packaged, polished, and prepped for a role she never auditioned for.

This is Mikhail's version of me, a decorative piece to complement his power, to be shown off and then shelved when convenient.

I search for some glimmer of my former self among the layers of lace and silk. But it's like trying to catch smoke with my bare hands—elusive, frustrating.

Just when I'm convinced that I'm a stranger even to myself, the door softly creaks open again. This time, it's my mother who steps in.

The moment our eyes meet, I can see the weight of years of silent suffering etched into her features. Her eyes are red and puffy, as if she's spent a lifetime crying in just one day.

I gasp when I see her and turn around. "Mamma—"

"Gabrietta," she whispers as she approaches me, her voice brittle. "I'm so sorry, Tesoro! I'm so, so sorry."

"What happened to Sophia? When did she die? Why did Pappa do this?!" I find myself going off in rapid-fire Italian, each word laced with an emotional cocktail of anger, confusion, and deep-seated fear.

"She..." my mother trails off, tears spilling down her cheeks. "She's gone, Gabriette! I still spoke to her the night before and she was fine, but now..."

I look at the heartbreak on my mother's face and my heart breaks along with hers. Sophia was always her favorite. She never wanted me to leave, but Sophia convinced her.

This was the last image I saw of her when I left, weeping for me, and now it's the first thing I see after I'm pulled back into this world.

"How could Pappa do this to me?" My voice rises with each question, tinged with a desperation I don't want to feel but can't suppress. "He promised me! He promised me I could ... I could leave, after everything he allowed to happen!"

She wraps her arms around me and I inhale her familiar vanilla scent and it sets off my tears. Rubbing my back like she used to when I would cry in her arms, she whispers sweet comforting words in Italian, and I feel like I'm right back home again.

“Did you ask him not to do this to me, Mamma?” I sniff. “Did you tell him he promised me?”

“I didn't have a say, you know we don't,” she says and pulls back, hesitating as if the words are too heavy for her to lift. “I've been sick, Tesoro, very sick and Sophia ... she was only going to marry this man because I asked, but—”

“Sick?” I ask, my eyes narrowing and my heart dropping. “What do you mean sick, Mamma?”

She looks at me as if she regrets saying anything, then she breathes out a long sigh and takes my hand in hers, patting it.

“It's my heart, Amore,” she says and I watch her swallow. “I'm living on borrowed time and your father knew if I asked Sophia, she would do it.”

I feel the room around me blur and distort, as if I'm seeing everything through a cracked lens. My mind is an explosion of questions, accusations, and unspoken disappointments.

“How could you keep this from me?!” I exclaim, my heart breaking anew. “I would have come back! I would have—”

She places a finger to my lips and shakes her head, then she leads me back over to the makeup vanity and picks up a tissue to redo the mess I've made.

How could my own family shield me from the reality that the two most important women in my life—one gone, and one slowly fading—needed me?

“Your sister and I promised not to tell you,” my mother continues, her voice barely a whisper now. “We wanted you to have a chance at a life free from all of this chaos, this violence. But it seems even that was too much to ask for.”

My lips quiver, words forming and dissolving before they can make a sound. All I can do is sit there, encased in a bridal gown that feels more like a shroud.

When she’s done fixing my makeup, and reaches out to touch my face. It’s a simple gesture, but it unleashes a tidal wave of emotion, as if her touch has momentarily freed the dammed-up fears, regrets, and sorrows.

But I can’t cry again. I can’t let myself grieve, rage, or even process while I’m standing in Mikhail’s home.

“I love you, Gabrietta,” my mother says, her eyes never leaving mine, even as they fill with tears. “Please, try to understand. If not now, then someday.”

Her words hang in the air long after she leaves the room, leaving me alone once more, staring at a reflection that is both familiar and entirely alien.

Then the door swings open again, and this time, it’s my father who enters.

“Gabriette, it’s time,” he says, all formal in Italian, no hint of comfort, not that I expected it.

“Don’t you think you’ve orchestrated enough ‘times’ in my life, Pappa?” The bitterness in my voice surprises even me. “You arranged this marriage without my consent. You kept Mamma’s illness from me, and you lost my sister. What’s left?”

He looks at me, his face unreadable. “Life is not always about what we want, Gabriette. Sometimes it’s about what

must be done.”

“What must be done?” I retort, my voice rising with every word. “For whom? For you? For the family name? What about what must be done for me, for my life? When do I get a say in all this?”

He sighs, taking a moment before he speaks. “You’re my daughter, and this is your duty. It’s time for you to accept that.”

“Duty?” I can feel my fists clench involuntarily. “My duty is to live a life that’s true to myself. Not to be some bargaining chip in your underworld dealings—”

A hard slap lands on my cheek and I stumble backward, my hand flying up to where he struck me. Tears well up in my eyes and I look at my father, hoping for a glimmer of remorse, but finding nothing.

“I’ve had enough of your fucking cheek,” he growls, gripping my face in his hands and forcing me to look up at him. “Today, you will become Mikhail’s wife. It’s your duty to make this alliance work, or so help me God, I will kill you myself.”

My father has never spoken to me like this before, and I find myself terrified of him for the first time in my life. “Pappa —”

“The car is waiting. It’s time to go,” he says, stepping back from me and smoothing down his tux. “I have given you the freedom you wanted, Gabrietta, but you’ve run away enough. It’s time you know your place.”

Know my place ... Something tells me that my father never intended to keep his end of the promise with Sophia, and that knowledge now sits like lead in the pit of my stomach.

My freedom was never mine in the first place; I was living on borrowed time, just like my mother.



CHAPTER
SIX

GABRIETTE

The car stops in front of the church, and I'm seized by a visceral urge to bolt, to rip off this expensive dress and run as far and as fast as I can. I glance at the throng of expensive cars parked neatly outside and feel sick.

Every vehicle represents another nail in the coffin of my freedom, a garish show of wealth and power that has nothing to do with love or happiness.

"Smile, Gabriette," my father says, almost mechanically. His words hit like his earlier slap. How can he say that when he's led me to this emotional slaughterhouse?

I put on a mask of a smile, my lips trembling as they curve upwards. It feels like I'm betraying every part of myself with that single, simple action. I take his arm as if he's leading me to the gallows. The doors in front of us swing open.

And that's when I see it—the long stretch of white, flower-adorned carpet that I'm supposed to float down like a dream. But this isn't a dream; it's a nightmare. A trap set with roses and satin ribbons.

As we make our way down the aisle, I catch sight of Mikhail standing there at the altar, a dark magnet pulling me closer with every step. I can't take my eyes off him even though everything in me is telling me to.

He's a devil in a tailored Tom Ford suit; a devil I am signing my life away to.

There's no comfort in his gaze. Those mismatched eyes hold nothing for me, just an acknowledgment of the unholy

pact we're moments from inking. The scar adds a menacing look to his handsome face, making everything so much worse.

My heart bottoms out, a sinking stone of dread and remorse.

This morning the sound of a symphony celebrating my audition filled my ears. I was free. I was happy. I was me.

Now I'm being used as a pawn between the Cosa Nostra and Bratva. My public defiance could mean the death of many. Each step toward Mikhail is like descending deeper into a maze with no exit.

Finally, my father and I reach the altar. His hand lifts my veil, but it's more like he's unveiling a commodity than a daughter. Then his eyes widen and I see a look of horror in his eyes.

He glances at Mikhail, then at me, and clears his throat before placing my hand in Mikhail's.

When Mikhail's fingers close around mine, I shiver. It's like a shackle snapping shut and a thousand volts of dread and revulsion surge through me. My father takes his seat, and as I turn back to face the altar, the sanctuary seems to spin around me.

I lock eyes with the man in front of me, and for some reason, he glares, then he looks over my shoulder. I don't know what the hell is going on, and I don't have the extra emotion to still figure it out.

As the priest speaks, his words morph into a meaningless drone. My gaze sweeps across the sea of expectant faces, but they're just a blur, a smudged painting.

They're witnessing my ruin, but mistaking it for a celebration. How did I end up here? How did this become my

life?

It's as if the walls of the church are closing in on me, and I'm struck with the agonizing realization that I'm utterly alone. The magnitude of the lie I'm about to commit in front of God, the life sentence I'm about to willingly walk into, hits me like a ton of bricks.

Finally, the priest asks the question that's supposed to seal my fate: "Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

I know if I disrespect this man in front of everyone, then it's not just my own death I have to worry about. Emma and Lucy don't deserve what will become of them because of my disobedience.

Neither does my mother; she's already lost one daughter.

"I do," slips from my lips, a whispered betrayal of everything I ever wanted, ever dreamed of. The words hang in the air like a death sentence.

In that moment, it's like I'm an observer, watching from a distance as I sabotage my own life. I'm locked in now, bound to a destiny I never wanted. There's no going back.

I peer up at Mikhail, but oddly enough, I don't see a look of triumph on his face. Not even when the priest says 'you may kiss the bride.' Not even after he kisses me and we're declared husband and wife.

But one thing is for certain: the life I fought so hard to build is gone. I'm locked in, and not only are the walls closing in on me, they've already sealed shut.



CHAPTER
SEVEN

MIKHAIL

The limousine's leather seats are cool beneath me, almost as icy as the tension that fills the air. Gabriette sits at the other end, her posture rigid and her eyes forward.

The glittering dress she wears does little to mask the unease that emanates from her. I should be focusing on the future, on the power that this marriage will bring, but my gaze keeps drifting back to her.

She doesn't say a word as we drive to the reception, but she doesn't have to. Her whole aura is like a storm waiting to break, and I find myself both dreading and anticipating the moment it does.

This tiny woman is unlike anyone I've ever met. When we discussed the terms of our arrangement, her eyes had that defiant glint, like she was daring me to underestimate her.

And that fucking mouth of hers. It pisses me off and gets my dick hard.

Most women cower in my presence; Gabriette, on the other hand, seems as if she's itching to challenge me at every turn. It's ... intriguing, even if I won't admit it to myself.

As the limousine glides to a stop in front of the grand reception hall, I can't help but let my eyes drift towards her.

She's staring out the window, her face set in a look of defiance despite the clear tension in her posture. The stark contrast between her boldness and her obvious apprehension has me wondering why she's determined to defy me.

I step out of the vehicle first, per custom. Holding out my hand for her, I prepare myself for her likely refusal, but she

surprises me. Her fingers slip into mine—tentative, yet with a reluctance that seems more like an open challenge than submission.

“You’re such a gentleman,” she hisses softly as she steps onto the pavement.

I tighten my grip momentarily, holding her gaze. “Only for today, *Malyshka*,” I reply, my voice icy. “And only when needed.”

She trembles in my arms and her face seems to pale under my gaze, but that ‘fuck you’ look is still in her eyes. This fucking woman.

We arrive, and a crowd gathers around us, eager to offer their congratulations and kiss ass before I’m even inside the fucking reception hall.

“Smile,” I lean down and whisper in her ear. “We’re not at a damn funeral.”

She turns to me with a sweet smile, her eyes cold but alive. “Says you,” she whispers back, then she kisses my cheek, but it might as well have been a knife to my throat.

This tiny woman, barely reaching my shoulders, is a fucking paradox. She looks like a kitten, docile and obedient, but she has the fucking heart of a seasoned gangster.

The contract between her father and mine means I should see her as nothing more than a business transaction. A stipulation my father needed so I could take over from him as Pakhan.

Marry a Lombardi and get the routes and connections the Bratva requires, that’s all there is to it.

But Gabriette is proving difficult to categorize, much less ignore.

As we walk into the reception, her arm threaded through mine for appearances, she remains silent with her back straight. Her lips, a shade of red that would usually demand attention, are set in a straight line.

I hate the fact that she's made me want to strip back her layers to see what's underneath. This curiosity is stirring up old memories I'd rather forget. I can't afford the distraction; I shouldn't even entertain the thought.

Yet as I sit down beside her, surrounded by the chatter and laughter of guests blissfully ignorant of our silent war, I find that I am already entertaining that thought.

She's not what I'd expected; looking like a queen in that dress, commanding attention in a room full of powerful men. I see the hungry way they look at her, and it pisses me off.

I turn to look at her again, and that light graze on her cheek catches my eye. I lean forward and draw my hand to her chin, frowning. Her brow furrows, and she's about to say something when I pull away from her.

"Hmm," I say, then I scan the crowd until my eyes fall on her father. I gesture for him to come closer, and that look on his face tells me he knows what this is about.

Gabriette takes this in with a curious look on her face, then I pull her to her feet and walk to meet her father half way. The coward looks like he's about to piss himself—good.

"Mikhail, what—"

Before she can finish the sentence, I rear back a fist and land it squarely against his nose. The satisfying crunch of his bones breaking sends me on a high, and I land another one.

He cries out and holds his nose, and I can hear the sounds of weapons being drawn. I wipe my knuckles on my pants and I turn back to look at Gabriette, who's wearing a look of absolute disbelief.

"You touched what's mine, so I gave it back to you ten times over," I say, and he glares at me while on his knees. "Stop looking so fucking surprised. Your ring left a mark, asshole."

With that, I pull her back to the table, but not before she looks back at her father. "What was that for?" she murmurs when we're seated.

I draw my hand to her chin again and caress the light cut on her cheek where her father struck her. "Your father put his hands on you in my home," is all I say before I turn away from her again.

It's not like I was fighting for her honor, but more for mine. Then I hear her silently murmuring to herself in Italian, and I decide not to intrude on that moment.

When the time comes for us to step onto the dance floor, I stretch my arm out toward her and she looks at it like she's about to handle a live grenade but eventually takes it.

"You're too kind," she says, her voice dripping with sarcasm, but I can feel her trembling under my touch.

The sound of the melancholy waltz played by the band on the dance floor set a somber mood. I look into her eyes; those gorgeous pools of amber and notice she's scared, but there's something else. I feel the ripple of a shiver shoot through her and I frown.

She's terrified, and yet she fights back. It makes no sense.

“What’s on your mind, Gabriette?” My voice is colder than I intended. I’m accustomed to obedience, not questioned or tested in my authority.

But this woman challenges me, and the strangest thing is, I find myself enjoying it.

“How I can sneak the knife from the table and imbed it in your neck tonight while you sleep,” she retorts, the corner of her mouth curling into a smirk. “You know, foreplay.”

I chuckle at this. “Oh, claws are out once again, *Malyshka*. Will you drag them down my back tonight?”

She bristles. “You fucking wish, Baranov—”

“Oh, but you’re my wife now. I am entitled to that sweet pussy of yours,” I say, and feel her gasp. “But then again, I won’t take if you’re not willing to give.”

“You took me,”

“Semantics,” I say, rolling my eyes while we dance. “Duty is duty. If my father asks for an heir one day, you won’t have a choice.”

She’s silent after this, and it surprises me because my tone was quite cold. Then she sighs and shakes her head.

“We’re both prisoners here, Mikhail. The difference is, you hold the key to both our cells.”

“Is that what you think?” I challenge her, my grip tightening just a fraction. “If you believe I’m a prisoner, you’re even more naïve than I thought.”

Her eyes narrow. “And if you think I’ll be a submissive little wife, you’re even more delusional than I imagined.”

She's quick-witted, and the fire in her retort takes me by surprise. The other women I've known were submissive, falling in line with my every command. Gabriette, however, is a riddle, a spark in an otherwise darkened room.

"Having second thoughts?" she taunts with a sweet smile teasing her lips when I don't answer.

"Don't flatter yourself," I retort. "I get what I want, and right now, that's this marriage."

"Must be so proud," she fires back, her voice sharp as a knife. "Big Russian mobster threatening his wife with rape."

I've never had someone speak to me with such disrespect before; it's disarming. She's got a fucking mouth on her. It's both maddening and alluring.

"Rape?" I spit out the word and see her flinching.

She trembles, but those defiant eyes lock onto mine. "That's what will happen when I don't give in tonight, right? You'll rape me?"

"Didn't I just fucking say I won't take what you aren't willing to give?" I ask, the words coated in a frosty indifference designed to provoke her.

She hesitates, and for a split second, I see a crack in her composed façade. "Stop contradicting yourself, Mikhail—"

"Blyad!" I grit out, pinning her with a glare. "Yes, we'll fuck tonight, but I won't rape you. Christ."

She stiffens up at the coldness in my tone, but only for a second before she sighs. "Don't mistake my obedience for compliance. I may be in a gilded cage, but remember, caged birds still have claws."

I let out a soft, cold chuckle. “It sounds like you’re warning me.”

“Maybe I am,” she counters.

“And what if I told you that I like challenges, that a bird’s claws make it more interesting to tame? By the way, you look beautiful in that dress.”

Her eyes flare with a mix of anger and uncertainty, and I feel a sudden, inexplicable sense of triumph. I’ve rattled her with that comment, if only for a moment.

She won’t break; I can see it in her eyes. I catch myself wondering what that fire could do, given the right circumstances.

As the dance comes to an end, the guests around us erupt into applause and I release her from my arms, almost regretfully.

I walk behind her, listening to the measured click of her heels against the marble floor and lost in thought about what her resistance could imply.

She is a means to an end—a path to solidifying my position as Pakhan, a mere part of a transaction. She can’t mean anything to me; I won’t allow it.

Yet that defiant glint in her eyes tells me she’s not someone who can be easily controlled or understood.

I’ve married a force to be reckoned with. And whether I want to admit it or not, part of me is looking forward to the challenge.

I just can’t afford to lose myself in this curiosity and risk a repeat of what happened ten years ago.



CHAPTER
EIGHT

GABRIETTE

The clinking of glasses and polite laughter fill the grand reception hall, but it all seems miles away to me. I glance over at Mikhail, who's talking to some business associate or another.

His face is a portrait of composure, unreadable, but there's a chill in his eyes that doesn't go unnoticed. Those mismatched eyes that tend to unnerve me whenever they land on me.

We haven't exchanged more than a handful of sentences since our "I dos," and when we do, we argue. But each moment of his silence feels like a blade of ice against my skin.

A silence that says more than words ever could: I am an afterthought, a piece of a transaction, an accessory to his ambitions.

Then there's his taunting; like he wants to get a rise out of me and it's infuriating.

The music fades and the clamor of conversations grows dimmer as the reception winds down. A cold emptiness settles over me as I catch Mikhail's gaze from across the room.

He nods once, a perfunctory acknowledgment, and then he's gone. His icy indifference chills me to the bone, and I can't shake the nagging feeling that I've just stepped into a lion's den.

When it's time for us to go, I hear a familiar voice behind me and my heart drops. I turn to see Jax standing behind me with a sad look on his face and my heart drops. I pull my hand

out of Mikhail's grasp and rush into the arms of the only man who has felt like family.

"Reginetta," he murmurs, holding me close while I try to push the tears away. He's been the only constant in my life, the only one I felt I could trust and now I'll never see him again.

"I'm going to miss you so much, Jax!" I exclaim, swallowing the lump in my throat as he strokes my hair. "I don't wanna go... I don't want to—"

"That's enough," he chastises me and pushes me away gently. He places his hands on my shoulders and offers me a small smile. "You're strong, Reginetta. If anyone can survive this, it's you."

I shake my head and sniff. "You always have such faith in me, but look at where that's gotten me—"

"Gabriette," Mikhail's cold voice snaps behind me and I stiffen up.

With a sigh, I give Jax one last hug. "Thank you for everything you've done for me. I love you."

"I love you too, Gabriette," he says and I can hear the unwillingness to let me go in his voice. "Make them bow down to you even if you have to force them to kneel. You do not lower your head to anyone, not even your husband."

I can't help but smile at his words, then with a peck on his cheek, I give him one last lingering look, then walk away from him with my heart in my throat.

The ride to our new home, Mikhail's penthouse, is filled with a suffocating silence as well. No words are exchanged; no glances are shared.

In a strange way, I find comfort in the quiet, as if the absence of sound reflects the large emotional distance between us. It's a reprieve, a momentary escape from the expectations that loom large in this arranged union.

But as I think about the so-called expectations, something else occurs to me again: this is our wedding night. He demanded my hand in marriage and took it even as I screamed no, what will he do once we're alone?

He teased me while we were dancing, but he wouldn't really do that...right? I mean, he's so much stronger than I am, there's nothing I can do if he decides he wants that from me.

I've put the thought off the entire day, but now it's staring me right in the face. He's my husband now, I can't deny him even if I wanted to.

The thought scares me more than I want to admit. I feel myself trembling as if a hand is gripping my throat and I breathe through it. Mikhail said he wouldn't take what I don't intend on giving. But can I really trust him like that?

No. I learned the hard way that trusting a man can have lasting consequences, and it's left me unable to stand the touch of another person.

When the car stops in his designated underground parking, Mikhail gets out first. He holds the door open for me, but unlike before, he doesn't offer his hand. Then more frosty silence as we walk to the elevator and when it opens to his penthouse.

The walls are adorned with art pieces that likely cost more than my entire life, but my eyes hardly linger on them. Instead, they drift to the man walking several paces ahead, absorbed in his own thoughts.

This man is infuriatingly quiet and it's pissing me right off. He can't even acknowledge me with more than a few words after stripping my life away.

God, I want to stab him in his annoyingly gorgeous face.

Just then, a woman appears from one of the adjoining rooms. Mikhail hands his coat to her and acknowledges her with a nod before striding off down the hall without so much as a backward glance.

Perplexed, I blink a few times, then I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

I turn to the woman who Mikhail handed his coat to. She's dressed elegantly, a graceful figure with an air of composed authority.

"Good evening, Mrs Baranova," she says. "I'm Nikita, your house manager. I've prepared your room."

I offer her a weak smile and she nods, indicating that I should follow her.

Nikita leads me to the bedroom—a sanctuary of understated luxury, adorned in soft grays and muted golds.

My eyes drift to the walk-in closet and I go towards it, noticing Mikhail's clothing to the right while the left is already filled with clothing that seems tailored to my exact measurements.

Right down to the damn underwear.

"When was all this delivered?" I ask, confused and a bit alarmed at the level of detail.

"This morning, ma'am," Nikita replies.

This morning? He's been planning every little detail right down to this? The thought unnerves me. It's like he's been studying me in the few hours before he came to collect me, learning how to fit me into this life like a jigsaw puzzle.

This frightens me more than I care to let on.

"Is there anything else you need?" Nikita asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

"No, thank you," I reply, and with a nod, she leaves.

But I'm not alone for long, because the door opens again and Mikhail saunters inside. My heart drops when I see him and my mouth goes dry when I see him removing his tie, then his cufflinks.

"Mikhail..." I trail off as a cold stab of fear embeds in my heart. "Please, don't do this."

"I'm not doing anything, *Malyshka*," he says as he unbuttons his shirt and walks over to me. I take a tentative step backwards and he grins. "I told you, I'm not taking what you're not willing to give."

"I'm not giving you this!" I exclaim, but he only chuckles.

"Oh, you will..." he says, then he removes something from his pocket and my heart fucking drops.



CHAPTER
NINE

GABRIETTE

A knife.

The blade is pitch black, tapering sharply to a pointed tip. One side of the blade is smoothly honed, gleaming faintly, while the other side features serrations, suggesting its capacity to tear through material with ease.

My heart bottoms out and I can feel my eyes welling up with tears. I'm sure I must look terrified right now, but Mikhail has a look in his eyes that suggests he loves what he's seeing.

“What ... what are you going to—”

“You're probably thinking I'm about to rape you at knifepoint, correct?” he says with a chuckle and shakes his head. “Oh, but there are plenty of fun things you can do with a knife other than threaten. Observe.”

He says, before taking the front of my dress in his hands and, in one swift motion, drags it down. The fabric slips and lands in a pool at my feet, causing me to gasp.

I'm left standing there in a lacy white corset and thong, while Mikhail's hungry gaze sweeps over my body. I might as well be naked with how he's looking at me, and I can't even get myself to move.

“Turn around, *Malyshka*,” he orders in a husky lilt that shouldn't send a shiver down my spine.

Swallowing deep, I do as he asks. Then he lets out an appreciative hum at the back of his throat before he whispers something in Russian.

Piece by piece, I feel him cutting away the restricting corset laces until the ruined garment follows the same route as the dress.

When he doesn't do anything else after a few seconds, anticipation coils deep in my stomach ... and I am shocked at myself for not feeling dread instead.

Why am I feeling like this? Why am I not more terrified, considering—

“Mikhail—”

“Shh, I'm admiring your body,” he interjects, shutting me up immediately, then I feel his hard, muscular chest pressing up against my back. “And God, what a view.”

Strong arms snake around my middle, making me tremble, and when one of his meaty hands gently grasps my breast, I stiffen up. Leaning forward, he kisses the nape of my neck, right next to my ear.

“I won't take what you won't give me, Gabriette,” he says, his breath hot against my skin. “But I can make you want it just as badly as I do.”

He skims the pad of his thumbs lightly over my nipples, causing them to harden and I bite my bottom lip so I can't make a noise. But then he gently nips at my earlobe and I shiver.

“Don't fight me. You can go back to hating me tomorrow,” he says as he slips his hand down my belly toward my mons.

“I—”

“What, you don't want me to fuck you?” he says, chuckling.

I'm about to say yes when I feel his fingers slipping through my folds and I throw my head back against his shoulder at the sudden invasion.

“That’s it...” he trails off as he circles a finger around my clit. “Give in to me, Gabriette ... Just for tonight.”

My breaths come in shallow gasps the more his fingers work around the bundle of nerves, and as much as I want to hate this or push him away ... I don't.

Instead, I stand there in complete submission, allowing the man who took my freedom to play with my pussy. He dips a finger inside of me and groans when he finds me wet.

“Is this all for me?” he says, and I can hear the grin in his voice. Then he spins me around and captures my mouth in a kiss that leaves me stunned out of my fucking mind.

I moan into his mouth as he continues to kiss and fuck me with his fingers, rolling my clit around his thumb while two are inside of me. My entire body burns with a desire I've never felt before, and I find all the previous apprehension gone.

He grinds against me, and I can feel his thick cock against my belly. Need coils deep inside of me, and I am desperate to feel him fucking me senseless.

But then he stops and takes a step back from me.

The suddenness of it has me reeling and when I open my eyes, he's wearing a cocky grin.

Drawing the same fingers that were inside me into his mouth, he groans and pins me with those mismatched eyes of his.

“Do you want me to fuck you, Gabriette?” he says in a low voice, cocking his head to the side. “Remember, I won't take

what you're not willing to give.”

My heart is pounding so loud that I can hear it in my ears, and the word ‘yes’ leaves me before I can even think about it.

Mikhail has me pinned on the bed within a matter of seconds. The sound of rustling fabric coupled with a crinkling of plastic let me know what's about to happen and I brace myself for the impact.

But bracing doesn't help me at all, because the size and curve of Mikhail's cock literally fucking spears me in two.

With a feral growl, he pounds into me, and I can't even comprehend what's happening. I don't want to fucking moan, but I sound like a pornstar with the way he's slamming into my pussy.

Our mouths collide in another searing kiss, and I feel my core clenching as I chase my earlier denied orgasm. It's absolute agony, hating this man and loving what he's doing to my body.

I meet his thrusts with my own, wrapping my legs around him and not giving a fuck for now. If he's going to use me to get off, I might as well enjoy his cock and worry about the consequences later.

Pulling back from the kiss, he places one of my legs over his shoulder and wraps his hand around my throat, squeezing the length of it gently.

My eyes shoot open at this, but he shakes his head. “Trust me,” he says, and I nearly laugh at those two words.

Then he applies more pressure, but not enough to choke me and my orgasm hits with such a force that I call out Mikhail's name like a fucking prayer.

“Your pretty pussy clenched beautifully,” he purrs, picking up his pace. Then he pulls out and spins me around on my belly.

“On your knees like a good girl, Gabriette,” he orders, and of course my fucking body obeys him willingly. “Push out that perfect ass for me.”

My obedience seems to spur him on, because his thrusts become more frenzied. He fucks me harder and the sounds of our slick skin meeting echoes around the room.

“Mikhail...” I moan his name as I push out my ass more, meeting him thrust for thrust while I fist the sheets in my hand. “Oh, God ... Oh, fuck—”

“I need to feel that pussy squeezing my cock again,” he groans, leaning over me and slipping his hands in between my legs. He finds my clit and works me up into a frenzy, but then he stops just as I’m about to fall over that blissful edge.

I turn around to look at him and he grins, then he does it again, leaving me frustrated.

“How badly do you want to come, Gabriette?” he says as he fucks me slow. “Tell me how much.”

“*Please...*” I trail off, out of breath and fucking annoyed. “Let me come or I’ll do it myself!”

This makes him laugh, and he grabs my hands, pinning them behind my back with one of his. “There, no fucking touching yourself. Now, tell me how much you want that orgasm, Gabriette.”

I let out a whine. “*Please...*”

“Fuck, I love hearing you beg,” he groans, slowly thrusting and letting go of my hands. He leans over me, finding my clit

and working me up again. “I’ll give you what you need, but first you need to do something for me.”

“Any ... anything,” I breathe. My core clenches and I brace myself for him to stop again, but then he whispers something that has my fucking body convulsing.

“Call out the name of the one you’ll worship from now on, my sweet girl,”

And I do ... I fucking *scream* it.

His cock pulses inside of me at the same time my orgasm hits and now I get it when women say they can see stars. Because Mikhail’s massive cock just had me seeing them.

Out of breath and spent, I feel him pulling out of me and I’m vaguely aware of falling to the side and watching him enter the bathroom. My mind is a jumbled up mess when I hear the shower running.

I’m not sure how long I was laying there for but when Mikhail walks out of the bathroom and into the walk-in, I realize it must have been for a while. After a few minutes, I hear him leave the bedroom and everything comes crashing down.

What the hell just happened?!

Alone at last, I robotically make my way to the bathroom and step into the hot embrace of the shower.

The warm water hits my skin, and for the first time since this nightmare began, I allow myself to break. My hands clutch the tiled walls as sobs rack my body.

I think of my sister, who hated this man so much that she wanted to die and the life I’ve left behind—my dreams, my

aspirations, and most of all, Damien. A face I will likely never see again, framed by a life I can never return to.

And now that's all been replaced by a cold, loveless contract and a man who can barely stand to look at me. A man I defy at every turn.

A man who just fucked the life out of me and I allowed him to.

I slide down the wall until I'm sitting on the shower floor, letting the water wash over me as though it could cleanse the desperation that clings to my soul.

I don't think the gravity of the entire thing, the marriage, my sister's death or my father's true colors have sunk in until this moment. I allowed that to happen when I could have just pushed him away.

You're so fucking stupid, Gabriette; this man owns you now. Body and fucking soul. He did say he won't take what I'm not willing to give, and I just gave my all.

But I'll allow myself this one moment of vulnerability, this brief indulgence in sorrow, because from tomorrow, there will be no room for weakness.

Even though I've been out of this life for years, I know what's expected of me. I know I have to please this man even if I want to murder him in cold blood. Even if he just gave me the best sex of my life.

Mikhail might see me as nothing more than a contract-bound obligation, but I refuse to be the submissive wife he likely expects.

I'll match his coldness with fire, his indifference with defiance. But tonight, just for tonight, I'll let the walls crumble and the tears flow.

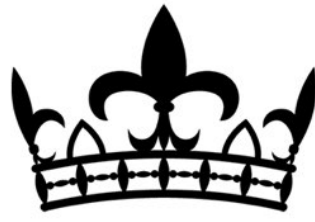
When I'm done, I turn off the shower, dry myself, and put on one of the plush robes hanging behind the door.

As I look at my reflection in the mirror, I see a stranger staring back at me—someone caught in a web of power struggles and marital contracts, reduced to nothing more than a pawn in someone else's game.

The room feels colder as I leave the bathroom. After getting into a tank top and shorts, I slip under the covers of the king-sized bed. I can't shake off the feeling of Mikhail's icy gaze, as if he's still watching me, studying me.

Calling me his good girl.

I can't let that happen again; can't allow myself to give in to Mikhail. This life might be a prison, but I will not be its submissive inmate.



CHAPTER
TEN

GABRIETTE

It's 7:00 am according to the bedside clock—a new day, another challenge. It's strange how life can switch tracks so quickly.

I turn my head and see the rumpled sheets indicating that Mikhail must have come back to bed and left before I even woke up. Wow, I must have been completely out of it to not feel his large body next to me.

Guess I was thoroughly fucked, then.

I sit up and immediately feel the ache in my lower regions. Damn, I never thought I'd hurt after a good dick down, but also it shows that last night wasn't a bad dream, after all.

Sighing, I go about my business and get dressed in a fresh outfit picked from the wardrobe that mysteriously has all my correct sizes. I head downstairs and the aroma of good Italian coffee beckons as I enter the kitchen.

But then my heart bottoms out because Mikhail is there, leaning against the counter, engrossed in his phone.

His presence sucks the warmth out of the room, leaving behind a chilling silence. He has a way of letting you know that he's there, but you're definitely not worth his time.

Asshole.

I grab a cup and pour myself some coffee, the liquid dark and steamy, mirroring my mood. But I stand there in suffocating silence, hyperaware of the man who literally told me he owns my pussy last night.

Then he finally speaks, but doesn't look up from his device.

"Now that you're part of this family, there are rules," he states flatly, his tone far from inviting conversation.

I can feel my body tense up at this. "Rules?"

"Yes, rules," he puts his phone aside, his gaze finally meeting mine. "Firstly, you will be accompanied by bodyguards whenever you're out. Security is not negotiable."

"Is that for my safety or to keep me on a leash?" I challenge.

The asshole disregards my question and goes on. "Secondly, I am not expecting you to open your legs for me unless an heir is required," he says, then he grins. "Last night was the only exception."

I blanch at this and my face warms when I recall what a begging mess he made me into last night. "What about your needs? You're a high-ranking man in the Bratva, aren't you? Surely you have needs."

"Needs I'll have taken care of elsewhere if I have to," he says nonchalantly, and I don't know why that pisses me off. "Lastly, your social commitments need to be coordinated with my secretary. You represent the family now. Public appearances aren't optional."

My hands tighten around my coffee cup. "Understood, but what about my role at the Seattle Philharmonic? I just got accepted. Am I allowed to continue, or does being your wife mean giving up on who I am?"

He eyes me thoughtfully, then responds. "You may continue with your music as I have set up a music room for

you here, but unfortunately, I will not be carting you back and forth from Seattle.”

Anger and disbelief burns hot in my chest at his words, another thing taken from me, but before I can process his answer, the door swings open and two burly, imposing men walk in.

“This is Alexei and Viktor. They’re your bodyguards,” Mikhail introduces, utterly detached.

“Mrs Baranova,” one of them nods, his expression as stone-cold as his boss’s.

“My meeting’s in half an hour. Keep what I said in mind,” Mikhail tosses at me as he grabs his coat and turns to walk away, leaving me standing in a daze.

But before Mikhail can walk away, I swallow deep and walk toward him. There’s no way he’s leaving here with just giving me a set of rules.

“Mikhail, wait,” I say, seeing him visibly bristle. “What about my apartment and my belongings? When can I collect them?”

He halts, barely glancing back as he answers, “There’s no need. Your things will be brought here.”

“Excuse me? You’ve literally uprooted my past life without me there?” The bite in my words doesn’t go unnoticed, but he seems indifferent.

“Your past life is irrelevant. Get used to your new one,” he says as he turns to face me, his voice a chilling blend of authority and disdain.

“You can’t just erase my past, Mikhail,” I fire back, anger lacing every syllable. “You’ve taken everything I love away

from me. At least grant me this!”

“Fairness is a luxury you no longer have,” he retorts, his tone cutting like the winter wind as he turns his back on me, but I am not done with him.

“Mikhail—!”

He pins me with a glare and I immediately shut up, not because of fear but because I’ve never seen unadulterated violence in one look alone. I can push so much, but Mikhail has a body count. I have to pick my battles better.

With that, he strides out of the room, his exit as cold and unyielding as the words he left behind. Alexei and Viktor remain as stoic as ever, trained not to react to personal conversations.

Left alone in the room, each careless word, each frigid glance, is another bar in the cage he’s constructing around me.

The finality of that look sinks into my bones, adding another layer of cold to the already chilly room.



CHAPTER
ELEVEN

GABRIETTE

Being a wife to a Russian mobster is a busy job. You wake up, get ready for the day, make yourself look ‘presentable’ just so you can have breakfast with a scowling 6ft3 muscle bound man in a perfectly tailored suit.

It would be easier to dislike if said man didn’t look so disgustingly gorgeous in said tailored suit.

Or if he didn’t fuck me within an inch of my life that my nether regions still ached three days later.

Then there’s the sleeping arrangements. I go to bed just after 8pm at night and wake up at 6am. In between these times, Mikhail sleeps next to me without my knowledge; I know because I can still smell his gorgeous cologne on the pillow next to me.

No, I do not sniff pillows. What makes you think that?

Also, the fact that he’s getting his kicks with another woman shouldn’t piss me off, but it does. I shouldn’t care that he’s fucking someone else, right? I mean, at least he isn’t getting it from me again, or forcing me.

But the lack of respect for me, as his wife, just leaves me feeling ... I don’t know, hurt? No, it can’t be hurt; that would be stupid.

Then there’s the music room. If I didn’t hate Mikhail so much, I would have fallen to his feet in thanks. There are at least five Stradivarius cellos in there; the one name I’ve only ever dreamt of owning.

But he got me five. FIVE. Holy shit, I know I have to thank him for it sometime, but fuck me if it didn’t feel like a

bribe.

A very gorgeous, expensive bribe.

God, I need to get out of the house today. I can't stand to sit here again and do nothing.

After getting myself ready, I head downstairs to have breakfast and, as usual, Mikhail is there already. Phone and coffee in hand, he doesn't acknowledge me and is literally winning the IDGAF war between the two of us for the last few weeks.

So I decide to cut the tension, but then he beats me to it.

"We have an event coming up tonight," he says, just as I was about to speak. "A gala with my father and others who couldn't make it to the wedding due to a death in the family. Wear a dress and look presentable."

"Yes, sir," slips out before I can stop myself and his head snaps up. The heat in his gaze makes my skin crawl, and I immediately look away. "I mean, no problem. I'll look the part."

I know I said I wouldn't look away from him, but that look in his eyes literally made my core clench. What the hell is up with this reaction? Clearing my throat, I force myself to look at him again.

Shit, he's still looking at me like that.

"I ... uh, I wanted to know if I can get out of the penthouse today," I say, holding my coffee cup so tight that I swear I'll break it. "With Alexei and Viktor tagging along, of course."

Mikhail leans back in his chair and regards me for a few seconds before he nods. "That should be fine. You're not a

prisoner here, Gabriette,” he says and I nearly laugh in his face. “I’ll be home at about 6 pm, so we can leave at 7.”

I nod and muster up a smile before saying, “Thank you,” and turning my back on him so I can make myself breakfast.

Also, to hide my smile because he looks perplexed at the sudden appearance of my manners. While busying myself with the tough job of choosing a cereal, I hear his footsteps behind me, then he slides something across the counter and my eyes widen.

A fucking black card.

“Use it for whatever you need,” he says without waiting for anything else then retreating from the kitchen until I hear the unmistakable ding of the elevator.

It’s only then that I breathe out a sigh and put the cereals back before turning to my two bodyguards.

“Let’s get going, shall we?” I say, then for the next few hours I immerse myself in the mind-numbing art of shopping.

What’s the point of getting free rein of a black card if I don’t use it? Screw this man. He took my life from me, and made me beg him for his cock. Might as well spend his money.

When I get back, it’s nearly five, and I am actually tired. But there’s this thing with Mikhail tonight, so even if I wanted to have an early night, I know it’s not possible. I’ll be paraded as the wife of Mikhail Baranov tonight; yay me.

After Alexei and Viktor help me with my bags, I unpack everything and choose my outfit for tonight before running myself a bath. I have half an hour before he arrives back here, so I better hurry.

Dozing off in the hot water wasn't on my list of things to do today, and when the bathroom door slams open, I sit up with a yelp.

Only for my heart to sink right into my stomach when Mikhail walks in, white shirt and face splattered in blood.

He doesn't even acknowledge me, he just starts to strip ... right there. Right in front of me while I can do nothing but stare because the tub is facing the shower area.

I tell myself not to look. I really do. It's an act of will, almost a silent chant in my mind—don't look, don't look, don't look.

But the moment Mikhail unbuttons his shirt, the chant loses its grip, unraveling like a poorly knitted scarf. My eyes betray me; they shift from the floor tiles, inching their way up, and finally rest on him.

The air grows thick as he pulls off his shirt, and for the life of me, I can't look away. God, why can't I look away?

This is what I missed when he fucked me the other night? Fucking hell, this man is gorgeous.

His back is a canvas of ink—no, not a canvas; that's too delicate for Mikhail. His body is more like a weathered wall that's seen too many storms, marked up with tattoos that each tells a story I'm not privy to.

Lines of text I can't read curl around his biceps like they're trying to strangle him. There's a serpent slithering down his spine, its scales detailed to an almost hypnotic degree. More ink crawls over his shoulder blades and wraps around his biceps like armor.

Armor for what? I have no idea. Emotional detachment, maybe.

His muscles tense and ripple as he moves, each one honed through years of whatever the hell it is that he does when he's not making my life complicated.

I hate that I notice how the golden strands of his long hair catch the light, turning it into a golden halo of sorts and softening the hardness of his face.

God, I want to despise him, I really do. He's arrogant, dismissive, and infuriatingly nonchalant about this whole marriage thing. Yet, as I watch him, I can't deny the raw, almost primal, magnetism he exudes.

Shit. Stop it, brain. He's not an angel; far from it.

What unnerves me is how he moves so casually, so unguarded, as though he's unaware of his own physical presence. Or maybe he is aware, and just doesn't care.

Either way, it's irritating as hell. I feel like I'm spying on a private moment, yet we're in our shared living space, a place where I have every right to be.

Then he turns around and we lock eyes.

I should look away; I need to look away. I despise how he can make me feel this way, how he can draw my eyes and hold them hostage. But for the life of me, I can't seem to break free.

The art on his chest is not chaotic; it's been thoughtfully positioned to form a narrative sequence—or at least, it feels that way. In the midst of the ink are two stars, identical yet unique, one on each shoulder.

My gaze involuntarily drops to his knees, finding twin stars that mirror those on his shoulders. I'm sure they have to mean something, these stars. They can't be random; nothing about Mikhail ever is.

Stars are celestial, distant—much like him. But there they are, embedded into the skin of a man who's anything but heavenly.

Oh, God, his cock looks like it could rearrange your insides *well*, and the dull ache still in my pussy three days after our wedding can attest to this. He has those delicious V-lines too, because of course he does.

Why did I have to be cursed with a disgustingly hot, arranged husband? Fuck sakes.

A shiver races down my spine, freezing me in place just like his gaze. For a split second, there's a flicker of something in his eyes. Is it surprise? Curiosity? Before I can decipher it, the wall comes back up, and his eyes are as unreadable as the tattoos that mar his skin.

Then he smirks because he's an asshole ... An asshole who just caught me eye-fucking him.

“Like what you see, *Malyshka*?” he says, then he walks into the shower and I just wish the ground would swallow me whole right along with this tub.

What is wrong with me? I'm not supposed to feel this way. Not about him, not about this man I'm tethered to by nothing more than a contract and a last name. I curse under my breath.

This is ridiculous. I've got to get a grip.

But even as I think about it, I know that I'm lying to myself. Because for the first time since this whole mess started, I realize that Mikhail has gotten under my skin—and I have no idea what the hell to do about it.

I tear my eyes away, finally breaking that involuntary spell, trying to ignore the strange twist in my stomach. For a

moment, I catch my reflection in the glass pane by the window. My eyes meet my own, questioning.

What the hell are you doing, girl?

I wish I had an answer.

He's just there, unaware, or perhaps entirely aware, of the effect he has on me.

I stand up and my heart drops as I realize it was the wrong time to get out of the bath ... because his hungry gaze sweeps over my naked body and causes my insides to clench.

So I reach for a towel and rush out of the bathroom before we both do something we'll regret.



CHAPTER
TWELVE

MIKHAIL

Walking into the room with Gabriette on my arm feels like I'm stepping onto a damn minefield.

I didn't expect her to be in the bathroom when I got home after an intense interrogation session, and only noticed her after I got undressed. But I sure as hell didn't miss the way she was staring at me.

Her eyes were all over my body, even zoning in on my cock and biting her bottom lip. The fact that she was naked as well isn't lost on me. If I was even more pissed off, I would have ripped her from that bath and had a rehash of our wedding night.

But that would have been a mistake. I don't want to fuck her again ... God, but that body of hers. Now that I've seen it, I can't get it out of my mind.

Fucking her was a mistake, I never should have staked my claim on her body. What had possessed me to do it, and even more telling, why didn't she push me away or tell me to stop?

Her body molded perfectly to mine. For a defiant firecracker, she sure was submissive under my touch. Even slamming back on my cock and meeting me thrust for thrust.

Then she called out my fucking name when she came on my cock the first time, only for her to scream it like an oath the second time.

She's getting under my skin and every instinct tells me to keep my distance, but she's wearing a red dress — one that clings to her in all the right places, making it damn near impossible to focus on anything else.

Everything's fine, I tell myself, but even as I think this, I can't shake the feeling that 'fine' is a condition that's slipping rapidly out of my grasp.

We move through the room and I sense the eyes of other men on her, tracing the contours of her body. It irritates the hell out of me. I don't want to feel possessive, but I find my jaw clenching involuntarily.

I'm going to be a Bratva Pakhan, for God's sake, feared by men who know better. Jealousy is a worthless emotion, a distraction. And distractions get you killed.

She's 25; young, vibrant. I'm a decade her senior, carrying the weight of choices and responsibilities that would break lesser men.

I've led operations that have shifted the underground world's balance of power, orchestrated deals with politicians and law enforcement to ensure the survival of my people.

So I can't afford to be sidetracked by an arranged marriage, a pretty face, a complicated stare.

I keep my demeanor ice cold as we move through the crowd. People part ways for us like the goddamn Red Sea. Some out of respect, most out of fear. I've cultivated that fear carefully, weaponized it.

Yet here I am, battling an emotion I didn't invite, because of a woman I didn't choose.

The irony isn't lost on me. A man who's navigated life and death situations, yet can't seem to navigate the space around his own wife. It's a sensation I can't easily shake off, like the barrel of a gun aimed squarely at your back.

Ten years ago, that kind of attention might've meant something. But ten years ago was another lifetime; one where

mistakes were made, debts were accrued, and loyalties were shattered.

I spot my father across the way, and he nods his head.

“We should speak to my father and sister. They’re over there,” I tell Gabriette, gesturing in the direction of my father and Natalya.

They’re standing a little apart from the crowd, engaged in a conversation that looks intense. Very much like them.

Natalya is a ‘daddy’s girl’ and can literally twist him around her little finger, but don’t tell him that. Despite her younger years, she has inherited that Baranov steel, albeit refined by an education that’s been broader than mine.

My father has the unyielding demeanor of a man born to lead, born to be feared. His stern countenance, punctuated by his mismatched eyes, one green and one blue, conveys a lifetime of ruthless decision-making.

I got my eye colors from him; it’s a Baranov feature that seems to be prominent in the first-born sons.

It’s said that he can peer into a man’s soul, determining his worth or lack thereof, with a mere glance. I often wonder if each eye perceives something different, giving him a more complete picture of the world and the people in it.

Before we reach them, I turn to Gabriette.

“Wait, I have to ask if you know who he is,” I say, suddenly recalling that my wife might not be clued up in the way my world works.

She peers up at me and shakes her head. “I don’t. As I’ve said before, I’ve been out of this life for years. But I do still know that different mafia sects have a chain of command.”

I nod. “Well, who would be right at the top in the Cosa Nostra?” I ask, attempting to see if she remembers the so-called chain of command.

“Uh, that would be the Capo dei Capi...” she says, trailing off and when the realization seems to hit her, she looks up at me with wide, horrified eyes. “Don’t tell me your father—”

“He’s the Pakhan, yes,” I say, and without another word, we continue our walk toward them.

As we approach, my father’s eyes lock onto Gabriette. It’s a scrutinizing gaze, one that I’ve felt countless times. It’s the kind of gaze that measures worth, that sizes up potential threats and allies in the span of a heartbeat.

“Father, Natalya, this is my wife, Gabriette,” I say, making the introduction as formal and as detached as possible.

My father extends his hand for a firm shake, and I notice Gabriette’s smile waver slightly. My sister offers a polite, if slightly cold, smile in return.

“Gabriette, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I apologize for not being able to attend the wedding,” my father says, his words practiced but sincere.

“I understand, Mr. Baranov. The pleasure is mine,” Gabriette replies, holding her own despite the palpable tension, but I catch the tremble in her hand at the same time my father does.

“Natalya,” Gabriette continues, turning toward my sister. “I wasn’t even aware that Mikhail had a sister.”

“Hm, I wonder why,” Natalya says, a hint of disdain in her voice. “I wasn’t at the wedding either, but then, I wasn’t invited.”

I feel a spike of irritation. “You were away at St. Leonards, immersed in your final trial studies. I didn’t think you’d want to be bothered.”

Natalya’s eyes narrow at me for a second, and I know we’ll be revisiting this conversation later, in private. “Well, it’s nice to meet you anyway, Gabriette.”

An awkward silence settles over us. Gabriette doesn’t know yet that in a week’s time, I’ll take over as Pakhan. My father and I have been meticulously planning the transition, laying the groundwork for a seamless change in leadership.

But the presence of Gabriette in this new chapter of my life is a wild card, an unpredictable element I’ve yet to fully understand.

“My son tells me you’re adjusting well,” my father finally says, breaking the silence.

“I’m getting there, thank you,” Gabriette replies, a little cautiously, her eyes darting from me to my father.

“That’s good to hear. Mikhail will need a strong woman by his side in the years to come,” he adds, the implication heavy in the air, though only I fully grasp its weight.

I can’t help but think about what happened ten years ago ... only for him to say something like this now. A strong woman at my side as I take over? What for?

As we make small talk, I can feel Gabriette’s hand on my arm, her fingers lightly touching the fabric of my suit.

“We should get back to the other guests,” I finally say, cutting the non-existent conversation short.

As we walk away, I feel Gabriette’s eyes on me again, just like earlier. This time, it’s not my shirt or my tattoos she’s

studying, but something far more impenetrable.

I realize, with a mixture of frustration and something I don't even want to name, that the layers of my life I've kept so meticulously compartmentalized are beginning to blur.

"So ... your father is basically the head of the Russian mafia. The most powerful person this side of the pond," Gabriette says, scoffing in disbelief.

I nod. "Yes, and I'll be taking over from him soon, so that's a fact you had better get used to."

As soon as I say this, Gabriette seems to grow pale. Good, she finally understands what this means for her and how she can't step out of line right now because it might end in her death at another's hand.

She looks up, her eyes meeting mine. There's something there—an emotion I can't quite place. Maybe it's the same magnetic pull I'm trying to resist. Maybe it's something else entirely.

But for a split second, I find myself wondering what it would be like to let my guard down, to explore whatever the hell this tension is between us.

I quickly snuff out that thought. My past is a demon that lurks in the darkest corners of my mind, a ghost whose whispers have shaped the man I am today. Letting anyone get close, even Gabriette, isn't an option. It's a risk I can't afford to take.

I won't allow another woman to get under my skin, not when there's still a fucking knife in my back.



CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

MIKHAIL

We step out of the gala hall into the crisp night air, Gabriette's hand resting lightly on my arm. The vehicle is already waiting for us—a black sedan, inconspicuous yet fortified with all the essential security modifications. Alexei, one of my most trusted men and Gabriette's guard, sits in the driver's seat.

“Just get us home, Alexei,” I say, the words coming out a bit sharper than I intended.

No sooner do we pull away from the curb than my instincts kick into high gear. A black SUV pulls out to follow us, and something about its movement sets off every alarm bell in my head.

“Speed up, and take the next right,” I order Alexei, my eyes staying glued to the rearview mirror.

Before Gabriette can ask what's going on, the deafening sound of gunshots fills the air. Bullets slam into the back of our car, and I instinctively push Gabriette down into the back seat. Then I reach into the concealed compartment between the seats to grab a gun.

“Get down and stay down,” I bark, throwing a glance over my shoulder to make sure she's out of sight. My eyes meet hers for a split second—wide, terrified, but also trusting. That look sears through me as we speed away from the venue.

Another round of bullets hits the car, and I hear Gabriette gasp, her body trembling beside me.

Alexei swerves sharply, narrowly avoiding an oncoming truck. I roll down the window, lean out, and return fire. I see

one of the SUV's headlights shatter; it swerves but regains control and continues its pursuit.

The city blurs past us like a dizzying mosaic of lights and shadows. We zigzag through narrow lanes, but our pursuers are persistent. I can hear Gabriette's ragged breathing, sense her terror, but there's no time for comfort or explanation.

My gaze darts to the rearview mirror. More black SUVs are tailing us, closing the gap with alarming speed. The tires screech in protest, but we manage to put some distance between us and the vehicles behind.

My phone buzzes — a message from my right-hand man, Ivan. Backup's on the way but still minutes out. Too long.

The shots ring out again, this time nearly shattering the rear window. Splinters of glass rain down into the car. I hear Alexei groan just as his window shatters completely, and I turn my head to see him slump over the wheel.

“Alexei!” I shout as the car swerves. “Fuck!”

As if on cue, the SUVs catch up, pulling alongside us. I can see masked faces and the glint of firearms. A fresh round of gunfire erupts, pinging off the car's armored sides.

In the midst of the chaos, gunfire, and shattered glass, I observe Gabriette's narrowed eyes, filled with determination.

“Alexei, move over to the passenger side,” she commands, surprising me with her calm authority as Alexei tries to drive while injured, and a smile tugs at my lips. “I'm taking the wheel.”

“But, Ma'am—” Alexei starts, his words drowned out by the rattle of bullets against the car.

“We don’t have time for arguments, Alexei. Just do it!” she snaps, her tone leaving no room for hesitation. “This window is shattered. They can easily kill either one of us, so fucking move!”

As Alexei complies, shifting to the passenger seat, Gabriette swiftly settles into the driver’s position, her hands gripping the steering wheel with a confidence that doesn’t go unnoticed. Her ability to take charge in the face of danger is as infuriating as it is attractive.

Fuck, this woman and what she does to me.

With a swift, almost instinctual motion, I return fire again. One of the SUVs swerves, temporarily falling back, but the other continues its pursuit, relentless and hell-bent.

The screech of tires signals another sharp turn, this one onto a narrow, less-traveled road. It’s a risky move—the tarmac is riddled with potholes and barely lit, but it’s a calculated gamble to lose our pursuers.

“Nice to see you showing your claws again, *Malyshka*,” I remark with a chuckle as I reload.

She shoots me a glare in the rearview, her eyes flashing annoyance. “Save the sarcasm for later, Baranov. We need to get out of this mess first.”

“Just keep us alive, woman,” I growl, my fingers gripping the gun tightly as I fire a few shots at our relentless pursuers. “And watch the damn road!”

Gabriette rolls her eyes but doesn’t miss a beat. Her foot presses down on the accelerator, and we shoot forward, narrowly missing a collision with a delivery truck. The city’s neon lights streak past us in a dazzling blur.

Seconds feel like hours. My focus narrows to the road ahead and the rearview mirror, where the headlights of the pursuing vehicles are finally starting to fade. Just as I think we've lost them, a bullet whizzes past, barely missing the side mirror.

"They really want you dead, don't they?" she remarks, her tone more matter-of-fact than scared. "Any idea who these charming gentlemen are?"

I spare a quick glance at Gabriette, her profile illuminated by the dashboard lights. The way her hair tumbles down her shoulders, the hint of determination in her eyes; it's maddeningly attractive.

And the fact that she's the only one who can keep a level head in this chaos? Infuriatingly impressive. My wife is no fucking timid thing, that's for sure.

"Does it matter?" I grunt in response, returning my attention to the pursuing SUVs. "Just keep driving like you stole it, and I'll handle our unwanted guests."

"Yes, sir, Mr Baranov," she retorts and I swear my cock twitches. That damn mouth.

I let out a slew of Russian curses while returning gunfire, my thoughts going to who the fuck this is and my worry for Alexei's wheezing. The exchange of bullets continues as Gabriette swerves through the city's maze of streets.

The car is filled with the acrid scent of gunpowder, but Gabriette's perfume adds a subtle, sweet undertone. The contrast between danger and her delicate scent is strangely exhilarating.

"They're gaining on us, Mikhail," she says, her voice tinged with urgency.

I glance at the SUVs in the rearview mirror, noting their increasing proximity. “Take the next left, and then head straight. Backup shouldn’t be too long now.”

As if to prove my point when we take a sharp left onto a familiar street, additional cars join us—reinforcements summoned by Ivan. They fall into formation, effectively sandwiching our car in the middle of a protective convoy.

Three SUVs still pursue us, but now they’re outgunned and outnumbered. A hailstorm of bullets from our backup cars peppers one of the pursuing vehicles, and I see it slow down, then veer off course, crashing into a lamppost.

Then, as suddenly as it started, it’s over. A black sedan appears from a connecting road, slamming into one of the SUVs and forcing it off the road. Another sedan joins the chase, and the last SUV is taken care of within seconds.

Only when I’m sure the threat is neutralized, do I finally turn my attention back to Gabriette. Her face is pale, eyes wide and pupils blown out with an emotion I can’t place.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my voice softer now, though still tinged with the adrenaline that courses through me.

She looks at me through the rearview mirror, her eyes searching mine for something, then she nods.

“Good, we’re clear. Stop the car and move to the back. I’ll get us home the rest of the way,” I say, feeling my body slowly unclench from its battle-ready stance.



CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

MIKHAIL

When we pull into the underground garage of the penthouse, I can sense Gabriette's tension, a palpable force field of anxiety.

"We're here," I say curtly, as I kill the engine and look over at Alexei before I exit the car. Weapon drawn, I scan the area then signal that it's safe for her to get out.

She gets out, her body trembling as I pull her close and take out my phone to dial Viktor.

"The job's done?" I ask without preamble.

"One survived," Viktor responds. "He's been restrained and is waiting for questioning."

"Bring him," I say and step toward the cars that have just pulled up. Gabriette seems almost in a daze, her eyes fixed on the weapon in my hand and the men getting out of the car.

My men quickly fan out, securing the perimeter, and I hear a voice over one of their radios confirming that they're bringing the captive.

A couple of minutes later, two of my men arrive, dragging a bruised and bloodied man between them. His hands are bound, and he's wearing a cock-sure look on his face that pisses me off.

He's been disarmed, but his eyes shift warily, taking in his surroundings, settling on me and then flicking to Gabriette.

"Let's get this over with," I say, glaring at the captive. "Who sent—"

But before I can complete that sentence, Gabriette lunges at him, her palm landing with a sharp crack against his already battered face.

“Bastardo!” she says, then continues to curse him in Italian, her words seething with anger and we all stare at her for a few seconds before I snap out of my appreciation.

I move swiftly, my arms wrapping around her, pulling her back gently. I cup her face in my hand and she looks up at me, her eyes wide and filled to the brim with anger.

“Let me handle him, *Malyshka*,” I say, my voice low and reassuring against the storm of her rage as I pull her close to me. “This is what I’m here for.”

I hold Gabriette tightly, her sobs muffled against my shoulder. My voice, when it comes, is a low, comforting rumble, carefully measured for the ears of my men.

“Gabriette, I’ll handle this. You’ve shown immense strength today, and I’m proud of you. But this is my world.”

I release her slightly, still keeping her close, my fingers tracing comforting circles on her back, yet I maintain a stoic facade, aware of the watchful eyes of my men.

My tone carries the weight of my authority, a reminder to both her and my men that while I am comforting her, I am still the unyielding leader they follow.

“No more tears, *Malyshka*, let them see your strength,” I switch to Italian so only she can understand, my voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “Your tears mean nothing to me, except to serve as a reminder of what I’m capable of when someone threatens what’s mine.”

For a brief moment, I meet the eyes of my men, conveying a silent command that they understand well. Their expressions

harden, and they avert their gazes, giving us the privacy we need.

I push her away from me and cup her face in my hands, seeing that she's stopped crying. "Remember, you're mine, and no one can break what's mine without facing the consequences."

She looks up at me, the earlier anger all but gone. For a moment, I let her see the depth of my fury, the lengths I would go to protect her, before my expression smoothens into something more controlled.

"Now," I say, my tone returning to its usual calm, a steel edge cutting through my words. "Let's finish what we started."

In the ruthless world of organized crime, vulnerability is a luxury I cannot afford. Her safety is paramount, but it doesn't mean I'll expose our connection as a weakness.

With Gabriette held close, I turn my attention back to the captive, my glare fixed on him and it takes everything in me not to empty my clip into his fucking face.

"You made my wife cry," I say, my voice as sharp as a blade, locking eyes with the captive. "That just put you right on the top of my shit list. Talk. Who sent you?"

My men grip their weapons tighter, ready for my command.

The man hesitates, his eyes darting between me and Gabriette. Finally, he mutters, "Someone from your past who wants your head," grimacing as he tries to maintain his composure.

"Well, that narrows it down," I say sarcastically. "Take him away. Make sure he talks, but not here." I direct this to my

men in Russian. As they drag the captive away, I turn back to Gabriette.

She looks at me, her eyes searching for something; empathy, reassurance, a sign that the man she's married to is capable of feeling something other than cold detachment.

I offer her none of these things, my face a mask of indifference because I can't afford to slip up.

I scoop her up into my arms and tell one of my men to get the elevator as I hold her close. Her flowery perfume calms my frayed nerves for some reason, and I find myself breathing out a sigh.

After calling on Nikita to tend to her, I leave the penthouse, even though everything in me is telling me to stay with her, to make sure she's fine.

But I can't do that. I have a job to do that doesn't require the side of me Gabriette saw a few moments ago.



CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

GABRIETTE

The heavy doors of the elevator shuts behind Mikhail, closing off the outside world, and I'm left alone in the aftermath of the chaos. I find myself alone in the spacious living room, my heart still racing from the chaotic events that unfolded in the underground parking.

With trembling hands, I wipe away the remnants of tears from my cheeks, my fingers tracing the lines of distress etched into my skin.

Nikita walks out a few seconds later. She's seen it all, I'm sure, the raw emotions and the unexpected outbursts. But like Mikhail, she maintains a stoic facade, offering no words of comfort.

"Come, let's clean you up," is all she says.

I nod in acknowledgment, grateful for the practicality of her presence. Together, we head to the bathroom, where she retrieves a first aid kit. She cleans my face and I feel my skin stinging from where the glass shards exploded.

Afterwards, I grab my makeup remover and a cotton pad and begin to wipe away the smudged makeup, my movements mechanical.

Nikita remains silent, her gaze averted, as if giving me space. It's a stark reminder that in Mikhail's world, emotions are something that needs to be hidden. As I clean my face, I can't help but replay the events in my mind, the anger, the fear, and Mikhail's words of reassurance, however minimal they were.

I take a deep breath, attempting to steady my trembling hands, but the reality of the situation bears down on me. Once I've cleaned up to the best of my ability, I glance at Nikita, her expression unchanged.

“Mikhail... he...” My voice catches in my throat, unable to articulate the whirlwind of emotions churning within me.

Nikita places a hand on my shoulder, her touch gentle but sending a ripple of nausea through me. “He’s a complex man, Mrs Baranova. His world is harsh, and he navigates it with ruthless determination. But there’s more to him than meets the eye. He has his reasons, even if he doesn’t show them.”

I nod, absorbing her words, trying to find solace in them. Despite the comforting words, a nagging doubt lingers in the depths of my heart. Can a man like Mikhail truly care for someone? Or am I just a pawn in a game far beyond my understanding?

Nikita hands me a fresh towel, and I dry my face, wiping away the remnants of tears and makeup. “Thank you,” I say.

She nods and leaves the bathroom while I remain alone for a moment, staring at my reflection in the mirror. The face that looks back at me is not just a woman marked by dried tears and anger; it’s a woman thrust into a world of danger and deception, bound to a man who walks a razor’s edge.

With a sigh, I straighten my posture, determination welling up within me. Mikhail may be distant, his world ruthless, but I won’t be a mere pawn in this game. I’ll find my own strength, my own place, and prove that I’m more than a weakness to be shoved away in a fancy penthouse.

Besides, didn’t I just drive a car in the middle of a goddamn shootout? I know I’m not weak if I can pull that off,

even with Mikhail barking orders from the back seat.

As I step out of the bathroom, ready to face whatever comes next, I know that the road ahead won't be easy. But I'm Gabriette Baranova now, and I'll have to make my mark in this world, no matter how unforgiving it may be.

He said no more tears and to let them see my strength, If I'm going to be the wife of a future Bratva head, I need to learn this.

I just need to find a person who can teach me how to shoot a gun.



CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

MIKHAIL

The walk to the makeshift holding cell we have in the building is a short one, but it's enough time for me to prepare myself mentally for the unpleasantness that awaits.

The man is tied to a chair, beaten, bloodied but conscious. He grimaces as I enter the room, his eyes clouded with a mixture of fear and defiance.

“Who sent you?” I ask again, wasting no time on pleasantries.

The man hesitates, glancing nervously at Viktor standing in the corner of the room.

Seeing his reluctance to answer, frustration boils within me like a tempest ready to erupt. In a swift motion, I step forward, my fist connecting with his jaw with a sickening thud.

His head snaps to the side, a spray of blood accompanying the impact. The room reverberates with the sound, a harsh reminder of the brutality that underpins my world.

“Talk!” I snarl, my voice sharp as a blade. “Or I promise you, my fist will be the least of your worries.”

The man groans, blood dribbling down his split lip. Despite the pain etched on his face, he refuses to back down and curses.

I clench my jaw, the pulse in my temple matching the drumming beat of my anger. With controlled fury, I land another blow, this time striking his already battered face. Each punch is a cathartic release, a manifestation of the rage that simmers beneath my skin.

“I suggest you speak,” I growl, my patience at its end. “There’s the easy way, where you tell me who sent you.”

The man hesitates, darting his eyes toward Viktor again, who’s leaning against the wall, arms crossed. His face is badly bruised, swollen in places, but he can still speak. It’s a conscious choice we made to keep him able to communicate.

“And there’s the hard way, where I find out who you are after killing you, and send your family right afterward to join you,” I snarl, feeling the tendrils of my patience fraying.

He coughs, spitting out a glob of bloody saliva onto the floor. “You think you’re invincible, huh?”

“I’m Mikhail Baranov. I don’t think I’m invincible. I know I am,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking you can provoke me into killing you quickly. The less you speak, the longer this takes.”

His eyes meet mine, a futile challenge. The room is silent except for the ragged breaths of the man before me, each inhale a struggle against the pain.

“If you’re going to kill me anyway, why should I talk?”

I lean in close, my eyes locked onto his. “Because, depending on what you say, dying quickly might still be an option.”

For a moment, his facade wavers, and I can see the human instinct for self-preservation battling with whatever loyalty or vengeance-driven mission he’s on.

“A blood vendetta,” he finally mutters, his voice tinged with resignation. “Someone wants it claimed. Against you.”

“A blood vendetta,” I repeat, my mind spinning through a list of names, enemies both old and new. Vendettas are not

uncommon in my world, but a blood vendetta is serious, a matter of honor, a claim that's not easily ignored or set aside.

“For whose blood? Whose vendetta?” I probe further, my voice hardening.

He coughs again, this time struggling for breath. “We weren't given a name, just ordered to chase you and your wife and make sure she got hurt. They said you'd know when the time comes.”

I stare at him, my patience exhausted. “You know, vague answers have a way of resulting in painful deaths.”

He grimaces, realizing the gravity of his situation too late. When he finishes speaking, there's a moment of eerie calm; his confession hanging in the air like a noose, sealing his fate.

The room feels charged with a palpable tension, a silent understanding that this moment marks the end for him.

My fists clench, the need to kill this man burning inside me like a relentless flame. There's no mercy in my gaze, only a cold, unwavering resolve. The room seems to shrink around us, closing in on the doomed man tied to the chair.

Without a word, I step closer, my eyes never leaving his. He tries to speak, perhaps to beg for mercy, but the words die in his throat as my hands find his neck and I feel the fragile beat of his pulse beneath my fingers.

Horror fills his eyes as he realizes what was happening, but it's too late for him. His gasps for air fill the room, growing weaker with each passing moment.

The world around me fades, leaving only the sound of his labored breaths and the pulse of blood beneath my fingers.

His struggles weaken as I squeeze, my grip relentless, his wide, terror-stricken eyes locked with mine. I keep eye contact, forcing him to look at me until the life drains out of him.

His body convulses briefly, then falls limp, the spark of life extinguished. I release him, letting his lifeless form slump to the ground. The room is silent once more, the echoes of his last breaths fading into nothingness.

There's no remorse in me, only a chilling calmness that settles over my shoulders.

When I finally make it to our apartment, it's late. The penthouse is dark, save for a sliver of light spilling out from under the bedroom door. I walk in quietly, expecting to find Gabriette tossing and turning in the throes of a sleepless night.

Instead, I found her deep in slumber, her body curled up on one side of the bed, her face peaceful in repose. But even in the dim light, I can see the cuts on her face, tiny shards of glass from the shattered windows, each one a testament to the night's events.

As I stand there, I realize, perhaps for the first time, how young she is, how untouched by the brutality and violence that's shaped my life.

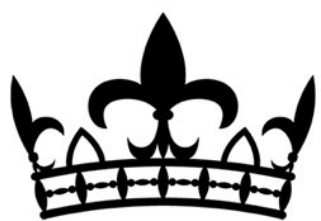
In that moment, she's not just an arranged wife or a woman who's entered into a world she doesn't fully understand. She's a human being, vulnerable and real.

After a shower, I slide into bed beside her, careful not to wake her, my body aching with a fatigue that's as much emotional as it is physical.

As I close my eyes, I know that something has shifted, a wall has been breached. The future remains a murky landscape

of unknowns, riddled with threats and vendettas yet to be claimed.

But for the first time in a long time, I find myself wondering not just about my place in that future, but about Gabriette's as well. And that thought, unsettling as it is, lingers long after sleep has claimed me.



CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

GABRIETTE

I wake up in a bed that's far too large for one person, a fact that's never bothered me until this very moment.

Last night's events play like a horror movie in my mind: the gunfire, the chase, and the sheer panic I felt. It's a rude awakening to the life I've married into. Even as a mafia princess, I've been shielded from this kind of brutality.

But I was smack bang in the middle of it all, driving a literal getaway car while Mikhail shot at people behind us.

I would still be wondering why they shot at us if Mikhail didn't explain just who his father was. He's the most powerful man in the Russian organized crime underworld, and now Mikhail will be taking over from him.

No wonder Sophia didn't want this life with him.

I curl up on my side and just as loneliness starts to creep into my thoughts, the bathroom door creaks open, pulling me out of my reverie.

Mikhail walks out, water droplets still clinging to his skin, a towel slung low around his waist.

He glances at me, his eyes locking onto mine, and for a fleeting second, I see something there; concern, maybe? Something that I've never seen before.

My breath catches as he makes his way toward me, that unreadable expression still on his face. Instead of barking orders or avoiding eye contact as he usually does, he kneels beside the bed, his proximity both unsettling and comforting.

He reaches up and gently tilts my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze.

“Are you okay?” he asks softly, completely devoid of the iciness I’ve come to expect from him. His gentleness catches me off guard, and for a moment, I lose my train of thought.

“Uh, yeah. I’m okay,” I finally manage to say, though ‘okay’ seems inadequate for the complex storm of emotions I’m navigating.

He studies my face, his eyes scanning the cuts from the shattered glass, the bruise forming on my cheek. “I’ll be home early tonight. There’s an orchestra concert I’d like to take you to.”

The sudden suggestion leaves me stunned. A concert? As if last night didn’t happen? As if I could just put on a pretty dress and sit in a crowded hall, pretending that everything is fine?

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” I say, my voice tinged with hesitation. “After last night, I don’t feel all that safe going out.”

He holds my gaze, his eyes piercing into mine as if searching for something—or maybe assessing the weight of my anxiety.

“You’re forgetting who you’re married to,” he says with a lift of his eyebrow.

I can’t help but sigh at this. “Last night reminded me, don’t worry.”

He scowls, then says, “I will keep you safe, Gabriette. That’s not a promise; it’s a fact.”

I've never heard him speak like this—not to me, not to anyone. The absoluteness in his voice disarms me, leaving me vulnerable in a way I didn't think was possible.

The weirdest thing is I find myself believing them. If last night proved something, it's that Mikhail and I work well together under pressure. Driving that car didn't terrify me, I felt exhilarated.

For a heartbeat, I just stare at him, my mouth open in a failed attempt to articulate my thoughts. It's as if the weight of his statement has pressed the air out of the room, leaving me gasping for breath.

He narrows his eyes slightly, as if frustrated by my silence, but he doesn't press.

“Do you understand?” he says, breaking into my thoughts, his voice still laced with that soft but unyielding resolve. “The safest place is at my side, Gabriette; I won't allow you to hide or cower.”

“I—yeah, I understand,” I finally stammered. Part of me wants to dive deep into this rare show of tenderness, to probe and understand what's brought it on.

But another part, the more cautious part, warns me not to. Because understanding might breed expectation, and expectation in our line of life is the first step towards disappointment.

His eyes hold mine for a few seconds longer, as if he's making sure his words have genuinely sunk in. Running the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip, he lets out a breath I didn't realize he was holding.

“Do you trust me, Gabriette?” he asks in a low, husky voice and it sounds less like a question and more like a test—

one I'm not sure I'm prepared for.

That simple question unnerves me, makes the walls I've built around myself wobble a bit.

"It's not about trust," I hedge, avoiding a direct answer. "It's just... this is all new to me. This life, this... chaos. I stepped away from it six years ago and now I'm right in the thick of it."

For a moment, I think he's going to probe further, push me to the boundaries of my emotional fortitude. But he doesn't. Instead, he nods, as if he understands exactly what I'm struggling to put into words.

"That's to be expected; you're married to me now—" he says, then he stops, as if he was about to reveal something he shouldn't have.

"We'll go step by step, starting with tonight," he says, then the corner of his mouth lifts in a smile. "I don't know about you, but I hate coming home to tension. So ... friends?"

The heaviness in the room eases, replaced by something softer, something that threatens to blur the rigid lines that have so far defined our relationship.

"Friends?" I laugh and try to stop my smile, but fail. "You want to be friends with someone who is always contemplating your death?"

He chuckles at this and shakes his head. "You don't want to kill me, Gabriette; and yes, I want us to be friends. Isn't it better than the alternative?"

I look at the man who forced a ring on my finger and wonder what the fuck I'm getting myself into. I can't get close to anyone again, much less be friends with them but here he is, extending an olive branch.

“Alright,” I whisper, my voice barely audible, as if I’m afraid speaking any louder would shatter this fragile moment. “We’ll go to the concert.”

He nods once, then he smiles, and it’s like someone punched me in the heart. Mikhail has fucking dimples on either side of his cheeks and they look damn adorable, especially since the smile actually reaches his eyes.

How can he go from fearsome Bratva leader to cute and boyish?

Then he rises to his feet, putting physical distance between us, but leaving an emotional closeness that feels as disconcerting as it is comforting.

As he walks away, disappearing into the walk-in closet, I’m left to grapple with this new element in our relationship. I feel like I’m not just an accessory to his life, an obligation to be managed. I’m something more, something worth protecting.

I sit there on the edge of our bed, stunned by this revelation and anxious about what it could mean for us.



CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

MIKHAIL

As I step into the elevator, the stainless steel doors closing with a soft whoosh behind me, I press the button for the penthouse and lean against the wall, taking a moment to exhale.

The conversation with Gabriette this morning lingers in my mind, its implications more complex than I'd like to admit.

I regret suggesting the orchestra. It's too intimate, too suggestive of the kind of emotional closeness that I swore I'd never allow myself to have with her—or anyone, for that matter.

“I will keep you safe, Gabriette. That's not a promise; it's a fact.”

Why did I say that? What came over me? There's a vulnerability in emotional investments, a risk that I can't afford, not in my line of work, not with my past.

And yet, the way she looked at me this morning, her eyes wide with surprise, perhaps even a glimmer of respect—it's troubling.

It's as if a dormant part of me was momentarily reanimated, a part that craves to be understood instead of feared. To be valued and to be, God forbid—loved.

The elevator dings softly, pulling me out of my thoughts. As the doors slide open, I step into the plush corridor leading to my penthouse, steeling myself for the evening ahead.

I'll go through with it, yes, but there will be a distance, a careful boundary that I won't cross.

The moment I step into the penthouse, that resolve lasts exactly three seconds. Gabriette stands there in a crimson dress that clings to her like a second skin.

Fuck, she looks amazing in red; as if the color was tailor-made just for her.

The color complements her complexion perfectly, making her look both ethereal and undeniably real. A slit runs up the side of the dress, reaching her thigh, and it takes every ounce of my self-control not to react.

God, I loved being in between those thighs the other night.

“Wow, you look... incredible,” I hear myself say, each word dragged out of me as if against my will. I’d planned on a simple ‘you look nice,’ but the words rearrange themselves, because I’m a fucking idiot who’s thinking with his cock.

“Thank you,” she replies softly, and I can see it in her eyes—that same surprise I saw this morning, now mixed with something else. Hope, maybe? Or expectation?

As I stand there looking at Gabriette, a woman I married out of arrangement rather than choice, I realize how perilously close to the edge I’ve come.

I’ve allowed a crack in the fortress I’ve spent years building, a tiny but dangerous fissure that threatens to bring the whole thing crumbling down.

And the worst part? I find myself not caring about the risk. I look at her, standing there in that crimson dress, her eyes meeting mine in a silent question, I think, fuck the consequences.

“Actually, just give me a moment. I need to ... grab something, and then we can leave,” I say, my voice more controlled than I feel.

“Alright,” she says softly, her eyes lingering on me for a moment longer before she looks away.

I walk into the bathroom, close the door behind me, and lean against it. Breathing out a long sigh, I stare at my reflection in the mirror, my eyes meeting my own as if looking for answers.

The room smells like her, some floral perfume that’s not too overpowering but still distinctly present, and it’s pissing me off how much I’m starting to like it.

I turn away, open the tap to splash cold water on my face. The chill shocks my system, but it does little to quell the storm brewing inside me.

With a frustrated growl, I yank a towel off the rack and dry my face roughly. This isn’t me; I don’t get distracted, don’t get emotionally entangled.

A woman can make or break you. I know this all too fucking well and I’ll be damned if I allow myself to be used like that again. I need to get my head back in the fucking game.

Exiting the bathroom, I find myself pacing the floor of the bedroom, each step echoing my growing unease.

This woman, this arrangement, it’s starting to get under my skin and I don’t like it. She’s not supposed to matter, not supposed to become someone I think about, worry about, want to impress.

Who the hell does she think she is, shifting the tectonic plates of my well-ordered world? And why do I let her?

I stop mid-pace, realizing the absurdity of blaming her for my own lack of control. My clenched fists uncurl slowly as I

exhale, forcing myself to simmer down. There's a problem here, yes, but it's not Gabriette; it's me.

When I finally re-enter the living room, she looks up and her eyes scan my face. For a moment, I worry she can read the internal upheaval I've just experienced, but she simply smiles and stands.

"Ready?" she asks, a word laden with more weight than she probably realizes.

I take a deep breath, meeting her gaze squarely. "Yes," I say, offering her my arm once more. "Let's go."



CHAPTER
NINETEEN

MIKHAIL

The ride to the concert hall is tense, but not in a way that I've ever experienced before. In the back of the sleek black car, my men remain hyper-aware, ever vigilant, but tonight, it feels as though their attention is divided.

Of course, they're still focused on the potential threats, the reason we even need an armed convoy to go to a damn concert. But there's something else too, an unspoken awareness that the stakes have somehow changed.

We arrive at the concert hall, its grand facade illuminated in the soft glow of the evening lights, and are quickly ushered inside.

A private booth awaits us, far removed from the public but with a perfect view of the stage. As we settle into our seats, I see Gabriette's eyes widen slightly.

"I didn't think we'd be so close," she whispers.

"I thought you'd appreciate this more," I reply, but what I don't say is that the private booth isn't just for luxury; it's easier to secure, to defend.

She looks at me, that unreadable expression back as she regards me. "Why are you being so nice to me, Mikhail? Aren't you supposed to hate me?"

"Hate you?" I scoff, chuckling. "I don't know you well enough to hate you, Gabriette. Friends, remember?"

Biting her bottom lip again, she looks over my shoulder as if to avoid my gaze and, for some reason, it pisses me off.

“You don’t have to treat me like I’m fragile, either,” she murmurs, turning that sliver of annoyance into fury.

But then the music starts, and I can’t bring myself to act on that fury.

When the symphony begins, I find it hard to focus on the music, though I usually enjoy it. Instead, I’m drawn to Gabriette yet again.

The way her eyes light up as the first notes float through the air is captivating. She’s entranced, her gaze not leaving the stage even for a second.

At certain parts, when the music swells into grand crescendos or softens into delicate, emotional notes, I see her eyes gloss over, nearly spilling tears. Her hand goes to her chest as if to calm her beating heart, then her hand lands on my thigh and she grips it unconsciously.

I grind my teeth, annoyed at myself. Why should her emotion bother me? Why should any of this bother me? She’s a means to an end, a pawn in a larger game. That’s all.

But even as I tell myself this, I know it’s a lie.

When a familiar Brahms piece starts playing, I notice how her relaxed posture suddenly stiffens up and her breathing becomes labored. I’m about to ask her what’s wrong when I see a tear slip down her cheek.

Something about her reaction doesn’t sit right with me, so I reach out to wipe the stray tear — only for her to jerk away from me. Her eyes are wide and filled with fear, as if she momentarily forgot where she was.

“Uhm, I ... sorry,” she says, then turns back to the concerto. I file this reaction away for later, but I doubt she’d tell me what it was about.

Where did she go at that moment? And why does it seem like that song trapped her there?

Finally, the concert ends, the last note lingering in the air before being swallowed by rapturous applause. She turns to me, her eyes still a little misty, and for the first time since this all started, she looks truly happy despite her earlier reaction.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her voice heavy with sincerity. “This was ... It was amazing, Mikhail.”

“You’re welcome,” I reply, though the words feel like shards of glass in my mouth.

There’s a look in her eyes, one that makes my fucking heart lurch with anticipation. But then she turns away and clears her throat.

The ride home is electric, every silence loaded, every glance fraught. It’s as if we’re both aware of something unspoken, a truth neither of us is willing to voice.

She squirms in her seat, adjusting her dress, brushing her hair behind her ear; telltale signs of her discomfort.

I catch her movements in my peripheral vision and force myself to look away, focusing on the dark road ahead. I try to fill my mind with other concerns, with the security protocols, the movements of rival organizations, the machinations of my own family.

Anything but her.

But it’s futile. She’s gotten under my skin, and I loathe the vulnerability that comes with it.

The car turns into the familiar drive of the penthouse; the gates closing behind us like the sealing of a vault, and I exhale

deeply, grateful for the physical barriers that keep the world at bay.

Yet as we step out of the car, and our eyes meet in a fleeting moment, charged with an emotion I refuse to name.

The elevator hums as it ascends, the only sound in a space otherwise enveloped by a thick, pulsating silence. I find myself leaning against the wall, arms crossed over my chest.

It's a defensive posture, one I've assumed countless times in tense situations, but this tension is different. It's not laced with the imminent threat of violence or betrayal; it's loaded with something else entirely, something neither of us is willing to articulate.

I can feel Gabriette's eyes darting over to me, then looking away, as if she's torn between wanting to stare and fearing what she'll see—or feel—if she does.

The soft glow of the elevator light catches the curve of her cheek, the shimmer of her dress, casting her in a surreal, almost ethereal light.

I know I should look away, break this electric tension, but I don't. Instead, I let my gaze lock onto her.

Finally, she looks up, her eyes meeting mine, and there it is.

Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes wide and filled with an emotion she can't, or won't, articulate. It's a look of need, pure and simple, and it catches me off guard.

Why? Because it mirrors my own.

It's a need that's raw, almost feral, something that can't be tamed by reason or rationality. For a moment, our eyes hold, and I see her pupils dilate, the flush rise on her cheeks. She

squirms slightly, her lips parting as if to speak, but no words come.

I'm a man of control, a master of my own fate, schooled in the art of suppressing wants and desires for the greater good, for the hard realities of power and survival. Emotion is a vulnerability, a risk I've been trained to avoid.

But as Gabriette holds my gaze, as I sense her struggle to understand this charged space between us, I feel my own resolve waver.

I can sense her need not just to be understood but to be wanted—just as I've realized my own need to understand her, to... want her.

She seems to be a mirror reflecting back parts of me I've long buried or forgotten, aspects of my humanity that I've felt were best left hidden. And it terrifies me.

I walk towards her and her mouth opens slightly when she realizes what I'm doing. Then I draw my hand to her chin and run the pad of my thumb over her bottom lip.

She sucks in a breath. "Mikhail—"

"Shh," I say, shaking my head. "It's taking everything in me not to kiss you right now, Gabriette—"

Then the elevator dings, snapping us both out of whatever trance we've been lulled into. Sighing, I push away from her, all too aware of how close I was to crossing lines that can't be uncrossed.

With every step, I'm reminded of the walls I've built, the emotional barricades erected to keep people, women, like Gabriette out. But as we step inside, those walls seem perilously fragile.

The air between us is charged, a living, breathing entity that neither of us can ignore. I feel it in my bones, this crackling tension, this unnamed thing that's both exhilarating and terrifying.

“Goodnight, Gabriette,” I say, my voice betraying none of the chaos swirling inside me.

“Goodnight, Mikhail,” she responds, her voice barely above a whisper.

She turns to walk away, I find myself watching her, tracing her silhouette until she disappears down the hall. And even after she's gone, the weight of that moment, that need, lingers in the air, a haunting reminder of a truth I'm not yet ready to face.

I realize no gate, no security protocol, no amount of calculated indifference will shield me from the one threat I hadn't planned for—the unsettling effect of Gabriette.

I understand that the most dangerous enemy I face might not be one I can defeat with bullets or strategy. Because this enemy isn't out in the world; it's here, in the confines of this penthouse, this inexplicable relationship.

It's the emotion in her eyes, the feeling in my chest, the tension in the air.

It's something far more terrifying than any threat I've ever faced, because for the first time, I don't know how to fight it.

God, I need to get out of here.



CHAPTER
TWENTY

MIKHAIL

I walk inside the bar and spot the familiar blonde woman sitting in my private booth. She looks up when I approach and smiles. Those green eyes have pulled many men to their knees.

She's gorgeous, of course, with a body made for sin and an unhealthy thirst for blood.

Liadan Vittori is one of my closest friends. Her mother is the sister of my father's best friend, so we've basically grown up like siblings. She has one foot in the Irish Mafia because of her mother and the other in the Cosa Nostra because of her father.

She also happens to be one of the most ruthless females I know.

"Ah, I was beginning to wonder where you were," she says as she gets up to embrace me. "You sounded out of it on the phone. What's up?"

"I need alcohol before I get into that," I growl and call one of the servers over for a bottle of whiskey.

While pouring us each two fingers, I can feel her eyes on me and know she has a thousand questions waiting to fire off.

"Christ, this looks interesting," she says, leaning back against the plush leather sofa. "What's got the great Mischa Baranov in this headspace?"

I shoot her a glare and down the alcohol before pouring another, and I can hear the amusement in her voice when she adds, "or should I ask, whom?"

“Shut the fuck up, Lee,” I growl, but it only serves to make her laugh more. She’s always been able to read me like an open book and it’s fucking annoying. “It’s my wife.”

Her eyes widened at this. “Oh? The little Italian spitfire you told me about?” she says, but this time the humor is gone. “Did something happen?”

I lean forward, bracing my elbows on my knees, and breathe out a sigh. “Being close to her is opening up old wounds,” I say as I look down at the amber liquid swirling the glass around. “Dasha type wounds.”

When I look up, I see the surprise on her face, but there’s an underlying anger there, too. She knows what I went through ten years ago, knows what my father had me do and how I haven’t healed from it at all.

“Feckin’ hell,” she says, her slight Irish accent coming through. “How so? What is she doing that’s opening these wounds?”

I think about that question, really think about it and wonder how I can answer it. What exactly is it about Gabriette that’s making me feel this way?

“She’s unapologetically ... Gabriette,” I say, scoffing. “She has a mouth on her, had one even as I threatened her into marriage. Even while terrified of me and knowing what I could do to her, she never backed down. Fuck, she even threatened to kill me when we had our first dance.”

Thinking back to our dance, I can’t help but laugh. “I don’t know, Lee, she’s making me feel all these things and...” I trail off as I look up because she’s suddenly wearing a look of disbelief. “What?”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” she scoffs, shaking her head. “You’re falling for your wife—”

“The fuck I am,” I growl. “I’ve only known her for a couple of weeks. I am not falling for her. She’s just... getting under my skin.”

Lee swings one leg over the other. “Okay, big man, prove it. Go up to that sexy redhead at the bar who’s been looking at you for the last ten minutes and tell her to meet you in your office back there.”

I turn to look at where she gestured to and sure enough, there’s a redhead staring at me. She sees me looking and acts coy, turning away from me as an invitation. Normally I would take the invitation in a heartbeat, perhaps new pussy will make me feel better.

But even as she’s sexy, as Lee put it, she’s not a certain brunette who screamed out my name as she came on my cock.

“I rest my case,” Lee says with a grin, holding up her glass and toasting as if she proved a point.

Falling for Gabriette? The thought is preposterous. I may have an unhealthy obsession with her and how obedient she was for me, but that doesn’t mean I’m falling for her.

Placing my glass down, I hang my head in my hands and breathe out a sigh. “I can’t go through this again, Lee. I can’t ... feel anything for her.”

“Not everyone is Dasha,” Lee says, and just the mention of that name feels like a railroad spike through my heart.

Dasha — my fiancée of ten years ago. The one who turned me into the heartless asshole I am today after I caught her in bed with the man who would have been my brigadier.

My second in command and my fiance had been having an affair behind my back for three years. I found this out the hard way when I came home early from Brussels one evening and found them fucking in my bed.

It would have been easier to have them killed, but my father was there with me and saw everything. Kazimir Baranov does not take kindly to betrayal, especially not when it's between the man he raised as his own son and the woman I loved.

He made me slit their throats right there and it would have been all forgotten had I not found out Dasha was pregnant when she died. To this day, I still don't know if I killed my own unborn child.

“No, she's not,” I breathe. “But I can't risk it, not after ... everything.”

I down the alcohol and lean back against the leather sofa, sighing. Falling for Gabriette is out of the question, so I need to maintain my distance. But how exactly do I do that when just her presence calls to me like a fucking siren song?

“So, what are you going to do? Why did you call me if you made up your mind?”

I turn my gaze back to her and shrug. “I guess I just needed to say everything out loud.”

“And do you feel better?” she asks with a lift of her eyebrow.

“Fuck no.”

Chuckling, she gets up from her seat and plants herself next to me. “Well, since I'm here to give you advice, it's this: don't overthink things. I understand your apprehension since I

was there to help you pick up the pieces afterwards. But for the love of God, don't paint Gabriette with Dasha's brush."

I blink. "I wasn't—"

"Yes, you were. You've already marked her as a betrayer before she could have a chance to prove herself to you," she says and places a hand on my shoulder. "Get to know her, Mischa. You might find out something that could surprise you."

I look at my best friend and see the sincerity in her eyes. She's the only one I really kept close after what happened, the only one who tried to help me get through the betrayal without losing myself in the hurt and anger.

I owe my sanity to her, as crazy as it sounds, so of course I would call her up as soon as I feel close to breaking point.

Pulling her into an embrace, I sigh. "Thank you," is all I say, but I don't think I need to explain why I'm thanking her. She simply nods and pats my back before diving into some proposal her uncle has for me.

She knows when I need to talk and when I need a distraction and honestly, I am thankful for that.

Now, to just get a grip on what I'm feeling for Gabriette.



CHAPTER
TWENTY ONE

GABRIETTE

I'm still in bed, staring up at the ceiling and wondering what the fuck happened between me and Mikhail last night.

For weeks he's been distant, pretending I don't exist and barking out orders. Now, ever since the car shootout the other night, he's talking to me and being gentle. What exactly is he trying to prove to me?

Granted, I loved going to the concert and being around others who share my passion. The only thing that ruined it was my reaction to that Brahms piece.

Why did it have to play at that perfect moment and dredge up old memories? He must have seen the look on my face when he touched my cheek, but luckily he didn't ask me.

Then there was the way he looked at me in the elevator, like he wanted to devour me whole. And at that moment ... to be completely honest, I would have let him. It's been a long few weeks of tiptoeing around the fact that I don't really hate him as much as I pretend I do.

Groaning, I grab the covers and cover my head. "Stop thinking with your goddamn pussy, Gabi," I chastise myself because not only is it totally fucking WRONG to be thinking about Mikhail like that.

But there's Damien.

Just thinking about his sweet face makes my heart ache and I curl up into a ball, wrapping my arms around my waist. I cheated on him, but honestly, does that matter after everything?

I loved him. He was my rock, but I find that I haven't thought about him at all since I've been married. The worst part is I don't even feel guilty about it ... God, I'm sick.

The last time we saw each other was on the day of my interview, and I have no idea what happened to my cell phone since then.

It's been a few weeks since I got married. Has anyone looked for me? If so, what would they have told the police? I scoff just thinking about it, because now that I know how powerful Mikhail actually is, there's no doubt he has the cops on his payroll.

I shouldn't have allowed myself to get that close to people, because honestly, who am I kidding? Getting close to people just means losing them in the end, considering the type of life I come from.

God, I was naïve thinking my father would really let me go so easily. I wanted freedom so badly that I was blinded to the truth. We weren't his daughters; we were his commodities.

With another sigh, I heave myself off from the bed and scream when I see someone leaning against my door with a smile on their face.

Wearing a skintight pair of black jeans, a gorgeous black silk blouse with a black leather jacket and heels, is Natalya, Mikhail's little sister.

"Jesus Christ, Natalya! You gave me a heart attack!" I exclaim as my hand goes to my chest and I try to control my breathing.

"Someone looks like they're wallowing in regret," Natalya says as she pushes off the door. "Something happen between you and my brother?"

While my heart slows down after being scared shitless, I think about the best way to answer that question. Did something happen between me and Mikhail or am I just overthinking things?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest and immediately regretting it because now it looks like I’m being defensive.

“Are you sure about that?” she says with a grin and a quirk of her eyebrow. “Because I saw Mikhail a few minutes ago wearing the exact same expression as you, just his face was more...scowly.”

“Pretty sure that’s his normal face,” I say, and shake my head. “By the way, why are you lurking in my bedroom?”

She walks over to me and gives a light shrug of her shoulder. “Thought I’d invite you out for lunch to get to know you better, but if you’d rather be in here wallowing in your own feelings, then be my guest.”

I look at her, this spitfire that seems to exude the same mix of confidence and cockiness as her brother, and wonder why she would even want to know me. She was all cold toward me at the dinner gala the other night, so it didn’t make sense.

“You want to get to know me? I didn’t even think you liked me,” I say with a frown. “Besides, don’t you have school?”

Natalya raises her eyebrow and I’m starting to think she’s mastered the look. “It’s Saturday, in case my brother fucked the sense of time out of you—”

“He did not!” I exclaim, feeling scandalized, and she grins. “I mean ... we haven’t done that...”

She looks incredulous and scoffs. “Wow, Mischa has no game then.”

“Mischa?”

“It’s his nickname. Now are you coming with me for some lunchtime margaritas or am I going alone?” she asks, looking exactly like a mafia princess who is used to getting her way and I can do nothing but sigh. If this will get me out of the penthouse and out of this funk, then so be it.

“Okay, okay, just let me get ready. Where are we going? And how old are you anyway?” I ask when I realize she’s just mentioned lunchtime margaritas. “Aren’t you too young for margaritas?”

“Russian genes, babygirl,” she says and rolls her eyes, walks towards me and pushes me to the bathroom. “We’re going to a restaurant my brother owns and I’m twenty turning twenty-one in a few months. Now go get ready!”

With this, she pushes me inside the bathroom and closes the door in my face. Good god, what a brat.

Twenty years old? Didn’t Mikhail mention that she was at St Leonards? Both Sophia and I attended St Leonards, the only school for mafia kids, although Sophia stayed there long after she graduated.

I poke my head out of the door and find Natalya lying down on the bed with her legs in the air, swinging them like a child.

Why are you still at St Leonards if you’ve graduated already?”

She turns her head to look at me. “It’s required for the kids of high-ranking members to learn the ins and outs of our

family trade. So after graduating, we stay a few extra years. Didn't you?"

I shake my head. "No, but my sister did..." I trail off, then walk back inside the bathroom.

Wait, my father had Sophia learn about his business? I wasn't asked to stay on longer after graduating, so what exactly did he have planned with my sister? Something tells me there's more to this, but I doubt my mother or father would even tell me.

Besides, I'm a Bratva wife now. They wouldn't trust me.

Shaking my head, I go about my business in the bathroom. But when I step out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel and walk to the walk-in, Natalya is sitting at my vanity already.

"Judging my make-up choices?" I ask and head to my clothing. "Don't judge too hard. It was all here when I arrived."

She shakes her head. "Not judging, just surprised and jealous that you probably don't even need all of this," she says with a pout. "What is it with you Italian women and looking flawless?"

I can't help but chuckle. "Flawless? I'd beg to differ. By the way, is black the universal color of members of the Bratva?" I say, gesturing toward her. "It seems to be a thing."

She chuckles and gets up from the vanity. "No, but it's a sexy color, Miss Crimson," she says, eyeing the burgundy blouse in my hand. "I recall you wearing red at the gala as well."

"What can I say? It gives me confidence. Now can you please go out of my walk-in so I can get dressed?"

“So damn bossy,” she says and rolls her eyes. “I hope you put Mischa in his place like this, too.”

Before I can even reply to that, she strolls out of the walk-in, not knowing how she exasperates me.

I have a feeling we’re going to get along well.



CHAPTER
TWENTY TWO

GABRIETTE

Natalya isn't in the bedroom when I walk out, so I make my way downstairs and call out her name. When she doesn't answer me, I walk into the living room and see Alexei, who nods his head when he sees me.

He's wearing an arm sling but doesn't even look like he's in pain. What the actual fuck? Why is he back at work?

"Alexei? What the hell are you doing back so soon?" I say, approaching him. "How are you feeling?"

"If I can walk, I'm well enough to work, Ma'am," he says with a proud smile and I actually can't tell if he's lying or not.

Deciding not to push it since he seems okay, I ask, "Did you see where Natalya went?"

"She's in the boss' office," he says, gesturing behind him. "I'll take you."

"Thank you," I answer and follow him as he leads me out, only to hear hushed voices by the office door. Alexei knocks and says something in Russian. Mikhail says da and Alexei opens the door for me.

Mikhail is leaning forward with his elbows braced on the desk in front of him, those eyes of his burning into me the second he sees me. Natalya, on the other hand, looks like she's about to explode.

"I hope we're not intruding," I say as I look between them and know for a fact that I am intruding.

"Not at all," Mikhail says, then he looks at his sister. "Remember what I said."

I swear steam would come out of her ears if she were any more pissed, but instead she storms out of the office with a “Come, Gabriette.” I blink a few times and am about to walk out when Mikhail says my name.

Why the hell are you beating so fast, stupid heart?!

I hear his footsteps behind me and I slowly turn around, swallowing hard. He comes to a stop in front of me and draws his hand to my chin, tilting it so I can face him.

God, why does he have to look so gorgeous? Those eyes, chiseled featured, his solid body. Even that scar running down the side of his face just fits; I barely notice it anymore.

“Are you fine going with Natalya?” he asks me, and I notice there’s a husky lilt to his tone.

I nod my head and clear my throat. “Yes, it would do me good to get out of the house. Besides, I’d like to get to know your sister.”

He maintains eye contact with me for a moment longer, his piercing gaze holding me captive. There’s an intensity in those eyes, a depth that seems to unravel the layers of my soul. It’s both unsettling and oddly enticing.

“Good,” he says, his voice low and smooth like aged whiskey, sending shivers down my spine. “Natalya can be... difficult at times, but I believe you two will get along just fine.”

His hand lingers on my chin for a moment before it slips to the base of my throat. We maintain eye contact for what seems like hours, the air feeling charged and thick with need.

What is this man doing to me?

His gaze flickers to my lips, then back up to my eyes and he bites his bottom lip, smirking. I can literally feel my pussy clenching at the gesture... Why was that so hot?

Then he lets go of me, stepping back, and I try to ignore the way my skin tingles in the absence of his touch.

“Run along now. I’ll be home late this evening,” he says, his lips curving into a faint, almost imperceptible smile. Weird, he’s never had to tell me he’s going to be home late before.

I manage a weak smile, my cheeks warm despite the air-conditioned room. “Thank you, I... See you.” I say, feeling stupid because why is this man suddenly turning my brain to mush?

He nods, his attention briefly flickering to the open office door where Natalya disappeared moments ago. But then his eyes widened slightly.

“Oh, I have something of yours,” he says, then he walks back to his desk and pulls something out of his drawer. “It was in your apartment in Seattle.”

I look down and see my old cell phone and my breath hitches. How long has he had this? “Thank you, I thought I lost it.”

“Well, my men did grab you right off the street that morning, so you wouldn’t have remembered what happened to it,” he deadpans, as if he was just reciting the weather report, then he turns back to his desk. “See you later, Gabriette.”

Okay, I know a dismissal when I see one.

I walk out of his office and close the door behind me before I rush out to Natalya, finding her leaning by the wall next to the elevator. She presses the call button and walks inside while I join her, along with Viktor and Alexei.

The drive to the restaurant is filled with an annoying silence, and it persists even when we're in the restaurant. After a while I can't take it anymore.

“Okay, did I make a mistake of coming out with you, or are you going to tell me why you're moping?” I say, crossing my arms as I watch her.

Natalya looks up at me and frowns. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Right, and you weren't just a ball of energy a few minutes before talking to your brother,” I scoff.

She regards me for a few minutes with that frown on her face, then her shoulders sag and she sighs. “It's nothing, just family stuff I didn't agree with. Sorry if it soured the mood, Gabriette.”

After deciding that she genuinely looked remorseful, I nodded my head. “I get family stuff, you don't even need to go further,” I say with a chuckle and tap on the menu in front of me. “Now, are we going to order something to eat? I'm starving.”

That smile on her face is back, but this time it's guarded, and it leaves me wondering just what the hell Mikhail told his sister to upset her like this.



That morning spent with Natalya drifted into an afternoon shopping and blowing off steam, only for us to end up in another one of Mikhail's restaurants for an early dinner.

I must admit that I haven't had fun like that in a long time, just shooting the shit with someone who I could actually be

myself around.

Granted, I had Emma and Lucy back in Seattle, but I couldn't do the things I wanted to do around them, couldn't talk about my family and the expectations I had growing up. Turns out Natalya has it harder than me.

"I can't believe they're teaching you how to successfully torture a man without killing him too soon," I say, raising a glass of wine to my lips. "Fuck, I wonder if Sophia had to learn that, too."

She chuckles. "With Cosa Nostra, I doubt it. Normally, women don't have a say in Bratva business, but my great grandfather made sure even the women in the family knew the ins and outs after they nearly killed my great grandmother."

"Yeah, my father probably had her trained to be the perfect bride, knowing I wouldn't ever be called that," I say, chuckling but feeling a pang of guilt in my chest.

Sophia was always the perfect one, the eldest who could do nothing wrong while I was the afterthought. I never held it against her, though, because that's just how my parents were. They could control her, but never me.

"Yikes, seems like you have some underlying seething there," she jokes as she eats her pasta.

"We're mafia princesses, when isn't there an underlying seethe?"

Lifting her glass, she shoots me a toast and sips her wine, only to nearly choke as she takes a sip. "Oh, fuck," she says, looking down at her food. "Shit."

"What—" I frown and am about to turn back when she grabs my hand across the table and shakes her head.

“Wait, don’t—” she says

But I don’t hear the rest of her words, because I see why she suddenly got so awkward. Mikhail has just walked in with a gorgeous as fuck leggy blonde on his arm, and she’s smiling brightly at whatever he’s just said.

He pulls out her chair and kisses her cheek, only for his gaze to immediately fall on me.

“We should go,” I say when I look away, and signal for the bill, not daring to look behind me again.

“Gabi, it’s really not what you think—”

“I’m not interested,” I say with finality, and Natalya blanches at the venom in my tone.

I don’t have the time to listen to Natalya making excuses for her brother, and thankfully she offers nothing else and honestly, I’m glad.

Because how do I tell her those few seconds of seeing Mikhail with another woman hurt me more than I care to admit? Well, at least now I know why he’s going to be late tonight.

Mikhail said he would get his kicks elsewhere, and I was fine with it, so why the hell does seeing him with someone else make me feel like absolute trash?



CHAPTER
TWENTY THREE

MIKHAIL

“If I knew you were going to be this out of it, I wouldn’t have feekin’ bothered coming, Mischa.”

I get snapped out of my thoughts, turning my focus back to the woman in front of me and breathing out a sigh.

“Sorry, Lee, my thoughts just went ... elsewhere. Anyway, what did your uncle have to say about the merger?”

She blinks a few times and frowns at me, and I know she wants to ask where my thoughts are right now. But even being my best friend, she knows not to push it, so she dives into her uncle’s proposal.

As I listen to her speak, I can’t help but think about Gabriette and how it must have looked to her. She glanced over just as I kissed Liadan’s cheek in greeting and for those brief seconds; I saw the hurt in her eyes.

But why would she be hurt because I’m with another woman? I told her I’d find someone else to fuck because I won’t force myself on her, so what was with her reaction?

Not that I have fucked anyone else since, but she doesn’t know that.

After spending a few more hours with Lee, we said our goodbyes, and I made my way back to the penthouse. It’s after one in the morning, so thankfully I don’t have to face Gabriette after what happened.

I’m seriously not in the mood for an argument, not that I think she would be the type to argue about something like this.

Sighing, I finally look down at my cell phone and let out a groan when I see the texts from Natalya. According to her, after a few texts cursing me out, Gabriette's mood changed as soon as they left the restaurant.

Fuck. Adding this to the news that I've arranged a marriage between Natalya and a Greek kingpin, I just know my sister will be busting my balls about everything when she comes here tomorrow.

I lean back in my seat and pinch the bridge of my nose. Gabriette and I haven't really spoken since last night because I've been busy, but then again I didn't want to face her. I'm sure she could sense my need when we were in the elevator, and the last thing I want is to expose myself like that again.

We arrive back at the penthouse all too soon and I start to feel the exhaustion set in, so after a shower, I drag myself to bed. Everything else can wait until I've had enough sleep.

Gabriette is laying on her side facing away from me, but as I lay down and my leg accidentally grazes hers, I feel her stiffening up.

Wait, is she still awake? I decide not to push it, even though I'm curious as hell as to why she's still up. I close my eyes and breathe out a sigh while allowing sleep to pull me under.

"I have a question for you," she suddenly asks, snapping me out of my near slumber and I turn my head to look at her.

"A question?"

"Yeah, a question," she says, then she turns around and faces me and I can see fury blazing in those whiskey eyes. "You mentioned finding someone else to fulfill your sexual needs. Does that extend to me as well?"

Okay, now I'm fucking awake.

"Are you asking me if I'll allow someone else to fuck you?" I ask and when she nods, anger coils in my chest and I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Jesus fucking Christ."

"Answer the question," she says in a level voice, although I catch how her voice goes up slightly when she says my name. "What's good for you should be good for me, right?"

"Unless you want their blood on your hands, be my guest," I say, turning on my side to face her. Her cheeks are flushed and her nostrils flare with anger at my answer, but fuck that. "And I'll make you watch."

"That's fucking unfair, Mikhail!" she says, shaking her head. "If you get to fuck people outside of this marriage, then I should be allowed to—"

I lose it at her words, and without thinking, I pin her down underneath me. She yelps out in surprise and I feel a tremble surge through her body when I pin her hands next to her head.

"If anyone even touches what's mine, I'll kill them and their families," I growl, watching her eyes well up with tears. "You belong to me, Gabriette, and that extends to your pussy even if I'm not fucking it."

She blinks and shakes her head, allowing her tears to fall. "So you get to disrespect me by fucking other women, while I'm just ... here?" she asks, and fuck me if that didn't zap the anger right out of me.

I let go of her hands, feeling like a fucking idiot for being so possessive and showing my feelings again. Sighing, I draw my hand to her chin and force her to look at me, but I don't miss the way she flinches.

“I have touched no one else since I slipped that ring on your finger,” I say, and her eyes widen. “The woman you saw me with tonight is my best friend. You can ask Natalya. I’m actually surprised she didn’t say anything.”

As soon as the anger slips out of her eyes, her cheeks redden. “You ... haven’t slept with anyone else?”

I nod, and a smile tugs at my lips. “No, I haven’t and don’t feel the need to,” I say, then I lean close to her ear and feel her suck in a breath. “Were you jealous, *Malyshka*? Did seeing me with another woman make you want to kill me?”

She scoffs and her following words make me chuckle, “Every day with you makes me want to kill you.”

“So violent,” I say, my cock twitching at her words and I grind into her. “It gets my cock hard when you talk about murder like that.”

“Ugh, you’re sick —”

“I never claimed to be a good man, did I?” I say with amusement and lift so I can look at her. Her pupils are blown out and those cheeks a delicious shade of red. “As much as it’s within my rights to claim you and get pussy elsewhere, I’ll wait until you’re ready for me.”

Her eyes widened at this. “What? Why would you do that?”

I lean in close again, my breath fanning her cheeks, and I feel her body tremble. “Because you’re a Bratva queen, and no one is allowed to disrespect you, not even me.”

When I move back, I smirk at the look of disbelief on her face, knowing that for once, I have managed to surprise her. But of course, I can’t let it go.

“I’ll wait until you’re begging for my cock again, *Malyshka*, and trust me, you will,” I say and she scoffs, all disbelief gone.

She moves her hand between us and strokes my semi-hard cock, eliciting a gasp from me and my heart fucking drops.

“Oh, but feeling this, I think you’ll be the one begging me, Baranov,” she says, shooting me a sweet smile, then she leans close to my ear. “And trust me, you will.”

“Touché,” I say with a chuckle and roll off of her. “May the best one win.”

The smile on her face makes my heart clench, but I have a feeling I just wagered a bet with a literal fucking she-devil.



CHAPTER
TWENTY FOUR

GABRIETTE

Holy shit, what the hell happened last night? I went from angry and pissed off to wishing Mikhail put his threat to better use. I never would have thought that, with my past, I'd love a possessive man pinning me down.

There's something about Mikhail that just ... does it for me. His touch doesn't seem to make my skin crawl anymore; it's almost like I trust him. I have no idea what's happening or why he has this effect on me now when I couldn't stand him before.

But he was right. Seeing him with that woman didn't just hurt me, it made me feel jealous and possessive, because who the fuck does he think he is disrespecting me like that?

I can't tell you the relief I felt when he cleared things up, and honestly, when I think about it, Natalya wanted to say something too, but I stopped her. Perhaps next time I shouldn't be so hardheaded and allow my anger to get the best of me.

Sighing, I turn my head to face a sleeping Mikhail and wonder what it is he sees when he looks at me. I never claimed to be an obedient person who would follow each of his rules, so how does a person like me get his cock hard with my defiance?

I smirk as a smile tugs at my lips at the same time a plan forms in my head. Oh, this is so petty, but I'm going to do it anyway, just to see the look on his face.

Slipping into the shower, I take my time to get ready and when I walk out of the bathroom with nothing but a towel, Mikhail is sitting on the edge of the bed, stretching.

He narrows his eyes when he sees me, but I can feel his gaze raking all over my body. “You’re up early,” he remarks and gets to his feet while I literally gape at the size of his morning wood.

“Natalya invited me to a luncheon the philharmonic is hosting,” I say as I walk past him. “Hope you don’t mind.”

I don’t wait for an answer and head straight into the walk in, where I take my time yet again. First, I dry my body and hair, and slip on a matching lace underwear set, including a garter belt. Then I slip on some sheer black stockings. To finish the look off for now, I added a silk robe without tying it.

Now to wait.

As I sit in front of my vanity doing my makeup, I hear the bathroom door opening and hide the smile on my face by putting on red lipstick. He enters and I try my hardest not to stare, but Mikhail has one of those bodies that demands your attention.

Our eyes lock in the mirror when he enters and I hear him say something in Russian, then he shakes his head and smirks. A sliver of annoyance shoots through me even if I had the desired effect, but then he starts to towel dry himself.

Holy fucking shit.

I thought I was being seductive, but have you ever seen a well-built man drying his body and watching the way his muscles ripple? I swear, the Gods carved his body to perfection, and it’s so fucking annoying how gorgeous he is.

After drying his hair, he immediately looks at me and I drop the lipstick I’ve been holding, breaking the spell he had over me. I hear him chuckle behind me and my face heats up.

“What are you trying to achieve, *Malyshka*?” he asks as he reaches for one of his white button-down shirts. “I’ve already seen your body and want to fuck you into next week, but not until you’re begging me.”

I scoff and get to my feet, then I turn around to face him, making a point of letting my robe slip from my shoulder.

“God complex, much?” I say as I saunter towards him. The way he’s looking at me has goosebumps puckering all over my skin, and when I drop to my knees in front of him, his eyes go wide.

“Is this where you want me, Mikhail?” I ask, my breath fanning over his thickening cock, then I watch as he unravels when I lick him from the base right to the tip. “Do you want to fuck my mouth?”

He moves to grab my hair and I quickly get to my feet and step back from him, knowing I’ve set him off. That predatory look in his eyes and the low growl in his chest sends a thrill right through me.

I throw my arms around his neck and give him the sweetest smile. “Too bad—”

“Finish what you fucking started, *Malyshka*,” he says through gritted teeth, and I maintain my smile while he looks like he’s about to explode.

I tut and shake my head. “No, I don’t think I will.”

I’m playing with fire, I know, but why the fuck am I craving the burn? I walk backwards, needing to put some distance between us before I really do finish what I started.

He chuckles and I swear it heads right to my pussy. “Oh, I’d love to be on my knees for you, Gabriette, but unlike you,

I'll finish what I'll start," he says, smirking as he strokes his cock. Fucking hell.

"Hmm, just thinking about slipping my tongue between your pussy lips is making me want to pin you to that wall."

"Cristo," I curse and turn around, my heart beating way too fast as I slip off my robe, but then I feel his arms circle my waist and I immediately stiffen.

"What's the matter?" he whispers into my ear, his beard tickling my neck. "Can't take what you dish out? Let's call it even, *Malyshka* ... get on your knees for me again."

I laugh at this, even though I would love to be on my knees for him. But I'm no quitter and I won't give him the satisfaction of breaking first.

I let my head drop back against his chest. "What kind of queen would I be if I quit now?" I say as I stare up at him. "Yes, looking at you stroking that delicious cock got my pussy throbbing—"

"Fuck," he breathes.

"But I won't be giving in just yet, Baranov," I say, then I turn to offer him a sweet smile. "It's a pity you won't get to feel just how wet I am for you right now."

He chuckles as I walk away from him, and he shakes his head. "God, you were made for me," he says and we both continue getting dressed, hyperaware of the other standing there.

But as I slip on my heels, he walks toward me, gets on his knees in front of me and ties the little buckle on the side of my shoe. I suck in a breath when he draws his hand up the inside of my leg as he rises to his feet.

He tilts my chin up to face him, biting the corner of his bottom lip. “Oh, you’ll break beautifully, *Malyshka*, and I’ll be right there feasting on your shattered pieces,” he says, then he walks out as if that line didn’t just get my nipples hard.

The bastard.



CHAPTER
TWENTY FIVE

GABRIETTE

Mikhail and I drew our lines in the sand; who would give in first? But I have to admit that this morning was more than I bargained for, and I was left with a throbbing pussy long after he left for the day.

I need a moment to breathe, to recalibrate, to not drown in the intensity of what happened between us this morning.

And that's why Natalya's invitation to the philharmonic luncheon felt like a perfectly timed godsend.

The hall gleams with soft amber light; the chandeliers casting intricate shadows on the marble floor. Every corner of the grand room spoke of elegance and old money.

The air is filled with the soft hum of chatter, punctuated by the delicate clinking of wine glasses. Attendees filled the room, donning tailored suits and elegant dresses, some engrossed in conversation while others admired the art on the walls.

The rich sounds of a quartet playing Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' wafted through the air, evoking a mix of melancholy and romance.

"I still can't believe you had an invitation to this," I tell Natalya as we walk in, scoffing in disbelief. "This is a literal dream come true for me."

She chuckles as she hands me a flute of champagne. "Well, the Baranov name is well known within the circles here, and I've been putting it off for years now. So when Mischa told me you were a cellist..." she trails off with a sigh. "I knew I had to bring you along with me."

The Baranov name is well known in the philharmonic circles? I'm about to ask what she means by this when a smile crosses her face and she looks at me.

"I'd like you to meet someone," she says and gestures across the hall. I follow her gaze to an older gentleman with distinguished silver hair, his posture speaking of authority. He walks over to us and my heart literally drops.

Holy shit, this is Chairman Orlov! This man can literally make or break your dreams; oh, my god!

"Gabriette, meet Sebastian Orlov, the chairman of the philharmonic," Natalya says as if I didn't know. "This is the lady I spoke to you about; my sister-in-law."

"Ah, Mrs Baranova," he begins, offering a polite nod. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Natalya speaks highly of your prowess with the cello. Another one for your family, eh, Natalya?"

Natalya gives a small smile. "It would seem so," she says, and I turn back to Mr Orlov.

"It's a pleasure to be here, sir," I say, taking his outstretched hand and swallowing my revulsion when he kisses it. "I never thought I would ever meet you. It's such an honor."

"Oh, you know about me!" He says, regarding me with a curious glint in his eyes. "Since you're in the family now, I'm guessing you know about Amaranthe Baranova, Mikhail's great-grandmother?"

My eyebrows quirk in intrigue, and I shake my head. "Not at all. I don't think I've heard of her," I say.

Mr Orlov looks at me as if I've just insulted his entire bloodline, then he takes my hand and leads me to a display along the walls.

“She was a prodigy,” he says with a hint of reverence. “Her talent with the cello was unparalleled in her time. An injury halted her career prematurely, but not before she’d etched her name into the annals of our musical history.”

He gestures to one of the nearby display cases, which showcases an old photograph of a striking woman with brunette hair and piercing hazel eyes, her cello cradled close. Beside it, a pair of headphones lay invitingly.

“May I?”

Mr Orlov is practically buzzing as he picks them up and hands them to me. “Please, be my guest,” he says.

The instant I covered my ears with the headphones, I was completely engulfed in the hauntingly beautiful melodies of the cello. As notes filled with passion and agony flowed, my vision blurred with unshed tears.

The raw emotion she conveyed resonated deep within me, reminding me of the visceral connection music can establish beyond words, beyond gestures. It felt like I stood there for hours, listening to her tell her story, when it was only a few minutes.

I remove the headphones and release a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. Never before have I heard the cello played with such passion, such absolute beauty, that it brought unresolved emotions to the forefront.

“Magnificent, isn’t she?” Mr Orlov murmurs, watching me intently.

“Yes,” I whisper, wiping my eyes discreetly. “Her music is soul-stirring. I can’t believe Mikhail never told me about her; she’s... wow.”

A gentle touch on my arm pulled me back to reality. Natalya's voice held a soft concern. "She really was. My great-grandfather never remarried after cancer took her from him. He used to call her his sunshine," she says, her eyes shimmering.

I nodded, deeply moved by the music. "Her music speaks to me on a profound level. I'd love to know and listen to more of it, if possible."

Mr Orlove smiles. "Amaranthe had that effect on many. Her soul resonated through her music, and anyone could feel it. Such a loss to the music world; such a profound loss," he says, shaking his head. "But that being said, I would love to hear you play sometime, Gabriette. Anyone moved by music like this has their own story to tell."

I can't help but smile. "It would be my honor to play for you."

With that, I made arrangements to come see the philharmonic as they did their practice sessions, and honestly, I could have kissed Natalya right there and then.

Throughout the luncheon, as I met various attendees and engaged in polite conversations, the melody of Amaranthe Baranova's cello played in the back of my mind. I couldn't get it out of my head, and wondered what kind of person she used to be.

Natalya seems deep in thought as we pass through a section where portraits of illustrious musicians hang, and I can't help but notice a particularly beautiful one of Amaranthe. Her expressive hazel eyes seemed to tell a story far beyond her music.

Natalya pauses in front of the portrait. “She was truly a vision, wasn’t she?” she says with a sigh. “She’s proof of what happens when we end up in the hands of enemies.”

I looked at her questioningly, my eyebrows knitted in confusion. “What do you mean?”

She takes a deep breath, as if bracing herself for the memory. “My great grandfather was Pakhan—the head of our family in every sense. With power and influence come enemies, but in Amaranthe’s case, those enemies mistook her for someone else.”

I keep quiet as I wait for her to continue, intrigued by the mystery that is Amaranthe Baranova.

“She was on tour in Italy when they abducted her after mistaking her for one of her old friend’s lovers. That old friend ended up being a Cosa Nostra don. They believed they had captured someone vital to him, someone they could use to bend him to their will.”

The room seems to grow colder. The very idea that someone so pure, so entrenched in her art, could be a pawn in such a brutal game was unimaginable.

“They tortured her daily, her fingers crushed with hammers, her body subjected to the worst kind of pain imaginable,” she says, shaking her head. “Afterwards, she was known as The Tortured Queen in mafia circles, a term she wasn’t exactly fond of.”

“That’s barbaric,” I whisper, horrified, and she nods.

“They wanted to send a message, and it was delivered; only to the wrong person. By robbing her of her ability to play, they stole a piece of her soul. And in many ways, the same went for my great-grandfather,” she says. “After her ordeal,

she never played again, but not for lack of trying. She couldn't."

My heart leaps into my throat at the thought. "To endure such cruelty and then be unable to find solace in the one thing that brought her joy..."

For someone as talented as Amaranthe, to not be able to play again is a tragedy. I don't know what I would do if someone had to strip away my ability to play, and I don't want to think about it.

"Okay, that's enough sad stuff for today!" Natalya exclaims, taking my hands in hers. "Let's mingle some more. I'm sure there's many more people who would love to meet you."

With that, she leads me around the room, all the while my mind is still on the mysterious Amaranthe Baranova.



CHAPTER
TWENTY SIX

GABRIETTE

The day seems to stretch on, with laughter, music, and conversation filling the grand hall. While I enjoyed every moment of it, Amaranthe's haunting music and tragic story lingered in the back of my mind. It was hard to shake off the profound effect it had on me.

When the luncheon finally came to an end and goodbyes were said, I found myself yearning for the comfort of my cello. Natalya gave me a gentle hug, whispering, "Take care, Gabriette," and with that, I made my way home.

The echoes of Amaranthe's music and her tragic story still reverberate in my mind as I leave the hall. The drive home felt like a blur, the haunting notes of her cello acting as a backdrop to the flurry of emotions threatening to consume me.

By the time I make it back to the penthouse, it's well after 9 pm. With the weight of the day's revelations pressing heavily on my mind, I felt a strong pull towards my music room and the comfort of my instrument.

I need to play. I need to channel all this raw emotion into something tangible, something that would bridge the gap between the agony of Amaranthe's past and the uncertainty of my present.

With trembling hands, I carefully remove one of my cellos from its stand, the weight familiar and comforting. The memory of Amaranthe's music still lingers, but now there's another song, one from the depths of my own heart that wants to be heard.

Closing my eyes, I place the bow on the strings and begin to play.

The notes pour out, a reflection of my own tormented past. The hurt of betrayal, the anguish of lost innocence, and the heartache of memories best forgotten. Each note, each pause, each crescendo was a cathartic release of emotions I had buried deep within.

Tears stream down my face as I play, memories flashing in rapid succession. The trust I once placed in someone who didn't deserve it, the searing pain of betrayal, the feeling of helplessness, and the fight to find my voice again, everything came rushing back.

My fingers shake, and the notes falter, but I play on.

As the song's tempo picked up, the memories became more intense. The harsh words thrown at me, the cold accusation of 'you asked for it', the utter hopelessness of dark days when even music couldn't provide me comfort.

My bow moved with a frantic energy, pouring every ounce of pain and anger into the strings.

And then, as the climax approached, the music became more erratic. My own sorrow blending with the haunting legacy of Amaranthe, culminating in a crescendo of raw emotion. The cello screamed out my pain where I couldn't, told a story I felt too terrified to revisit.

But every stroke of the bow dragged those memories to the forefront, making me relive them.

Tears flow freely down my cheeks as I play, the music a direct reflection of my soul's deepest anguish. I lost track of time, so immersed was I in this cathartic act.

And then, suddenly — silence. My fingers stop, and the cello lay silent in my lap, the final note still resonating in the air. I tried to catch my breath, my heart beating so fast it felt like I had run a marathon.

The weight of my cello became too much, and I gently set it down. I take a moment, wiping my tears, trying to regain my composure and feel drained, emotionally spent. As if I'd purged a lifetime of pain in a matter of moments.

In that heavy stillness, I feel a presence. The fine hairs on the back of my neck stand up, signaling that I wasn't alone. Before I can turn around, a familiar scent envelopes me, oddly comforting and familiar — Mikhail.

I didn't need to see him to know that he'd witnessed my raw, unfiltered display of pain. And honestly, I was too tired to explain what he had just seen.

His presence offers a warmth that I didn't realize I was craving. It was clear he had been standing there for a while, absorbing every note, every tear.

Strong arms wrapped around me, lifting me effortlessly. I hold on to him, seeking comfort in his arms. As we exit the music room, I bury my face into the crook of his neck, finding solace in his scent; a mix of sandalwood and a hint of citrus.

Reaching our bedroom, he gently lays me down on the soft comforter, settling himself beside me.

Wordlessly, he holds me, his fingers tracing soothing patterns on my back, calming the storm raging within me, and I nestle into his embrace. The events of the day, the haunting music, and the revelation of my shared pain were too overwhelming.

But here, in this moment, it's just the two of us.



CHAPTER
TWENTY SEVEN

MIKHAIL

There's something about the sheer vulnerability of music that can strip a person bare, lay them out for the world to see.

When I discovered Gabriette lost in her haunting cello performance, something within me shifted. The air in that room had been heavy, charged with raw emotion, and I'd felt an unbidden urge to shield her from her own turmoil.

So when I cradled her in my arms throughout the night, not one thread of doubt pulled at me. It felt... right. The weight of her against me, the rhythm of her breath as she slept. It anchored me in ways I'd never imagined.

This isn't just about fulfilling a role anymore. It's deeper, more visceral. It feels as if this woman, despite everything, has started to burrow her way into my cold, often calloused heart.

It's been hours since I found her in that music room, her raw emotions laid bare, resonating through her cello. Seeing her so vulnerable, every protective instinct in me had surged forward. She needed someone, and without a second thought, it was my arms she found refuge in.

She hasn't spoken a word about it. Neither have I. But in the stillness of the room, with her heart beating steadily against me, I can feel a shared understanding forming between us.

I've always been the one in control, the unwavering pillar that others lean on. But as dawn breaks, the first golden rays spilling into the room, I find myself at odds with my own feelings. There's a warmth in my chest, an affection that has

been growing steadily, threatening to overtake the defenses I've spent years constructing.

Fucking hell. Why now? Why her?

I glance down at Gabriette, her features relaxed in sleep. She's so different from the defiant firecracker I've come to know. In this stillness, there's a hint of vulnerability, of past pain that has etched itself onto her very soul.

And it's that pain, so palpably echoed in her music last night, that now pulls at something deep within me.

I've noticed the subtle signs, of course. The occasional flinch when I touch her without warning, the shadows in her eyes when she thinks I'm not looking. Something happened to her. Something that left a mark.

Goddamn it. The realization irritates me, not because of its implications, but because I care. I'm starting to fucking care about Gabriette, and that terrifies me.

I've lived most of my life maintaining a distance from those who could be used against me. Emotional ties are liabilities I cannot afford. I've seen what attachments can do, how they can be exploited, twisted into chains that bind and control.

My great-grandmother is a testament to this.

Yet here I am, getting fucking attached to a woman I barely know, a woman I was ready to use as a pawn, feeling something I haven't felt in a long time. Vulnerable.

It feels right to have her close, to be the one she turns to. But she's starting to become a drug, an addiction I didn't anticipate, one I didn't want, but one I'm not sure I can resist.

Her soft form against me feels like a fucking brand. It's almost maddening how right she fits in the curve of my body, like she was carved just to fill this space beside me.

The irony is not lost on me: the last thing I need right now is to feel possessive, especially after what I went through with Dasha.

Betrayal doesn't leave you; it just embeds itself deep in your bones.

I went through that hell, only to be dealt a card like Gabriette. There's this dangerous pull she has on me. Every damn thing about her screams for me to claim, protect, and never let go. But I've been down that road, and it's paved with deception.

With every steady breath she takes, resting against me, the walls I've meticulously built over the years are chipped away bit by bit.

I don't want to care. I don't want to feel anything but indifference. Yet here I am, silently raging at the idea that someone might have hurt her, left marks, emotional or otherwise, on her.

Who the fuck dared to hurt her? Who in their right mind thought they could lay a finger on her and get away with it? The surge of anger rising within me is almost blinding.

That possessive streak I've always had? It's raging now, burning hotter than ever. Any pain she's felt, any threat against her, is a direct affront to me.

Her gentle movements, the slight rustle of her hair against my skin, brings a different kind of anger—frustration. Those hands, which pulled such haunting sounds from her cello, do

they bear hidden signs of past torment? Every thought I have, each one darker than the last, it makes me grit my teeth.

She shifts slightly, drawing me back from my spiraling thoughts. I let my fingers run along her face, resisting the urge to probe for any signs of past pain. All I see is the tranquil mask she wears. But I know better now. Behind those closed eyes is a story, a nightmare she's lived through.

I need to know the details. Not just to feed my growing rage, but because knowing is the first step to avenging. She deserves justice, and by fuck, I'll see that she gets it.

How did this woman manage to wedge herself so deeply into my world? When did her pain become my war to wage?

Fuck it. I tighten my grip around her, a silent vow forming in my mind. Whether it's my past demons or her present ones, I'll burn the world down before I let them touch this. Gabriette might just be the end of me, but I'll be damned if I don't stand as her shield.

This isn't me. This level of possession is raw and unhinged. But the truth is, the more I try to resist these feelings, the stronger they get.

I sigh heavily, and she stirs in response, her eyelids fluttering open. For a moment, she looks disoriented, then understanding dawns, and she nestles closer, her head tucked under my chin. The gesture, so simple and trusting, unravels me further.

“Morning,” she murmurs, her voice thick with sleep.

I simply tighten my hold on her, not trusting myself to speak. There's so much I want to say, questions I want to ask. But now's not the time. She doesn't need an interrogation.

We lay in comfortable silence for a while. The morning light grows steadily brighter, casting a soft glow over everything. It's a tranquil scene, at odds with the tumult of my thoughts. Gabriette's past, my growing attachment to her, the risks of letting someone in—it's a tangled mess in my mind.

“Fucking hell,” I whisper, more to myself than her. It's an acknowledgment, a surrender to the inevitable pull she has on me. Gabriette isn't just a temporary diversion anymore. She's challenging every damn thing I believed about myself.

It scares the shit out of me, this vulnerability. This feeling that she could, maybe, break me. She's found a crack in my armor that I didn't even know existed. But here's Gabriette, making it look so damn effortless, breaking down barriers I didn't even know I had left.

I'm not naïve. I know how dangerous this path is, and I know where it can lead. But looking down at her face, I know I'm in deep shit.

Whatever the fuck is happening here, one thing's crystal clear: Gabriette is mine. Even if I'm still trying to figure out what the hell that means.



CHAPTER
TWENTY EIGHT

GABRIETTE

Sunlight filters in through the sheer curtains, their golden hue warming the room. I stir, reaching out for the comforting presence that cradled me just hours ago, only to find empty space. The sheets beside me are cool, signaling that Mikhail's been gone for a while.

Last night, the raw, unfiltered emotions I expressed through my cello had been liberating. And yet this morning, the weight of it all still sits heavily in my chest and leaves me feeling tender.

With a sigh, I push myself up, running fingers through tangled hair. I can still feel the remnants of last night — dried tears, the lightest smudging of eyeliner. God, I didn't even shower or anything; I feel like a mess.

So after a shower I feel slightly human again, then I slip into clean PJs, I wrap myself in a robe, and go downstairs. Purging your emotions tends to leave you starved and craving coffee, so here I go.

As I walk down the staircase, the subtle aroma of freshly brewed coffee greets me. I make my way to the kitchen, feeling the ever-present watchful eyes of Viktor and Alexei following me as I go.

"Morning," I mumble, nodding at them. They respond with curt nods, but there's an undertone of respect in their gestures.

Mikhail's gentleness from last night replays in my mind, causing a flutter in my stomach. The way he held me, his powerful arms offering protection and comfort ... It's unsettling how good it felt.

It's one thing to be drawn to a man's power, another entirely to find solace in it. I've been alone since I arrived here, with the exception of Natalya's visits. But last night, with Mikhail, it felt... right.

The thought makes me uneasy; it's dangerous territory. I mean, he's going to be Pakhan soon, his life is a world away from what I had wanted to be. Our teasing, our flirty exchanges are all well and good, but falling for him? It's a risk I'm not sure I'm ready to take.

I pour myself a cup of coffee, its steam rising in gentle swirls. As I sip, I think about something that has been laying on my mind lately: Mikhail's touch doesn't make my skin recoil like it used to.

It's strange, considering what happened to me. Even Damien's touch took a while to get used to. Can it be my body's way of telling me that Mikhail is different? With him, could I be safe?

I almost laugh bitterly at the thought. Trusting him feels like dancing on the edge of a knife, each step a risk of cutting deep. But the strange thing is, despite every alarm bell in my head, despite every warning of the dangers that come with a man like him, something in my core nudges me towards trust.

I've always been wary, careful of who I trust, especially after that night. My past has made me build walls, ones I thought were impenetrable. And yet, Mikhail, in all his intimidating glory, seems to find cracks in my defenses without even trying.

It's unnerving. The rational part of me screams that trusting the soon-to-be leader of the Bratva is the height of foolishness. Yet, when I look past the title, past the power and

potential danger, I see a man who's been nothing but respectful.

He's never overstepped, never laid a finger on me without my clear consent. There's been no cruelty, no power play, no ulterior motives in his actions towards me. Even if he could do all those things, he never did.

For heaven's sake, he held me last night, comforted me when I was at my most vulnerable. What kind of mafia leader does that? Isn't their world filled with blood, betrayal, and brute force?

But with him, I've only seen layers of depth, glimpses of a man who, beneath that hard exterior, seems to possess a genuine heart.

And yet, that's what I got—a mafia leader who cradled me through my pain. It's all so bloody confusing. I don't want to trust him, but there's this growing, nagging sensation that tells me I might be able to.

Maybe it's foolish. Maybe it's my heart, desperate for a sense of security, playing tricks on me. But the evidence is there, isn't it? Every gesture, every softened gaze—it's almost as if he's asking me to trust him.

And, terrifyingly, a part of me wonders if I already do.

I feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing up and when I turn around, there stands Mikhail, a stark contrast to the man I usually see.

He's in a white t-shirt that hugs his well-defined chest, gray sweatpants that hang low on his hips, and his hair—usually tied back in some fashion—now hangs loose over his shoulders. It's a casual, relaxed look that I've never seen on him, and it's disarmingly... human.

He looks comfortable, relaxed. Different. Yummy.

The change in attire brings out another facet of him that I haven't seen before. Without the armor of his usual suit, he appears more approachable. I'm caught off guard by how disarmingly handsome he looks in this state of undress.

He strolls in, his gaze immediately finding mine. "Morning, Gabriette." His voice is soft, laced with a hint of morning gravel. "How did you sleep?"

I'm taken aback by the gentleness in his tone, his genuine concern. Pausing for a moment, I search for the right words.

"Better than I thought I would," I admit, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "Thanks to you."

He stops in his tracks for a brief second, eyebrows raised slightly. A subtle smile tugs at the corner of his lips, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. He nods and heads to the coffee machine.

As he pours himself a cup, the silence between us thickens, and for a moment, I'm lost for words.

"That's good to hear," he murmurs finally, his gaze fixating on the dark liquid swirling in his mug.

"You... look different." I blurt out before I can help myself, nodding towards his clothing. The playful tone hides my genuine interest, but his sharp gaze catches it.

A corner of his mouth quirks up into a small smile. "Not used to seeing me out of a suit, are you?"

"No," I laugh lightly, "It's a nice change. Are you not working today?"

He smirks, leaning against the kitchen counter. Working from home today."

There's an undertone to his words, and I raise an eyebrow, sensing there's more he's not saying. An invitation, perhaps? Or a warning? With Mikhail, it's always hard to tell.

“Really? The soon-to-be Pakhan of the New York Bratva working from home?”

His smile grows a little more genuine, a hint of mischief in his eyes. “Well, I thought it might be a good day to... relax. Take things slow,” he murmurs, the double meaning not lost on me.

A warmth flushes my cheeks, and I look away, focusing on the patterns in my coffee cup. The weight of last night's vulnerability, of being held so securely by him, wraps around me. I'm grateful, but it's also unnerving how quickly my barriers seem to crumble in his presence.

I raise an eyebrow, challenging him. “Really? Or just keeping an eye on me?”

He chuckles, the sound deep and genuine. “Can't it be both?” His gaze holds mine, the intensity in his eyes making my heart race.

Taking a deep breath, I attempt to regain my composure. “Just promise me you'll wear sweatpants more often,” I tease, trying to lighten the moment, but then I realize how that sounded because ... well...

That outline is glorious, my God.

His laughter fills the kitchen again, the sound warm and inviting. “Only if you promise to play your cello for me again,” he counters, a playful glint in his eye.

The sudden shift in topic makes my heart skip a beat, memories of last night flooding back. “That,” I reply cautiously, “can be arranged.”

Our eyes lock, the silence between us thick with unspoken words and lingering tension from last night.

His gaze deepens, drawing me in. “Are you okay, Gabriette?” he asks again, more earnestly this time.

I nod slowly, the weight of last night’s emotions still heavy on my heart. “Yes, I’m okay. Thanks to you.” I repeat, emphasizing the last part. It feels important that he knows just how much his presence meant to me.

For a moment, we just stand there, two people caught in the ebb and flow of emotions, both aware that something has shifted between us. But neither of us is ready to address it just yet.



CHAPTER
TWENTY NINE

MIKHAIL

The sun casts golden stripes across the wooden floors of my office and I find myself lost in thought.

Gabriette this morning—she looked different. Softer, more relaxed. And it's fucking with my head more than I anticipated. It's as if a layer of her defenses had fallen away around me.

Her relaxed posture, the way her robe clung to her just so, revealing and concealing at the same time. She looked... peaceful.

There was none of the guarded tension in her eyes that I'd grown used to. That shift, while subtle, was profound, and it unsettled me more than I cared to fucking admit.

It felt like I was seeing her for the first time. A woman at ease, unburdened, and yet still carrying an indescribable depth in her gaze.

Could she really be letting her guard down around me? And if she is, why does it feel like a victory and a threat all at once?

Distracted, I rub the bridge of my nose, trying to push away the burgeoning headache. Just as the silence of my thoughts becomes deafening, it's interrupted by the haunting sound of a cello.

Every string pulled, every note played, it's undeniably her. I've always been a man of control, but lately, around her, that control seems to slip.

I'm on my feet before I realize it, drawn like a moth to a flame. As I approach her music room, the melodies grow

louder, more insistent. Pausing at the doorway, I lean against the frame, allowing the music to envelop me.

There she is, her fingers dancing over the strings, her face a canvas of concentration and emotion.

And for a brief, surreal moment, the hauntingly beautiful melodies of my great-grandmother Amaranthe's music intertwine with Gabriette's, merging past and present, memory and reality.

As the final note hangs in the air, she looks up, and our eyes meet. Her soft smile hits me like a tidal wave, and for a moment, I'm lost.

How is it that a mere smile from this woman can make me feel like I've been gut-punched? The intensity of this unspoken connection leaves me both elated and terrified.

Without another word, she dives into another melody, and I literally have to pull myself away from her to get on with my own business.

The day's warmth rolls into the evening all too soon. Dinner feels both casual and charged as we sit across from each other. It's as if there's a magnetic field between us.

"So," I begin, taking a sip of my wine and looking for an opening, "tell me about your life, Gabriette."

She takes a deep breath and meets my gaze, hesitation evident in her eyes. "Well," she starts slowly, her fingers playing with the stem of her glass, "I wasn't exactly... ordinary."

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued.

A small smile plays on her lips, tinged with a hint of sadness. "Sophia and I were close in age, but not as close in

bond as I would have liked. Our upbringing, the environment... it made us wary, made us grow up too quickly.”

She hesitates, and I can tell she’s weighing how much more to reveal. “Being in that world, it wasn’t easy. There were rules; rules we didn’t like, but had to abide by. As girls, we were supposed to be the perfect daughters, meant to marry well, to strengthen alliances.”

The similarities between our worlds are not lost on me. The Russian Bratva and the Italian Mafia may have their differences, but at the core of it all, the family dynamics, they are strikingly similar.

“It’s... complicated,” she continues, “I loved my family, but there was always this looming shadow over everything. The danger, the expectations, the weight of carrying the family name.”

“I understand,” I reply, my voice filled with sincerity. Because I do. Every word she says resonates with my own upbringing, my own struggles with the life I was born into.

I was always going to take over from my father. I knew that from the moment I killed my first man at nine years old.

My father didn’t seem to like how elated I looked after the man took his last breath, as if he didn’t truly want me to be in this life. But it was the moment my childhood ended and his legacy began.

She looks up, her eyes meeting mine, a mixture of vulnerability and strength shining through. “I’ve spent so much time trying to escape it, trying to be my own person. And now here I am, in this world again. With you.”

She continues, sharing stories of her childhood friends, the joy she felt during her first big performance. But even as she speaks, I sense the omission. It's like reading a book and realizing pages have been torn out.

The story she's not telling, who hurt her, what made her flinch at the touch of another, it hangs in the air; unspoken.

Pushing my plate away, I lean in. "You're holding back, *Malyshka*. I can feel it."

She drops her gaze, looking anywhere but at me. "There are parts of my past... things I'm not ready to share."

There it is. The wall. It's the same one I have, the one I feel crumbling every day around her. And god dammit, the irony isn't lost on me.

I leave it at that and change the subject to something easier. She can see my own deflection, but I won't push if she's not willing to share.

It's not lost on me how unlike myself I've become around her. Normally I would force a confession out of anyone not willing to tell me what I want to hear, but with Gabriette I find that I cannot do that.

No, not can't ... I won't.

Walking into the bedroom later on, I see her standing there in a silk nightie. With her back to me, the dim light casting a soft glow on her skin, I can sense her anxiety. The urge to bridge the distance between us, to pull her into my arms, to protect and possess is fucking overwhelming.

But I hold back, watching, waiting. The distance, the quiet turmoil, the push and pull — it's driving me insane.

Then she turns and looks at me, and I feel the last slivers of my self-control snap.

The tension in the room had grown to an almost unbearable level. The very air feels charged, every stolen glance, every unintentional touch between us loaded with unspoken emotions.

Every moment we shared seemed to lead up to this.

Before I can even blink, I'm right behind her, close enough to feel the warmth emanating from her body. My hands reach out, cupping her face, making her turn towards me. The surprise in her eyes is clear, but it's quickly replaced by an emotion I can't quite place—anticipation, maybe, mixed with a hint of fear.

Our lips met tentatively at first, a gentle exploration, tasting, testing. But the dam of restraint broke, and the kiss deepened. Her lips are soft and pliant beneath mine, and a suppressed moan escapes her as I pull her closer.

The world around us blurred and faded, leaving just the two of us. My hands traveled down her back, pulling her into me, feeling the curves of her body pressed against mine.

Every emotion, every unspoken word, every lingering doubt and hope, they all poured into that kiss. It was raw and passionate, a whirlwind of feelings that threatened to consume us.

She doesn't hold back when I deepen the kiss; she doesn't even push me away. Instead, she molds herself to my body as if she's let go of all her apprehension. With her arms around my neck and her fingers tangled in my hair, gripping tightly. As if she was anchoring herself to me and pulling me even closer.

That small show of need makes me go feral and I pick her up before pushing her against the window. She lets out a gasp when I grind myself against her, my cock thickening with need.

I know I'll live to regret this, taking advantage of her guard being down. But if she wanted to push me away, to stop whatever was about to happen, then she would have by now.

Then she does.

She pushes me away, one arm still around my neck while the other rests just above my beating heart. Out of breath, she peers up at me with those whiskey eyes that never fail to take my breath away.

“Wait...” she trails off. “What is ... what is happening right now?”

I draw my hand to her face, stroking her cheek with my thumb. “Aren't you tired of fighting whatever this is between us?” I say, breathing out a sigh. “Fuck knows I am.”

She bites her bottom lip, and I stifle a groan. “I ... But after... will you go back to ignoring me and treating me like I don't exist like on our wedding night?”

Guilt claws at me as I recall blatantly ignoring her for those few weeks, but I was only doing it to protect myself. In turn, it seems to have hurt her. Fuck.

Taking her face in both of my hands, I shake my head. “I don't want to go back to that, if you'll have me,” I say with a sigh. “I'm yours, Gabriette. I've been yours since the moment you promised to make my life a living hell.”

She chuckles at this, then she slides her hand up and over my chest towards my neck. “Then I guess I'm yours too, Baranov.”



CHAPTER
THIRTY

MIKHAIL

Her confirmation has me bursting with pride, and I lean down to brush my lips over hers. “Call it even, then?”

I feel her smiling when she nods, and without any other prompt, I claim her mouth in a searing kiss that borders on a promise.

This woman has been a temptation since I set my eyes on her, a maddening reminder of how easily a beautiful woman can betray you. And yet, I could do nothing as I slowly fell for her, no matter how many times I tried to stay away.

While kissing, I pick her up and lead her over to the bed. For some reason, a sliver of nervousness passes through me; a feeling I am not used to at all. God, this woman is making me feel everything at once.

She pulls me closer to her, wrapping her legs around my waist with her fingers pulling at my hair. Something tells me I haven’t been the only one feeling this absolute need since the first time we were intimate.

I break off the kiss and trail my tongue along her jaw, right to her neck, listening to her moan in response. With my arms wrapped around her waist, I spin us around so she’s on top of me, watching me with cautious eyes.

“I’ve craved this pussy since my first taste of it,” I say, running my hands up the side of her body. “Time to sit pretty, my queen.”

Her eyes grow wide when I say this. “What? You want me to—”

“Sit on my face so I can devour you? Yes, but first I need you to take off this thing so I can see those gorgeous tits,” I say, and a pretty little blush covers her cheeks when she drags the nightie over her head.

God, she’s gorgeous; now I’ll finally get to do more than sample her ... and fuck me if I’m not starved.

“Perfect,” I say as I drink her in, cupping those tits that are more than simply a handful; only for my gaze to land on her bare pussy. “Oh? No panties, *Malyshka*? Did you expect this?”

She bites her bottom lip and shakes her head. “I don’t sleep with panties on.”

I groan at the thought of her sleeping next to me with no panties. “Hmm, easy access for me, then,” I say, grinning. “Now, come here.”

When I lift her ass, she gives a little squeal that quickly tapers off into a moan the second I drag my tongue through her slick heat. “Hold on tight,” I say with a grin and start to feast on her pretty pink pussy.

Gripping her hips, I swirl my tongue around her swollen clit and love the way a tremble shoots through her. I suck the tight bundle of nerves, flicking it with my tongue, but the more I do this, the more she seems to move away.

“Why are you hovering over my mouth, Gabriette? Sit your ass down and ride my fucking face like you mean it,” I growl.

“You won’t be able to breathe!” she exclaims, and I can’t help but chuckle.

“Then suffocate me with this delicious pussy, my queen,” I say, running my tongue down the apex of her thigh. “I’m starved and need to feast.”

Before she can argue, I plant her ass down on my mouth and hold her in place, grinning when a tremble of anticipation shoots through her body.

I run my tongue up and down her slit, lapping at her pussy like a man starved. She tastes fucking amazing, and I can fucking shoot myself for holding out for so long. This woman has given me a permanent hard-on since she first threatened me. Now she's queening me and I love every fucking second of it.

I sense her apprehension still, so I lift her up and her head snaps down to me.

“Gabriette,” I say with an edge to my voice. “I promise this is not only for your pleasure, but mine as well. You won't suffocate me, you barely weigh anything, so trust me when I say I want you to ride my face, sweet girl.”

She bites her bottom lip. “Your pleasure as well?”

“Yes,” I groan, tightening my grip on her thighs. “Let's put it this way; think of me as your submissive little puppet and use my mouth to get off. Be as rough as you like. Take out your frustrations on my tongue and come all over my fucking face.”

This seems to make her happy because she fucking smirks. I pull her onto my face again and she eventually seats herself properly so I can do what I've been dying to do since I first tasted her.

And it doesn't take her long to get into a rhythm she likes.

“Oh, fuck ... Just like that... don't stop doing that with your tongue...” she says in a breathy voice, tightening the grip on my hair. Her gasps become moans and I feel her arching

her back as she grinds on my tongue, rubbing her wetness all over my mouth and beard.

Gripping my hair, she starts moving her hips faster, and I swear to God my cock grows harder than fucking steel.

I move my hand underneath her ass and I slip two fingers into her sweet cunt. “Mikhail...” she moans my name and my cock twitches painfully. “You’re so ... so fucking good at that. Don’t stop, baby.”

Wait, did she just—

I grin at how vocal she’s suddenly becoming and I flick my tongue faster while fucking her with my fingers at the same time. That coupled with my mouth on her sweet cunt gets her thighs trembling and she’s gripping my fingers faster than I expected.

Fuck, I need to feel that on my cock.

I wait for her to ride out her orgasm, slowly licking around her sensitive clit until she collapses on my chest. Her face is flushed while I’m literally grinning like the cat who got the fucking cream.

“You taste like more,” I say and slip my arms out from under her so I can brace her back when I spin her around. She gasps when she lands on her back and I get off the bed so I can free my aching cock.

Her eyes don’t leave mine and she sits up, watching as I step out of my sweatpants and boxer briefs. I crook my finger at her with a sly grin on my face, and she bites her bottom lip before she gets to her feet—

And fucking *crawls* towards me.

She stops in front of me with her hands resting on her thighs, looking perfectly fuckable in that submissive position as she peers up at me through her lashes. I stroke her chin while struggling to keep the stupid as fuck grin from my face.

“God, you look good on your knees, *Malyshka*,” I say, wrapping her hair around my fist. “Are you finally going to let me fuck that mouth of yours?”

She nods and slides both her hands up my thighs before wrapping one around the base of my cock. With a fucking lick of her lips, she swipes her tongue over my swollen, dripping cockhead and a shiver shoots up my spine.

“Such a gorgeous, massive cock,” she says, sending a thrill through me. “Will you fuck my mouth nice and hard the way I like it?”

Jesus fucking Christ.

I suck in a breath through my teeth when she runs her tongue down the length of my cock before she draws me into her mouth. Sucking in tandem with her hand stroking me, I close my eyes and throw my head back at the sensation.

With hollowed out cheeks, she peers up at me and moans before taking me all the way down her fucking throat. Groaning when I hear her gag, I tighten my grip around her hair and start fucking her mouth slowly.

“Your mouth feels so fucking good,” I say in a low voice. “Open your throat more, sweet girl, because I’m picking up my pace.”

Her eyes grow wide when I start moving faster, fucking her mouth and not giving a damn when she gags around my cock. No, that just spurns me on after being so damn turned on when she was riding my face.

I feel my balls tighten up the faster I fuck her mouth. And when that delicious current rips through my spine, I grit my teeth and tighten my hold on her hair. Tears are running down the side of her face as she moans around my cock, and digs her nails into my thighs.

“Swallow,” I growl. With one final thrust, I explode with a shout and fill her throat with my cum, my cock pulsating in that pretty little mouth of hers. My vision blurs as I come harder than I have in a long fucking time.

Breathing out a sigh, I look down at her. She’s grinning as she licks her lips and gets to her feet, then she slips her hands around my neck.

“Now, why don’t you make good on your promise to fuck me into next week, Baranov?”



CHAPTER
THIRTY ONE

GABRIETTE

The look on his face is priceless, and I walk backwards until I reach the bed and sit down. Something I noticed about Mikhail while riding his face, is how responsive he is when I give him little words of praise, so I want to test out the theory.

He sauntered over to me with a molten look in his eyes, so I lay back on the bed with my legs spread. I slip one of my hands in between my legs while I squeeze my breast with the other, watching him.

His cock is glorious, all curved, thick and veiny. I loved having him in my mouth and loved seeing how I was pleasing him. I never knew I liked it rough, or maybe it's just the way Mikhail handles me that I like.

"I want that gorgeous cock inside me again," I moan, arching my back. "Please, can you fuck me so I can still feel it three days later?"

He groans, and it goes straight to my core ... but then he chuckles and shakes his head before positioning himself in between my legs.

"I know what you're trying to do," he says, taking both my hands in one of his and raising it above my head. Then he slams so hard inside of me that it takes my breath away. "But it's not going to work on me, *Malyshka*. Praises do nothing for me because I know what I'm capable of."

I lose my train of thought the harder he piledrives into me, gripping my hands and my hips. I push against his hold, trying to get my hands out and failing. The only thing that comes out

of my mouth while fighting against his hold is a choked sound and my eyes roll back.

“You look so beautiful when you struggle for me,” he says in a gruff, breathy voice close to my ear. “But how could I possibly say no to my good girl when she begs so nicely?”

With that, he lets go of my hands and crashes his mouth to mine so hard that I taste blood. His tongue delves into my mouth as hard strokes of his thrusting rocks my body. I moan into his mouth and wrap my legs around his waist, desperately trying to chase the orgasm that’s just out of reach.

“Keep taking it just like that, *Malyshka*,” he purrs, pounding into me relentlessly. “Your pussy takes my cock so well ... I wonder how that pretty ass would take it.”

I immediately silence my moans and stiffen up at this since I’m not used to anal at all. But when he lifts and peers down at me, a sly grin spreads across his face ... one that shouldn’t excite me.

“Oh? Did this pretty pussy just clench when I mentioned fucking your ass? Naughty girl,” he chuckles and shakes his head. “Don’t worry, we have lots of time to still do that. For now I want to enjoy this.... fuck you’re perfect.”

He wraps a hand around my throat, his thick cock stretching me to my limit as he continues to ram into me. The noises coming out of my mouth borders on a fucking pornstar, but I think I’m past being coy about what he makes me feel.

I want Mikhail. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t and the way he looks at me, the way he commands my body and how he whispers my name reverently... I think he feels the same way.

So I push those thoughts out of my head and drown in what he makes me feel ... and it’s fucking glorious.



Lying next to Mikhail, my heart feels like it's caught in a tug-of-war between elation and dread. The room is cloaked in darkness, only the soft glow of the bedside lamp outlining the contours of his face.

His eyes are closed, his breathing steady. For a man who lives in a world of constant turmoil, he looks strangely peaceful in sleep.

I should be sleeping too, but my mind won't stop racing. Every single nerve ending in my body feels exposed, raw, as if he stripped away more than just my clothes tonight.

Last night crossed boundaries I hadn't expected to cross. He saw me, really saw me, not just as an arrangement or a duty, but as a woman. A vulnerable woman.

My skin feels sensitive, as if touched by a caressing breeze; every inch of me tingling with the aftershock of his hands on me, his mouth, his gaze.

It's as if he's peeled away the layers I've worked so hard to wrap tightly around myself, and what's left is raw and exposed. No one's ever been able to do that, to slice right through my defenses and see me as I am — not even Damien.

And I don't know whether to run from that or to embrace it.

I stare at the ceiling, at the soft play of shadows there, but all I see is his face. Those piercing, mismatched eyes that always seem to see right through me, making it hard to keep any walls up.

God, it terrifies me. The thought that he can look at me and see all the little cracks in my facade, all the messy, broken parts I try so hard to hide.

I shift slightly in bed, careful not to wake him. His hold tightens momentarily before he exhales softly, and it loosens again. And as I look at his face, peaceful in slumber, there's a realization that grips my heart in a vise.

I'm dangerously close to falling in love with him.

But falling in love with Mikhail would be like grasping a double-edged sword. He's not just any man; he's a man embedded within the dark underbelly of crime, a man who holds power and brutality in the palm of his hand.

How can a man like that give me anything but anguish? How can I trust him to protect my heart when his very existence threatens it? But then ... I've also seen moments of tenderness, flashes of a man who's capable of caring, even if he's loath to admit it.

That's what scares me the most. Not his darkness, but his light. The moments when he lets his guard down, if only for a second, and I catch a glimpse of the man he could be—the man I could easily fall for.

I know I'm close to falling, closer than I've ever been to that precipice. The drop is love, and the landing, I fear, would shatter me.

A tidal wave of thoughts crashes over me, thoughts of what a future with him could look like, thoughts of what it would mean to love a man who could one day become the Bratva Pakhan, if he's not already?

I know what the logical, rational decision is. I should pull away, distance myself emotionally before I get in too deep.

And yet, every fiber of my being rebels against that thought.

I've spent so long distancing myself from emotions, distancing myself from the prospect of love because of past scars, traumas that felt like they were written into my very DNA.

And here is a man who, despite everything, makes me feel seen, makes me feel safe. His touch doesn't send a ripple of dread through me. If anything, it's comforting, grounding, as if telling me that for once, it's okay to let my guard down.

He shifts slightly, pulling me closer to him in his sleep, and my heart does a foolish little dance. How can someone be both my sanctuary and the storm that threatens to obliterate me?

I remember the feel of his arms around me, strong but gentle. Those arms could break a man in two, yet they held me as if I were something fragile, something cherished. I've never had that—not since before ... before that night that wrecked me and left me with scars that go far deeper than the skin.

I thought my skin would always crawl at a man's touch, a remnant of a past I'd rather forget. But Mikhail's touch is different. He doesn't make my skin crawl; he makes it come alive. Is my body telling me to trust him, or is it just another illusion?

So here I am, staring at the ceiling, questioning my own sanity because, for a brief moment, a foolish moment, I imagined us together—actually together—beyond the constraints of this arranged marriage.

My fingers graze over his hand that's resting on my hip. The same hand that has pulled triggers, slit throats and clenched fists was so gentle with me. I'm not naïve; I know who Mikhail is, what he's capable of.

But last night, there was a tenderness in his actions, a subtle shift in the timbre of his voice, that told me he too was affected by whatever is happening between us. And just like that, another chip in my emotional armor falls away.

God, is this how it starts? This quiet erosion of rational thought, this forgetting of all the reasons we should never be anything more than what we are?

Mikhail isn't the man you fall in love with; he's the man you make pacts with, possibly the man you sell your soul to. But love? Love has no place in the barter.



CHAPTER
THIRTY TWO

GABRIETTE

I open my eyes to sunlight streaming through the open windows of the bedroom, noticing the drapes are wide open. Did I close them last night?

Yawning, I stretch out and a dull ache presses down between my legs ... then everything comes flooding back to me.

My eyes snap to the empty space next to me, and my heart sinks further — Mikhail left without even waking me up or saying goodbye? Didn't he say we won't be going back to how it was before? That he was done playing games and ignoring what was happening between us?

I sigh and swing my legs out of bed, ignoring the despondency as it settles in my heart as well as the ache in my nether regions. Last night must have just been a way for Mikhail to break through my defenses and now look at me — heartbroken and thoroughly fucked in both senses.

After I'm done in the bathroom, I get into a steaming shower while trying to erase my messed up emotions. But as soon as I step out of the bathroom, I nearly drop my towel.

Mikhail is standing in the middle of the bedroom with a tray of food in his hand. He scowls when he sees me, then he places the tray on his night stand and stalks over to me.

“Mikhail—”

“Get your ass back into bed, you're not wasting me bringing you breakfast,” he says and forces me back under the covers before taking my face in his meaty hands and kissing my forehead. “Good morning, *moya koroleva*.”

I blink as I stare into his mismatched eyes, confused as fuck. “Wait, what is happening right now?” I ask, breathless, and he genuinely looks confused.

“I’m bringing you breakfast in bed, obviously,” he says, cocking his head to the side. “Only you ruined that by waking up too soon.”

That early apprehension and dread in my heart is slowly replaced by a warmth I’ve been trying to push down. This is the sweetest thing; I never would have thought Mikhail would be so ... mushy.

“Thank you,” I say, smiling brightly and suddenly feeling shy. “I thought ... you left for the day.”

He frowns. “You thought I would just leave for work after you gave me all of you?” he says, shaking his head. “I suppose that one is on me. I did it the day after our wedding.”

I take a moment to let his words sink in, battling the urge to wrap myself in the vulnerability of the situation. It’s unnerving how much I want to believe him, how desperately I want to think that last night meant as much to him as it did to me.

But then, here he is, sitting in front of me like an embodiment of contradictions—harsh and gentle, merciless and caring.

“I’m sorry I thought that way, it’s just... I didn’t know what to expect,” I admit, picking at the corner of the comforter. I look up to find him studying me, his eyes thoughtful, almost tender.

“You’re right. I’ve fucked up. And not just a little. Sending mixed signals, not opening up,” he confesses, his voice laced with regret. “Fact is, I’ve been holding back because I didn’t

trust myself around you. I've been burned before, Gabriette. Burned so bad it took me years to even look at another woman, and even then, never like this. Never with this fucking intensity."

My heart pounds at his admission, at the rawness I see in him for the first time. "Mikhail, you don't have to—"

"No, let me say this," he interrupts, looking more determined. "I know I'm a complicated, possessive bastard. But you... you disarm me, make me forget my own damn rules. You make me want things I've shut out for a long time. You make me want to trust again, and that's... that's a big fucking deal."

A pause hangs heavy between us, filled with unsaid words, regrets, and yearnings. I consider what he's saying, my heart pounding in my chest. Could it be? Could this hardened man be falling for me just as I am for him?

I'm floored by his vulnerability, by the genuine fear I see in his eyes—fear of getting hurt, fear of hurting me.

"I don't want to be another regret in your life, Mikhail," I say softly, swallowing past the emotion. "I've got my own past, my own fears, and the last thing I want is to give you a reason to close up again. To regret me."

He looks at me for a long moment, as if weighing the risks and rewards of taking this leap with me. Then he sighs, almost as if he's releasing years of pent-up emotions.

"Who says you're a regret? You're a risk, Gabriette, one I can't even dream of taking in my line of work. But I found myself leaping in without even thinking of the risks. I can't look back after this."

A risk. I'm just a risk?

“Mikhail,” I weigh my words carefully. “I’m not just a thing to possess. I’ve got feelings, and yes, you’ve trampled over them by being cold these last few weeks. But I’m not some delicate flower either. I need to know we’re in this together. Can you give me that? Are we a ‘we’?”

His eyes search mine, like he’s looking for something. After what feels like an eternity, he nods.

“Yes, we’re a fucking ‘we.’ And I intend to prove that, every goddamn day, if I have to,” he growls before sealing our newfound understanding with a kiss—a kiss filled with promises, uncertainties, fears, but above all, a willingness to try.

“What happened between us last night wasn’t just physical, it was emotional, at least for me. I felt exposed, like you could see right through me. It terrified me, but it also felt... freeing. I just need to know it meant something to you, too.”

He clenches his jaw. “You’re asking for a piece of me I never wanted to give to anyone again. But you deserve that and more. Yes, it meant something, Malyshka. More than I can put into words.”

Those words send a shiver down my spine, but I’m not done. I lean in, kissing his cheek and smiling as I pull back. “Thank you. That’s all I needed to hear.”

Mikhail looks at me, his eyes softening more than I’ve ever seen before. “Then let’s not waste any more time,” he says, reaching over for the tray of food. “Eat. You’ll need your strength for what I’ve got planned.”

I laugh, finally allowing myself to lean into this new reality. My guard is down, and for the first time, I feel like

we've got a fighting chance at something real.

We eat in a comfortable silence, but my mind is anything but quiet, buzzing with thoughts of the future and all its beautiful uncertainties. With Mikhail beside me, though, those uncertainties seem a lot less daunting.

“So, are you working from home today?” I ask, taking a sip of coffee.

He grins, a mischievous glint in his eye. “Yeah, working from home. You catch the undertone to that?”

My heart leaps into my throat. “I think I do,” I say, grinning back.



CHAPTER
THIRTY THREE

MIKHAIL

Sitting behind the expansive oak desk in my office, I glance out the window. The sky's shifting from a radiant orange to a deepening indigo. It's a damn good metaphor for what's happening inside me.

Last night with Gabriette, I caved—no; I fucking broke. For years, I've fortified walls around my heart, never letting anyone in. But Gabriette... she didn't just find a chink in the armor; she tore the whole goddamn thing apart.

The last time I trusted a woman was Dasha, and she left me with a blade in the back. Ten fucking years, and the sting of betrayal hadn't worn off—until Gabriette. My jaw tightens just thinking about how much power she holds over me now.

But instead of dread, I feel... liberated. Lighter, even.

The phone on my desk buzzes, disrupting my thoughts. I look at the screen—my father. We're close, always have been. A bond forged in fires not many could understand. I swipe to answer.

"Pappa, how are you?" My voice carries genuine warmth; conversations with my father always stir something deep within, a blend of respect, nostalgia, and a yearning for approval that I've never quite outgrown.

"I'm well, Mikhail. How are you holding up? Your mother tells me you've been spending a lot of late nights at the office," he inquires, concern lacing his tone.

I chuckle dryly. "Well, the business isn't going to run itself. And there've been... complications."

“Aah, complications. Is that what we’re calling her now?” he knows me too well, always reading between the lines.

“Something like that,” I say, my words tinged with both humor and a vulnerability I don’t dare fully express. “She’s different, Pappa. She’s gotten under my skin, into my head... shit, into my heart.”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line, the kind of silence that’s heavy, filled with unsaid things. He was there when I found Dasha in bed with Michael. He was there when I took my knife to both of them.

He’s the one who taught me to have no remorse for betrayal — Kill first, no questions asked.

“She’s not Dasha,”

A sigh comes through the speaker, one of both relief and pride. “Mikhail, when are you going to stop running from what you’re destined to be? You can’t keep pushing back your ascension. It’s time,” he finally says, his voice a mix of stern command and something softer, perhaps understanding.

I’ve been holding off, not wanting her pulled into this life, this darkness, not unless I’m sure she can handle it. And maybe I was also afraid, afraid that claiming the role of Pakhan would make it real that I’m not the man she needs or wants.

But I’m done hiding—in all aspects of my life.

“I had my reasons for delaying, Pappa. You know that,” I defend myself, my thoughts drifting back to Gabriette. Everything about her that’s cracked my exterior, making me question and desire things I never thought possible.

“A Pakhan is only as strong as the queen beside him, Mikhail,” his voice softens, laden with the wisdom of a man

who's lived through highs and lows most could never imagine. "It's time you fully embrace who you are and what you're meant to be."

I think of Gabriette, her eyes shining, her skin glowing in the morning light. The way she looked at me when I brought her breakfast in bed, like I'd given her the fucking world, when all I'd been trying to do was repay a fraction of what she'd given me.

Hearing him say it out loud hits me like a punch to the gut. He's right, and I've known it for a while now.

"I know and I'm ready," I confess, feeling both the weight and relief of my admission. "Let's do it. Tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night, then," he says, and I can already picture his proud smile before we hang up.

I'm left there, staring at the empty screen, my mind a whirlpool of conflicting emotions. But for the first time, the path ahead seems clear.

Tomorrow night, I will become Pakhan. But tonight, I'll be Mikhail—the man irrevocably, unapologetically in love with a woman who has turned his world upside down.

I grip the edge of the desk, taking a steadying breath. It's time to stop running—from my responsibilities, from my past, and most of all, from love.

I rise from my chair, stretch out my arms, and crack my knuckles. Enough of this fucking musing. I have a Bratva to lead and a woman to win over—completely, unequivocally.

As I head for the door, I can't help but smile when I hear the sounds of her cello weaving through the air. It lures me out and I follow the notes without even realizing I'm heading right to her music room.

She's seated with her back to the door, her head tilted up as if she's lost in the world her music creates. A world where pain and beauty coalesce into something that feels almost magical. Wearing a silk night robe, its soft fabric clinging to her curves in a way that makes it hard to breathe and her hair falls in loose waves down her back.

I lean against the doorway, captivated. The cello's strings vibrate under her skilled fingers, each note piercing the air like an arrow, as if it could penetrate the very core of anyone who listens.

I make my way to her silently, but she doesn't even notice when I'm right behind her. Leaning down to kiss her neck, she hums in approval ... then I notice, with the way her robe falls open, that she's completely naked underneath.

Taking advantage of this, I slip my arms around her waist and trail my fingers down her taut belly. I nip at her neck and her notes falter when I cup her pussy.

"Keep playing, *Malyshka*," I murmured in her ear as I slipped a finger through her slick heat. "Focus on the music."

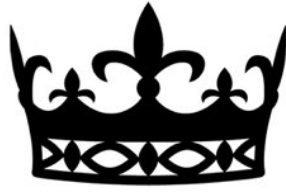
She sucks in a breath and moans when I start to tease her clit, encircling the bundle of nerves with the pad of my forefinger. I feather light kisses on her neck, nipping at random spots and grazing my teeth over her sensitive skin.

"One wrong note and I stop," I tease, pinching her clit, then applying pressure as I work it again, doing this in tandem while she gasps. Since last night, her body has become so easy to read.

When her body tenses up, I know she's close to her orgasm, so I lean in close and whisper, "Play your sweet music for me, Gabriette."

Then she comes apart for me, and I love every second of it because her notes don't even fucking falter.

As I stand there behind her, listening to her shallow breaths, it becomes painfully clear. No more running. No more doubts. Gabriette has come to be the melody that fills the once-empty spaces in my heart, and I'll be damned if I let that song end now.



CHAPTER
THIRTY FOUR

MIKHAIL

My chest feels lighter than it has in years, a sense of peace settling over me as Gabriette rests her head against it.

My fingers lightly trace circles on her back, relishing the warmth of her skin against mine. For this stolen slice of time, the looming responsibilities of my ascension and the damned politics of the Bratva world fade into insignificance.

I look down at her, her eyes meeting mine, and I feel something crack open inside me. And then she smiles. That goddamn beautiful smile that makes my heart skip a beat. It's simple, unguarded, and completely breathtaking.

"Hey," she whispers, her eyes searching mine. The walls I've spent years constructing crumble under the weight of her gaze.

"Hey," I reply softly, as if speaking any louder would shatter the fragile moment we've found ourselves in. I lean down and kiss her forehead, but something feels wrong.

She takes a deep breath, her body tensing against mine, her gaze drifting away for a moment before returning to mine.

"Mikhail, there's something I need to tell you," she says, her voice a delicate whisper tinged with a gravity that tells me this isn't a casual revelation.

My heart clenches. The protective urge surges through me, tightening its grip. I lock eyes with her, giving her a nod that hopefully conveys my readiness to hear whatever she needs to say. "Go ahead, *moya koroleva*."

She looks away momentarily, gathering her thoughts, her courage. "When I was younger, I had a music teacher make

promises. Promises of a brighter future, of making it big in the world of music. I was naïve, captivated by those empty words.”

As she continues, I feel a cold anger seep into my veins, mingling with a dread of what I know is coming.

“He took advantage of that naivety. He took something that was never his to take,” her voice trembles as she says it, and a lump forms in my throat when I feel her body trembling against me.

Her confession rings in the air, a raw wound exposed to the light, and my blood ignites. Every word that falls from her lips ratchets my fury up another notch. But it’s a silent kind of anger, the sort that smolders rather than blazes openly. My vision blurs red.

A growl rumbles deep within me, primal and vengeful. “That son of a bitch—”

She flinches at my outburst and I feel like shit as she cuts me off, her hand resting gently against my mouth to stop me from erupting into a tirade.

“Please, let me finish,” she begs. I nod, biting back the torrent of curses threatening to pour out of me, but every word she utters feels like a shard of glass, scraping across raw nerves.

“Afterwards, my father blamed me. He said I had asked for it and said it was my fault because I should have known better. The worst part? That bastard was a capo’s son, one of my dad’s closest friends.”

Jesus fucking Christ. The ground beneath me seems to sway as I process what she’s saying. The rage is white-hot

now, a conflagration threatening to consume everything in its path, including the fragile peace we've managed to find.

I pull her closer, my arms tightening around her as if I could shield her from her past, from the world, from every fucked-up thing that's ever touched her.

"I'm so sorry, Gabriette," my voice is a ragged whisper, heavy with emotions I can't begin to name.

I've seen the signs—the tension in her shoulders when someone touches her, the way her hand trembles ever so slightly when she has to shake hands with someone. I knew something had happened, but hearing it, hearing the vile details, that someone had ripped something essential from her, makes me see red.

She doesn't even have to say what he did in explicit detail. Just hearing her confirm my worst suspicions, makes me feel as if I've been sucker-punched.

"Gabriette," my voice is a low growl, a controlled storm. "No one asks to have their innocence ripped away like that. And your father, that spineless coward, should've done right by you. No matter who that bastard was, capo's son or fucking royalty, he had no right to lay a hand on you without your permission."

The fact that she had to carry this weight alone, and worse, had been blamed for it, boils my insides. I could kill her father and that piece-of-shit music teacher with my bare hands, no hesitation. But even that wouldn't be enough. It wouldn't scrub away the years of pain she's had to endure.

"You didn't deserve any of it, Gabriette," I say, the anger seething beneath each word, tempered only by the need to be

what she needs right now—supportive, not explosive. “If I could, I’d—”

“I know,” she interrupts, laying her hand on my chest, right over my pounding heart. “I know.”

That she understands the violent depth of my feelings, the primal urge for retribution, and accepts them—that’s what reins me in. It’s a bitter pill, swallowing the anger, keeping it caged. I can’t take vengeance, not without putting her and everything I’ve worked for at risk.

Her father’s betrayal, though, makes my blood boil in a different way. “Your father’s a fucking disgrace,” I spit out, unable to hold back the venom. “Blaming you? Are you fucking kidding me? What kind of a man lets that happen to his own daughter and then has the gall to put the blame on her? If it were up to me—”

“Please,” she says softly, touching my face. “Just... Thank you for understanding.”

Understanding? I understand all right. I understand that if it were up to me, I’d have that scumbag’s head on a spike. But he’s a capo’s son, entangled with Cosa Nostra. Retribution means war, and war costs more than just the lives of the guilty.

My fists clench, the rage I feel not just for her teacher but for her own goddamn father, boiling beneath the surface. I want to crush, to destroy, to do all the things that come naturally to a man like me.

But I see the vulnerability in her eyes, hear the tremor in her voice, and it holds me back, roots me to the moment.

And I can’t unleash my wrath, not without igniting a war with the Cosa Nostra. My instincts scream at me to do it

anyway, but the calculating, strategic part of my brain reigns me in.

“I’m sorry for reacting this way, but just knowing what you went through all alone...” My arms tighten around her instinctively, a futile attempt to shield her from a past I had no part in but wish I could rewrite for her sake.

She looks up, her eyes soft but infinitely sad.

“Mikhail, it’s...it’s done. It’s over. I just needed you to know, to understand why I am the way I am,” her eyes are glossy but resilient, meeting mine as she speaks. “You should know who you’re falling for; all of me, even the damaged parts.”

The ‘why I am the way I am’ slices through me. It’s an indictment not just of her past but also a hint that she knows she’s different, marked in a way most people aren’t. And I hate it. I hate that she has to carry that knowledge, that weight.

“You’re not damaged, Gabriette. You’re the strongest person I know. Don’t ever think you’re less because of what that bastard did. He’s the damaged one, and if I could, I’d—”

She places a finger over my lips, halting the violent promise forming there. “You don’t have to say it. I see it in your eyes.”

My heart clenches at her words, at the raw courage it took for her to share this with me.

“*Malyshka*,” my voice grinds out, low and rough, “you’re not broken. And that motherfucker doesn’t define who you are. You understand me?”

She nods, her eyes meeting mine, and something unspoken passes between us. Understanding, relief, a shared recognition of the darker corners of the human soul.

“I could make him disappear, you know,” I say, the words soaked in a dark promise. “But I won’t. Not unless you tell me to. Because this is your call. Always.”

She sighs, her body sagging against mine as if the weight she’s been carrying has lightened just a fraction.

“I know you could. And knowing that you would... it means everything.”

I pull her even closer, if that’s possible, resting my chin on the top of her head. For a moment, we’re silent, wrapped up in the gravity of what’s been said, what’s been offered.

“If you ever decide you want that bastard to pay, you just say the word,” I tell her quietly, my voice tinged with steel as I kiss her hand. “I may not be able to wage an open war, but trust me when I say there are more ways than one to ruin a man.”

She looks up at me, and I see a mixture of relief and something else—perhaps a glimmer of hope—in her eyes. “Thank you, Mikhail.”

Then I take her hand from my lips and press a fervent kiss to her fingertips. We lie there, our eyes locked in a silent communion deeper than words, each coming to terms with the newfound layers of our entangled lives.

“I want to protect you,” I find myself admitting, the words pulled from a place deep inside, a place I’ve kept guarded for far too long. “I’d do anything to make sure you’re safe.”

“I know,” she murmurs, her eyes searching mine, “And that terrifies me, but it’s also the thing I’ve been wanting for so long.”

Our lips meet in a kiss, a promise, an affirmation of everything we are and could be. The path ahead is uncertain,

fraught with dangers neither of us can fully comprehend yet.

My heart is still pounding as I look down at Gabriette, her eyes reflecting a mixture of relief and vulnerability after sharing a piece of her soul with me. But as much as I want this moment to last forever, reality looms large.

There's something she needs to know, something that's going to change the trajectory of our lives dramatically.

Taking a deep breath, I summon the courage to break the serene bubble we're in. "There's something else you should know. Something that's going to affect us both."

Her eyes lock onto mine, bracing for impact. "What is it?"

"I'm becoming Pakhan tonight." The words hang heavy in the air, like a pebble dropped into a still pond, creating ripples that touch every corner of our lives.

Her eyes widen momentarily, but then she exhales, nodding as if she had been expecting this. "You've been putting it off, haven't you?"

I give a wry smile. "Yes, I've been delaying it. Partly because of you, actually."

"Me?" She looks surprised and confused.

"I wanted to protect you, to keep you away from the inevitable danger that comes with being the Pakhan's wife. But I've realized that's not fair to you, or to us."

She takes a moment, her eyes thoughtful, weighing the gravity of what this means. "I grew up in this world, Mikhail. I knew what I was signing up for when we got into this arranged marriage. But knowing that we're in this, that we've found something real... it changes the equation."

My heart swells at her words, this admittance of something 'real' between us. "So you're not scared?"

"Oh, I'm scared," she admits. "I'm terrified for you, for us. But I also know that you're strong and smart, and you won't carry this burden alone. You have me, and I have you, and together... we can face this."

The tension I didn't even know I was holding dissipates, leaving a newfound sense of peace and determination. "I love hearing that, but you should know, the target on my back will grow larger."

"And mine will too, for being by your side. But what's life without a little risk?" she says, offering a brave smile that tells me she's ready for whatever comes next.

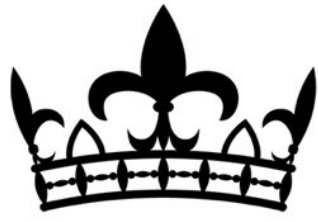
I lean down, my lips meeting hers in a kiss that seals our pact, our united front against the world that awaits us. It's a kiss that says I'm ready, that we're ready.

As we pull apart, I whisper against her lips, "Then let's face this life together, *moya koroleva*."

She smiles, a radiant, unguarded smile that lights up the room and my world. "Together," she echoes.

Tonight, I'll ascend to a position that comes with unimaginable power and unimaginable threats. But as I hold Gabriette in my arms, embracing the love that bloomed from an arranged marriage, I realize I'm already invincible.

Together, we're invincible. And as the Pakhan, I'll make damn sure the world knows it too.



CHAPTER
THIRTY FIVE

GABRIETTE

“Mikhail...” I cry out his name, digging my nails into his shoulders as he slams inside of me, the water from the shower all but forgotten.

With his hands on my hips, he thrusts hard inside of me with a growl. The intent of drawing another orgasm out of me at the forefront of his mind, even though I’ve come twice already.

“Please ... Please...” I beg for nothing and everything all at once and I see that smirk on his face, the one that lets me know he’s aware of what he’s doing.

“Oh, my sweet girl, give me another one,” he purrs in my ear. “You take my cock so well. One more for me; you want to be my good girl, don’t you? You want to feel me coming for you, don’t you?”

“Y—yes,”

“Then you better. fucking. *come.*”

Three more thrusts and I swear I’m a goner. I come so hard that my vision blanks, but then I get rewarded when I feel his cock pulsating inside of me. He buries his face in my neck and groans, holding me closer while I feel boneless.

“Such a good girl,” he grumbles in my ear and kisses the side of my head. “Now that I’ve made you dirty, I think it’s only fair that I clean you up.”

“Hmmm,” is all I can muster, and he chuckles as he grabs the loofah.

Showering with Mikhail has come to be so intimate. Usually I'm left unable to walk, just like now, but afterwards he always cleans me up. It's like our thing.

Later, as we're getting dressed, he asks me what I'm doing for the day and I mention going to the philharmonic today to check out the place, since Mr Orlov gave me an open invitation.

I'm dying to experience it, and to hear more of Amaranthe Baranova's work. So, after we get dressed, Mikhail lets me know that he has a few things to do in his office this morning before heading out.

I give him a kiss and something on the edge of the nightstand gets my attention; my old cell phone.

Oddly enough, I've ignored it since Mikhail gave it to me. You would think I'd want to dive back into my old world after everything. But... I just haven't felt the need to.

I press the power button and the screen flickers to life. A sigh escapes my lips as I scroll through the empty inbox, my messages as barren as a ghost town. No love letters, no frantic queries about my whereabouts, not even a 'thinking of you' from Emma or Lucy.

The phone vibrates suddenly, startling me. A new message from Damien pops on the screen.

“I love and miss you. Wait for me, I'll save you.”

I stare at the words, but they seem to float on the screen without sinking in. How did he know I switched my phone on and what does he mean by “save you”?

Not only that but why does my heart remain unmoved, as if the man who once had the power to send me into emotional spirals now feels like a stranger?

There's no ache, no pull, nothing. I stare at the screen, trying to decipher the meaning behind his words. "I'll save you"—save me from what? Did he know about my life now?

With a sense of detachment, I put my phone down. I could continue to sit here, mulling over a past that suddenly feels like a distant dream, or I could seek answers. Rising from the bed, I make my way downstairs to Mikhail's office. The door is slightly ajar, and I tap it open.

"Mikhail, do you have a moment?" I ask as I walk in.

He looks up from his papers, his eyes softening when they meet mine. "For you, always. What brings you here, *moya koroleva*?" he asks, putting down the papers.

"I turned on my phone," I start, pausing as I gauge his reaction. "I got a message from Damien."

"And?" Mikhail prompts, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"He said he misses me, and that he'll 'save' me. It doesn't make sense, Mikhail. What did you tell my friends in Seattle?"

Mikhail leans back in his chair, his fingers steeped before him as though weighing his words.

"Your friends Emma and Lucy were told that your family needed you home and that you've found a bigger opportunity elsewhere. Considering they don't know you well enough to dispute it, they didn't question it much."

My eyes narrow, trying to process his words. "You made it sound like I left for greener pastures? That's a lie, Mikhail. What if they try to find me despite that?"

Mikhail shakes his head. "They won't. My men have eyes on the situation. Anyone tries to dig too deep, they'll hit dead

ends or find themselves distracted by other ‘urgent’ matters. Trust me, I’ve got this covered.”

It should scare me, how easily he can manipulate circumstances, even from miles away. But oddly enough, it doesn’t. Not now, at least.

“And what about Damien’s message? This promise to ‘save’ me?”

“Ah, your former lover,” Mikhail smirks, almost amused. “He’s been elusive, couldn’t get a direct word to him. But I’ve had people keeping an ear to the ground. If he even breathes in your direction, I’ll know.”

“As for being ‘saved,’ let’s not kid ourselves. You’ve been through hell and back, and you’ve saved yourself. No one else did that for you,” he says, eyes blazing. “If he thinks he’s the knight in shining armor in this story, he’s fucking delusional.”

A feeling I can’t quite name settles within me. It’s neither relief nor panic—just a sense of acknowledgement that Mikhail has a reach that’s both protective and concerning.

“You’re not jealous?” I ask, an eyebrow raised.

He chuckles, standing up to approach me. “Jealous? Of a past that clearly didn’t have what it takes to be your future? No, *Malyshka*. If anything, I find it amusing that he thinks he can ‘save’ you. Little does he know, you’re not the damsel in distress he likely imagines you to be.”

I look up into Mikhail’s eyes, those piercing pools that always seem to read my soul, and feel my heart swell. “You give me more credit than I sometimes give myself,” I whisper.

“Then it’s time you start seeing yourself the way I see you—strong, resilient, and let’s not forget, mine,” he replies, his

voice lowering on the last word as he wraps his arms around me, pulling me closer.

The bluntness in his words should irk me, yet it doesn't. Instead, it confirms something I'd been struggling with.

"You're right. Reading that text from Damien... it didn't stir anything in me. No love, no longing. Nothing. I find that odd."

He smirks. "Maybe it's not so odd. Maybe it's just your heart telling you where you belong now."

My eyes meet his, and in that moment, I know he's right. Whatever life I had in Seattle, it doesn't hold a candle to what I've found here, with Mikhail. I consider this.

"So Damien thinks I need saving. From you?"

"Seems like it," he says, the corner of his mouth pulling into a sardonic smile. "The bigger question is, do you feel like you need to be saved?"

Looking into his eyes, thinking about the emotional and physical journey we've been on, the ups and downs, the dangers and the intimacy, I finally shake my head.

"No," I say, my voice unwavering. "For the first time in a long while, I feel like I'm exactly where I need to be."

Being saved means different things to different people. For some, it's an escape. For others, like me, it's finding a home in the heart of the person you least expected to love.

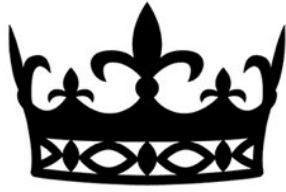
Love?

"Good girl," he says, kissing me on the forehead, then he gestures toward his desk, cluttered with responsibilities that await him. "I have to get back to this, but later tonight, we'll

talk more. Just finishing up before tonight and ... well, you know.”

“I know,” I agree, already anticipating our conversation, the new depth our relationship will take on after tonight’s ascension. “I’ll see you tonight.”

As I leave his office, my phone lays forgotten on the bed upstairs. And for the first time, I realize I don’t care about the absence of messages. My life is here now, unfolding in ways I’d never expected but have come to cherish deeply.



CHAPTER
THIRTY SIX

MIKHAIL

I stand in the dimly lit room, its stone walls bearing silent witness to countless ceremonies of ascension. It's almost surreal, how I've dreamt of this moment but never truly fathomed the weight of it until now.

My father stands at the center of the room, his eyes filled with a blend of pride and scrutiny as he addresses our closest lieutenants—men who've killed and died for the family, and who now look to me as the next Pakhan.

“Tonight, we stand at the threshold of a new era—an era under the leadership of my son, Mikhail,” my father begins, his voice steeped in an authority that's been earned through years of ruthless decisions and merciless warfare. “To solidify our loyalty and our strength in one man.”

As he continues to talk about the importance of allegiance and the ruthless calculus of maintaining power, I can't help but feel the weight of his words settle on my shoulders, heavier than any armor I've ever worn.

It's an invisible mantle, but it comes with an irrevocable set of responsibilities that I'm now bound to uphold.

Finally, he turns to me, locking eyes as he utters a phrase in Russian, passing down the wisdom and the warning that comes with the position I'm about to inherit. “Remember, my son, loyalty and power are the paths to rule. But they are also the paths to destruction. Choose wisely.”

He switches to Russian for a phrase that's been passed down through generations, a line that binds us to a code older

than any of us in this room: “*Sem’ya nad vsem,*”— Family above all.

The gravity of his words settle around us like a thick fog. I’ve known their essence all my life, but hearing them now, on the brink of taking the reins of a criminal empire, they feel almost sanctified.

“Remove your shirt, Mikhail. Kneel,” my father commands, gesturing to the stool that holds the ink and needle for my ceremonial tattoo. My hands are steady as I pull off my shirt, revealing the other tattoos that chronicle my life—a roadmap of pain, loyalty, and lessons learned.

I kneel on the cold floor, every eye in the room focused intently on me. The room grows quiet, except for the soft hum of the tattoo machine as one of the lieutenants, skilled in this particular art, dips the needle into the black ink.

The needle touches the skin of my ring finger, the only one left unmarked until now. A blacked-out cross gradually takes shape, each stroke of ink binding me further to the brotherhood I now lead.

It’s identical to the signet ring I wear, one given to me when I turned 21. Now it’s a permanent reminder etched into my skin. In the Bratva, your loyalties are inked in both blood and pigment, indelible and lifelong.

This tattoo is not just another mark; it’s a covenant. One that states, even though I have tied my life to a woman, my ultimate allegiance remains with the Bratva, the brotherhood that saw me grow from a boy to the man I am now.

I endure the sting in silence, my mind drifting momentarily to Gabriette. She, who has unwittingly entered this life of shadows and complexities. It’s an emblem that declares where

my first allegiance lies, and yet, in that complexity lies the simple truth—I love her, deeply, unreasonably.

As the artist finishes his work, I clench my fists. The machine finally cuts off, and I look down at the new tattoo. It's simple, but holds a weight heavier than anything I've ever felt. My father places a heavy hand on my shoulder, a touch laden with years of expectation.

I rise to my feet, turning to face my lieutenants, my brethren. The gazes of the room were now different—respectful, expectant. I lock eyes with my father, recognizing the quiet pride in his gaze.

Their faces are still stoic, but their eyes hold a newfound respect—a recognition of the man who will lead them into whatever darkness or light the future holds.

I am now Pakhan, the head of a complex, treacherous, and tightly bound family. And as I look at the men before me, their faces hard but loyal, I know that the path ahead will be fraught with danger. But whatever comes our way, whatever the cost, I know one thing for certain—we'll face it as a family.

For family is eternal. And I will bleed to keep it so.

And as I step out of that room, my thoughts inevitably drift to the woman who's unwittingly become a part of my life.

In loving her, I have found a semblance of peace and clarity, an anchor in a world that's perpetually storm-ridden. Yet, as I wear my new mark, I am reminded that my first love, my first loyalty, will always be to the Bratva.



The moment the ceremony ends, a sense of both relief and weight washes over me. The black ink on my ring finger, still fresh and stinging, serves as a brand-new reminder of my responsibilities.

I never thought I'd relish in formality, but there's comfort in tradition. It's a fucking anchor in a world of chaos.

The ritual of becoming the Pakhan is behind me, the ink on my ring finger still fresh. My old man looks at me, and for a moment, I see the years fall away from his eyes. He's proud, that much I can tell.

"Pappa," I say, lifting the glass of aged whiskey he poured for us. "To new beginnings."

"To new beginnings," he echoes, and we clink glasses.

As I savor the first sip, feeling the liquid fire smooth down my throat, his phone rings. My old man's usually unflappable, but I catch a frown knitting his brows together, then a deeper frown etches into his forehead as he takes the call.

I can't make out the words, but the tone is enough to tell me something's wrong. Severely wrong.

I study him, intrigued. The conversation's brief, terse even.

"What's happened?" I can't keep the curiosity out of my voice.

He stares at the phone for what feels like an eternity before looking up. "Mikhail, we have a problem," he says, and his voice is grave in a way I haven't heard in years.

This is not the time for bad news; not when I'm on the cusp of taking over, not when things with Gabriette are finally making some kind of fucking sense.

He puts his phone away, clearly contemplating how to break the news. “It’s about Sophia, Gabriette’s sister,” he finally says. “You know how she requested her body be donated to science?”

I nod, remembering that day vividly. The day Sophia was supposed to marry me, only to be found dead. “Yeah, what about it?”

“There’s been a mistake, a fucked-up one,”

My heart pounds in my chest. “A mistake? What the fuck do you mean?”

“A friend of mine at the coroner’s office just called. They examined her body after a fuck up with a previous coroner. The trajectory of the bullet wound... it doesn’t add up. She couldn’t have done it herself. Someone killed her, Mikhail.”

For a moment, I can’t breathe. The weight of his words settles over me like a shroud, and I feel a venomous mix of anger and betrayal boiling up from deep within.

A shockwave courses through me, chilling me to my core. Murdered? Sophia? The very idea stirs a storm inside, a tempest of anger and questions. It changes everything. It changes the game, the alliances, the goddamn board on which we play.

But most of all, it brings a dark cloud over what I have with Gabriette. She’s been living under the illusion that her sister took her own life, and now this? I look at my father, and the severity in his eyes matches the turmoil I feel.

“That changes everything, Pappa. We can’t keep Gabriette in the dark about this.”

“You’re right,” he agrees, his eyes meeting mine. “But with your ascension tonight, you’ve got a larger target on your

back than ever before. If Sophia was murdered, Gabriette could be in danger, too.”

Fuck. He’s right. I’m already grappling with what it means to be Pakhan, to have men swear fealty to me. And now this? It’s like I’ve been thrown into the deep end and told to swim with the fucking sharks.

“We find out who did this, and we make them pay,” my father says. The Pakhan in him speaks those words, but I hear the father, the man who’d do anything to protect his family—just like I’d do for Gabriette.

“Then let’s start hunting,” I reply, the finality in my voice sealing an unspoken pact. “And something tells me it’s the same people who tried to ram me off the road the other night.”

I’ll have to tell Gabriette, expose her to a truth that’ll shatter her already fragile world. But I’d rather she hear it from me than learn it in some godforsaken way.

As much as I hate the thought of adding one more burden to her shoulders, I owe her honesty—especially now, when honesty’s all I have to offer.

“We’ll navigate this storm, Mikhail,” my father assures me, perhaps reading the internal struggle in my eyes. “We always do.”

Yeah, I think, draining the last of my whiskey. But at what cost?

For the first time since the ceremony, my new tattoo feels like a weight, anchoring me to a reality more twisted than any I’d ever anticipated.



CHAPTER
THIRTY SEVEN

MIKHAIL

I step out of the pub; the air is biting cold, a stark contrast to the warmth and whiskey buzz inside. My footsteps echo on the cobbled street as I head to my car, a sleek black sedan idling by the curb.

As I settle into the plush leather seat, a swarm of thoughts begins to invade my mind. Sophia's death, my newfound responsibilities as Pakhan, and Gabriette. Always Gabriette.

I pull out my phone and dial her number. A part of me needs to hear her voice, to anchor myself in the one good thing that's happened to me recently.

But the call goes dead almost immediately. My brows furrowed in confusion, mingling with a tinge of irritation. Did she just kill the call? A knot tightens in my stomach. It's not like her to dodge my calls, especially not tonight of all nights.

My thumb hovers over the screen, contemplating whether to call again, when another idea pops into my head.

Mr. Orlov, chairman of the philharmonic where Gabriette was invited to play, and she mentioned she'd be there today. I scroll through my contacts and hit dial. The ring seems to go on forever before he finally answers.

"Mikhail! A pleasure to see you calling. How can I assist you this evening?"

His voice is as smooth as I remember, every syllable carefully weighed and measured. "Mr. Orlov, the pleasure is mine. I was wondering if you've seen Gabriette today?"

There's a pause, just long enough to set my nerves on edge. "I'm afraid I haven't seen her today. Was expecting her,

to be honest. She'll bring something extraordinary to our establishment. Another Baranova talent, ha!"

A sinking feeling begins to cloud my mind. "I see. Thank you, Mr. Orlov."

"Anytime, Mikhail."

That knot in my stomach tightens, twisting into something more ominous. I end the call with my mind racing. I want to trust her, God knows I do. But the events of the day, the looming dangers of my new role, and now this, it feels like a goddamn setup for a disaster movie.

I shake my head, forcing myself to breathe. No. I won't go down that road. Not with Gabriette. I trust her. I have to.

Suspicion creeps in, bringing along its ugly cousin, dread. But I shake it off. Gabriette wouldn't do anything to jeopardize us. We've laid our cards on the table, and the stakes are too high for stupid games.

With a sigh, I call Alexei and Viktor, her ever-present shadows. They answer almost immediately, but their silence feels heavy, calculated.

"Report," I demand, not in the mood for pleasantries. "Where is my wife?"

"Mrs Baranova has been in a theater for the past five hours," Viktor finally says.

My heart skips a beat. "With whom?"

"A pianist from the philharmonic," Alexei chimes in.

My jaw tightens. "A man or a woman?"

"A man, sir. His name is Maxim Volkov."

My grip tightens on the phone, knuckles going white. Maxim fucking Volkov. An accomplished pianist, no doubt, but also a notorious womanizer.

But it's not jealousy that twists my insides; it's the fear of how easily things can go wrong, how quickly misunderstandings can form, especially in a world as cutthroat as mine.

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down. "Keep an eye on her, but do not interfere. Understand?"

"Understood, sir."

I hang up, my thoughts racing as I lean back into my seat. A theater, a man, five hours. The facts lay themselves out neatly, but they don't assemble into any picture I want to see. It's not jealousy that grips me. No, it's something far worse—a biting uncertainty that gnaws at the trust we've painstakingly built.

The car moves smoothly through the darkening streets, but inside, a storm rages. I close my eyes for a moment, wrestling with the chaos in my mind. Tonight, I've ascended to a position of unimaginable power, bound by ink and blood to the Bratva.

And yet, as I sit here alone, I can't shake the feeling that there are still pieces of the puzzle missing. Pieces that could topple everything I've built, everything I care about.

But then I think of Gabriette. Despite my fears, my doubts, my bloody history, I feel like I can trust her. I have to. Because without trust, we're nothing but two broken souls pretending to be whole.

I lean back in my seat and sigh, staring out at the darkened city zooming past my window. I trust her; I do. But the world

we're entangled in doesn't give a damn about trust, or love, or anything sacred.

And with every passing second, as the city lights blur into streaks of inconsequential glow, I realize that the line between love and vulnerability is perilously thin. Too thin for comfort, yet too essential to ignore.

And in that shaky realisation, our lives hang in the fucking balance.



CHAPTER
THIRTY EIGHT

GABRIETTE

The car pulls up in the underground parking and I feel a twinge of anxiety tighten in my chest. I spent the entire evening absorbed in the life of Amaranthe without realising how long I've been under.

Amaranthe's concerts, her legacy—my evening had been enveloped in the haunting beauty of her cello music. A woman of unparalleled talent, and Mikhail's great-grandmother, no less. The hours had flown by, uncounted and unfelt.

I step into the quiet foyer of our home, my heels click softly against the marble floor, announcing my return. I drop my purse onto the console table and take off my coat, still lost in the melodies I heard earlier.

But then I walk into the living room and stop dead in my tracks. Mikhail is there, sitting on the edge of the couch. His elbows are braced on his knees, a glass of some amber liquid clutched in his hands. The room seems to thicken with tension, so palpable that I could almost touch it.

As he looks up, those mismatched eyes of his lock onto mine, and I can sense the tempest swirling behind them. Anger, confusion, maybe even hurt.

"Where were you?" His voice is low, almost a whisper, but laced with an undercurrent of menace.

"I was out," I reply cautiously, toeing off my shoes and making my way further into the room. "Is something wrong?"

"With whom?" he presses, completely ignoring my question.

“I was alone,” I answered, confusion muddying my thoughts. “I went to watch Amaranthe’s old concerts, to immerse myself in her music. She was an extraordinary cellist, and I wanted to draw inspiration from her.”

His grip tightens around the glass but he says nothing, so I continue, “I got lost in time. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“Why did you kill my call?”

I blanch at the venom in his voice. “I didn’t mean to, Mikhail. I silenced my phone before going in and I forgot to turn the ringer back on. As I’ve said, I lost track of time,”

For a moment, he just stares at me, as if trying to peer into the depths of my soul. “You think this is funny? Do you take pleasure in making a fool out of me?”

Taken aback, I reply. “What are you talking about? Why would you say that?”

His laugh is a harsh, bitter sound. “You tell me. Five hours in a theater with another man, ignoring my calls. Should I find that amusing?”

“Another man?” Confusion gives way to realization. “You’re talking about the pianist from the philharmonic? That was purely professional, Mikhail. Music, that’s it. Why would you jump to such conclusions?”

“Wouldn’t you, if the roles were reversed?”

His face remains an impenetrable mask, but his eyes... oh, those eyes seem to bore into my very soul. And I hate it. I hate that after everything we’ve been through, after the depth of the connection we’ve recently explored, he would even think for a second that I’d betray him.

“Do you think I cheated on you?” The words tumble from my lips before I can stop them, each syllable a blend of disbelief and hurt. “Do you think that little of me? Of us?”

He opens his mouth to speak, hesitates, and for a moment, I see a flicker of something—uncertainty, maybe, or regret—cross his features. But then it’s gone, replaced once again by that infuriatingly unreadable mask.

“Answer me, Mikhail,” I pressed, my voice tinged with an edge of desperation.

A heavy silence falls between us, each word left unsaid adding weight to it. The magnitude of what he’s implying finally hits me. Does he actually believe I would cheat on him?

I feel a pang of hurt, sharp and poignant. “You think I’d jeopardize what we’re still building, for a fleeting moment with someone else? After everything?”

His gaze softens for a fleeting second, and I see it—the vulnerability he hides so well.

“You have to understand, Gabriette, the life I’ve lived, the betrayals I’ve suffered—they’ve taught me to question everything, even the things I want to believe in the most,” he says, shaking his head. “Tonight was a big fucking deal to me, and I just wanted to hear your voice, only to be shut out.”

I walk over to him, take the glass from his hand, and set it aside. Then I sit next to him, forcing him to look at me.

“You’re not the only one who’s been hurt, who’s been betrayed. But if we’re going to make this work, this marriage, this life, we have to trust each other. There’s no other way.”

He stares at me for a while, pinning me with that gaze that always used to get my heart beating way too fast ... now it’s

doing it for all the wrong reasons.

“Trust is a fragile thing. Never make me question mine,” he says, finally breaking the silence that has stretched too thin.

And as I look into his eyes, the gravity of those words, the unspoken promise, and the veiled threat they carry, settles onto my shoulders. In this newfound world of ours, built on precarious pillars of power, responsibility, and yes, love—I realize how easily it could all crumble.

So, I take a mental step back, reminding myself that while we may have won battles, the war—the war for trust, understanding, and an everlasting togetherness—is still to be won.

“So, do you trust me?” I ask softly, needing to hear him say it, to dispel the thick air between us.

He looks at me for a long, weighted moment. “I want to,” he says, then he turns on his heel and walks away from me.

I stand there, stunned, watching his retreating back. It’s as if he’s drawn a curtain between us, one made of doubt and past wounds, and I can’t help but wonder if it’s a curtain we’ll ever be able to draw back.

After what feels like an eternity, I follow him. When I reach our bedroom, I find him in the walk-in closet, removing his shirt and trousers and neatly folding them before placing them in the hamper. His movements are mechanical, almost robotic, as if he’s trying to keep his emotions locked away.

“Mikhail, we can’t just leave it like this,” I say, crossing my arms as I lean against the door frame.

He glances at me, his eyes unreadable. “What would you have me say, Gabriette?”

“That you trust me, that you don’t think I’m lying to you,” I say, the words coming out more like a plea than a demand.

He pulls a drawer open and takes out a pair of black boxer shorts. “And would me saying it make it true? Words are just that—words. They mean nothing without action to back them up.”

I feel my temper rising, hot and swift. “So, my actions led you to believe I was cheating? Is that it?”

He finally looks at me, his eyes locking onto mine, and for a moment, I see the man I’m starting to fall in love with—the man who is so complex, so guarded, but also so incredibly human.

“No. But you thought the same, didn’t you? When I was out with Liadan? Doubt is a two-way street, Gabriette.”

The air between us grows colder, as if his words have brought in a draft. “Liadan is your best friend. It’s different.”

“Is it?” he counters, closing the drawer and walking past me. “Or is it just easier to believe in my guilt than in your own innocence?”

I want to say something, anything, that will bridge this chasm that’s opened up between us, but the words die on my lips.

Instead, I watch him slide into bed, his back to me as he turns off the bedside lamp. The darkness that fills the room seems to mirror the shadow that’s fallen over us.

With a heavy heart, I get ready for bed, my own actions a ritualistic echo of his. As I slide between the cool sheets, I turn my back to him, mirroring his posture.

But as I close my eyes, trying to escape into sleep, I realize that the true mirroring between us is far deeper, far more troubling. It's the mirror of doubt, reflecting both our faces, muddied by the past, distorted by fear.

And as I drift off into a restless sleep, I can't help but wonder if we'll ever find a way to break that mirror, to shatter the doubts that imprison us. Or if we'll remain trapped, each a reflection of the other's deepest fears.



CHAPTER
THIRTY NINE

MIKHAIL

Morning light seeps through the gaps in the heavy curtains, casting a soft glow on the room. I become aware of the warm body pressed against mine, and as my eyes open, I'm hit with a wave of regret so intense it's almost nauseating.

Last night's argument replays in my mind—the words said, the suspicions voiced, the trust that seemed to crumble in an instant.

Gabriette is still asleep, her back snug against my chest. I look down at her, at the way her hair spills over the pillow like a waterfall of black ink, and my heart clenches.

Last night, I let old wounds dictate my actions, let my past infiltrate the present in the most destructive way possible. I let doubt wedge itself between us, and the weight of that mistake feels like a physical burden.

My arm is draped over her waist, fingers just touching the silk of her nightgown, and I'm struck by the stark contrast between the softness of the moment and the hardness of last night's conversation. My eyes take a moment to adjust to the pale light, and as they do, my thoughts also come into sharper focus.

I feel like an idiot. A guilty, regretful idiot.

Carefully, so as not to wake her, I press my lips to her shoulder, each kiss an unspoken apology, the warmth of her skin reminding me of everything I nearly jeopardized.

I want to say so much, to find the words to bridge the distance I created, but at this moment, actions are all I have. And so I kiss her again, letting my lips linger on her skin as if

I can somehow transfer my regret, my need for her forgiveness, through this simple touch.

As I lay there, holding her, she stirs, her body tensing as she awakens. She turns her head slightly, her eyes meeting mine, and I see it—the residual hurt, the uncertainty. And it guts me.

“Mikhail?” Her voice is tinged with sleep, but I hear the uncertainty in it, and it gnaws at me.

“I’m here,” I whisper, tightening my arm around her as if I could pull her into the very fabric of my being.

She sighs and looks back at me. “About last night—”

“I’m sorry,” I cut her off, unable to let her finish, unable to let her take on any burden of blame. “I was a fucking idiot who shouldn’t have gotten into the bourbon while angry. I let my insecurities get the better of me, and I took it out on you. There’s no excuse.”

She studies me for a moment, her eyes unreadable. The tension in the room is a palpable entity, hovering over us, waiting for an invitation to dissolve or to grow thicker.

“Do you trust me?” she asks, echoing her question from the night before.

The words are a stab to my chest, a painful reminder of how badly I messed up. But they’re also a lifeline, a chance for redemption.

“I do,” I say, looking into her eyes, willing her to see the sincerity in mine. “I let old ghosts cloud my judgment, and I’m sorry for that. I trust you, Gabriette. More than I’ve ever trusted anyone.”

For a moment, she just looks at me, and I can see her weighing my words, measuring them against the hurt from last night. Then, slowly, she nods.

“I trust you too, Mikhail. Don’t ever forget that,” she says, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “I should have called you back so you wouldn’t worry. I’m sorry too.”

As I pull her into a hug, holding her as tightly as I dare, I’m hit with a newfound resolve.

Trust is a fortress, high-walled and formidable, but not impenetrable. It’s a fortress I built myself, brick by brick, and it’s a fortress anyone can tear down the same way.

And as I hold Gabriette, feeling the steady beat of her heart against my chest, I know that I’ve already started to dismantle the first brick.



My eyes flicker across the dual monitors on my desk, scanning through the piles of emails and documents. Contracts to approve, rival families to keep an eye on, business expansions to consider.

It’s just another day in the life of an emerging Pakhan. Then my eyes catch an email from an anonymous source. Normally, I’d be cautious about opening such emails—cybersecurity is not to be taken lightly in our line of work. But something compels me to click on it.

Footage begins to play, and what I see steals the air from my lungs. A man, his face obscured by a hood, sneaks into Sophia’s bedroom. My grip tightens on the mouse as I watch

from the outside how the intruder moves around the room before making his way out again.

I go through the attached files and find similar footage from three consecutive nights leading up to Sophia's supposed "suicide."

My hand shakes as I dial my father's number. "Pappa," I begin, my voice barely above a whisper. "You need to see something."

As I forward the email to him, my mind races back to a recent memory—a car chase, bullets flying, Gabriette's life hanging by a thread. I had caught one of the attackers, and he'd hinted at a blood vendetta against me.

Someone from my past who'd stop at nothing to see me dead, that I would know when the time comes. Could Sophia's death be connected to this? My instincts tell me yes, but I lack the evidence to substantiate that gut feeling.

My phone rings again, and it's my father who calls me back. "Contact Alberto and show him this. There's a connection here that we're not aware of, something we've overlooked."

"I'll do that right away," I say before hanging up, then I make arrangements for us to meet up before breathing out a sigh and cracking my neck. Time to head home and find my peace between my wife's legs.

I'm about to shut down my computer and do just that when my phone buzzes again. It's Mr. Orlov, and I can hear the distress in his voice even before he begins to speak.

"Mikhail, I owe you an apology. Gabriette was indeed here last night. It seems I missed her by mere minutes."

This information would've changed the entire fabric of last night. No misunderstandings, no arguments, no doubt clawing at the walls of trust Gabriette and I have built.

"I'm aware," I reply, curtly. "Thank you for letting me know."

I hang up, and my grip tightens around my phone, tempted to hurl it against the wall. But physical outbursts won't solve anything. If there's anything my new position has taught me, it's that power is futile without control.

My jaw clenches. Within a span of hours, I've been thrashed around by a sea of emotions—from the euphoria of ascension to the abyss of betrayal, then back to the edge of relief and frustration.

I lean back in my chair, feeling the pressure of the Pakhan's seat. It's not just a chair; it's a throne of responsibility, danger, and life-altering decisions. And as I prepare to go home to Gabriette, to look into her eyes and find that elusive sense of peace, I make a vow.

Whoever is threatening my family from the shadows, dredging up my past, manipulating the present, and putting my future at risk, will soon find out that even the darkest ghosts can be vanquished.

I shut down my computer and rise from my desk, sliding on my tailored coat. As I step out of my office, each footstep feels heavier than the last, burdened by new responsibilities and unresolved dilemmas. But I take solace in the promise of home, of facing Gabriette and mending the slight rift that has formed between us.

When I finally slip into the driver's seat of my car, the weight of my signet ring catches my attention—the newly

inked cross on my ring finger pulsing like a heartbeat. A reminder of the oaths I've sworn, the loyalty I owe, and the questions that remain unanswered.

As I drive back, I make myself a solemn promise. Whoever is challenging my life, threatening my family, and targeting my love will be hunted down and dealt with—no mercy, no exceptions.

Because if power teaches you anything, it's that some lines can never be crossed without consequence.



CHAPTER
FORTY

GABRIETTE

“Hmmm,” I trail off involuntarily when I feel rough hands running up the side of my body and a hard wall of muscle at my back. Groggy with sleep, I open my eyes just as I feel his lips on my neck, teasing me with his teeth.

I suck in a breath when he grinds his hard cock against my ass and his grip on my hip tightens. We’ve barely seen each other lately because he’s been so busy, so this feels like coming home.

“I need you; I fucking *crave* you,” he groans into my ear, trailing his tongue over the shell. “Tell me you need me too, sweet girl.”

His hand trails lower down my belly towards my mons, then I throw my head back when he slips it between my legs. “I ... I...”

“Do you want my cock, *Malyshka*?” he whispers in my ear, dirty and low, before lifting my leg and draping it over his leg behind me to spread me open. “Tell me you need me.”

He strokes my clit gently, running it in circular motions before slipping his fingers inside of me. Fucking me with those thick digits, he spreads my wetness all over my pussy and continues to do those same motions while not allowing me to reach my climax.

Edging so early in the fucking morning.

“Please...” I moan. “Mikhail, I need you, *please*.”

A dark sound rumbles deep in his chest when I say this, then in one swift motion, he buries his thick cock inside of me.

I moan loudly when he enters me from behind, then he lifts my leg up more and I swear I can feel him everywhere.

“You feel so fucking good,” he groans. “I’ve been waiting all day to put my cock in you, my good girl, and fuck, you’re worth the wait. This pussy was made for me.”

My stomach flutters from his praises, and I push my ass out more so I can feel him deeper inside of me. He rests my leg on his raised one to open me more, then he slams into me harder while wrapping his hand around my throat.

“Play with yourself, sweet girl,” he purrs in my ear while his thick cock stretches me wide open. “That’s it, I need to see you chase your release. God, you look beautiful.”

Fuck, when did I become a slut for praises during sex?

While he pistons into me, I play with my pussy; his groans of approval and my moans send me on a different fucking high. His hand at my throat slips down to my breasts, where he teases my nipples, pulling them, pinching them and flicking them.

I don’t know why, but this made my moaning reach a fever pitch, until he slams a hand over my mouth.

“Shh, I want to hear the way your perfect pussy sounds,” he hums in my ear as his thrusting picks up. “I want to hear how wet you are for me, then I need you to come, okay?”

I moan past his hand, and he tuts, removing his hand. “I need your words, *Malyshka*.”

He keeps using the word need, and something tells me that although praises do nothing for Mikhail, ***affirmation*** does.

“Y-yes...” I whimper. “I’ll be quiet for you, I promise.”

“That’s a good fucking girl,” he growls, and for the next few seconds, I lay there in silence while the sounds of him fucking my wet pussy fill the room.

It should make me cringe, right? The wet sounds, the thump of our bodies colliding; but it doesn’t. It makes me feel like a fucking queen, knowing I can get Mikhail to this point even while sleeping.

He goes feral for me without me even needing to do anything, and if that’s not having one of the most ruthless, powerful men in the palm of my hand, then what is?

“Please, make me come, Mikhail,” I moan, turning my head back. “Please...”

“Fuck,” he growls and slips his hand to my pussy. “I can’t resist my queen when she begs, can I?”

I whimper like I’m in fucking heat when he starts playing with my clit and thrusting hard behind me. His groans and the way he comes apart like this for me, and only for me ... God.

I swear my mind goes blank when I feel the first wave of my orgasm hit and I’m so fucking ready to fall headfirst.

But then Mikhail slaps my pussy and I immediately clench. He chuckles at my reaction and proceeds to do it again, and on the third slap, my body doesn’t just tremble—it fucking convulses.

I used to think pornstars screaming were all fake until Mikhail. Now he elicits that response from me almost on a daily basis.

When I come down from my climax, I feel him stiffen up behind me and groan, his hand at my throat again. I’ll never get used to feeling that thick cock of his pulsing inside of me; it’s the best reward I could ever get.

His thrusting slows down and he breathes out a sigh, resting his head against my shoulder.

“Sorry for waking you, *Malyshka*,” he says, his voice a deep timbre. “I just needed to feel you.”

“Hmmm,” I thrum, my body feeling numb after that. “You can wake me up like that whenever you want, Pakhan.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Gabriette,” he growls. “Calling me that, in your breathy voice, will get you fucked hard again.”

I can’t help but giggle, only to gasp when he pulls out of me, sliding his still hard cock between my soaked folds. My body trembles when his cockhead slides over my sensitive clit, and he chuckles again.

“Come, let’s get you cleaned up so you can get back to sleep,” he says as he kisses my neck and I sigh.

“Aw, I don’t want to,” I groan. “Can I just stay here and sleep?”

He picks me up and there’s my answer, so I grumble as he walks me to the bathroom. But when he places me down on the floor, a wave of embarrassment hits me when I feel his cum seeping out of me.

I look down while he adjusts the taps and I cringe before I walk to grab some tissue, when he stops me.

“I want to see my cum dripping out of you, don’t you fucking dare,” he says, then he turns to me and grins. “It’s just me staking my claim, baby.”

“Ugh,” I groan and roll my eyes, but secretly I feel warm inside because he called me ‘baby’. Usually it’s *Malyshka* or good girl when we’re fucking ... never baby in a breathy voice.

The thought warms me up, so I push my apprehensions aside and join him in the shower.



CHAPTER
FORTY ONE

GABRIETTE

“**T**here’s something I have to tell you,” Mikhail says as we walk into the closet. “It’s about Sophia.”

My back goes ramrod straight at the mention of my estranged sister, not feeling too comfortable talking about her, knowing she would have been in my position right now. Then guilt slivers into my heart at that thought.

What the hell, Gabi. Your sister is dead.

“What is it?”

He pulls on a pair of boxer briefs before walking over to me. “I’ve been given intel pointing to Sophia being murdered,” he says, and I drop the blouse in my hand. “She didn’t commit suicide, *Malyshka*.”

I feel like the walls are closing in on me when Mikhail wraps his arms around me and pulls me close. Sophia was murdered? How can that be? How did they miss this?

“I’m working to find out what happened,” he says, stroking my hair. “I’m meeting up with your father tonight to see what he knows.”

I take a deep breath, inhaling his cologne and allowing it to calm me down, but the glaring truth is staring me in the face.

Sophia didn’t kill herself to get away from Mikhail. Someone killed her before she could marry him.

“Do you think she was murdered because she was about to marry you?” I ask, my head still on his chest. “Was someone against the marriage?”

He chuckles, a deep throaty sound that reverberates through me. “I think it would be better to ask who was for it. You might have a solid number then.”

I turn my head to look up at him with narrowed eyes. “That many?”

“Peace between the Bratva and Cosa Nostra? Why would our enemies want that and risk a bigger threat?” he says, then he cocks his head to the side. “Although I do need you to stay out of the public eye until this is sorted.”

I step away from him. “What? Why? I have a dinner gala tomorrow night with Mr Orlov. Remember, you said you’re not able to come with me.”

He winces as if he just remembered the conversation, then he breathes out a sigh. “Fine, but I’ll be adding Max and Leandro to your security. I can’t risk anything happening to you when I’m not around,” he says, and my heart can’t help but warm at this.

I slip my arms around his neck and kiss his lips gently. “Thank you, babe,” I say and he pulls me closer, deepening the kiss. He seems to love when I call him nicknames, and I’m all too happy to oblige.

Once I called him ‘Daddy’ and he fucked me on the kitchen counter while I was busy making breakfast. Yeah, I haven’t done that since.

We break apart and continue to get ready, and when I turn my back to him to grab heels, he suddenly approaches me.

“What’s this?” he asks, stroking something on the back of my neck. “Looks like a bruise.”

“Oh?” I say and walk over to the mirror, trying to see whatever he’s pointing to. “Huh, I don’t see anything. Maybe

you bit me too hard.”

I smile as I say this and turn to look at him again, but his gaze has dropped to my legs. Frowning, I walk over to him and wave a hand in front of his face.

“Mikhail?”

He seems to snap out of his thoughts and turns his eyes back on me, shaking his head. “Sorry,” he says, then he turns back and continues to get ready.

I find this extremely odd, but continue to get ready while feeling an icy indifference from him. Why did he look at my knees like that? They’re slightly carpet burnt from lugging around music equipment in the studio practice with the string quartet for tomorrow night.

My eyes widened. Wait—

“Mischa,” I say and walk toward him, pulling him back while feeling pissed off. “Tell me what’s going through your mind right now and don’t lie to me.”

He’s looking at the ceiling when he breathes out a sigh, then peers down at me. “My insecurities got the best of me, but I pushed them back,” he says, shaking his head. “I trust you, Gabriette, but let me deal with my toxic inner thoughts.”

“Toxic inner thoughts? You saw carpet burn on my knees and a bruise at the back of my neck and your thoughts automatically went to the worst place—”

“When you’ve been walking around with a fucking knife in your back for ten years, you would see betrayal in everything too,” he growls, and my heart drops.

But before he can elaborate further, he storms out of the room and I can do nothing but stare at the space where he just

stood.

He didn't have to say it in so many words, but I think I get it now.



CHAPTER
FORTY TWO

GABRIETTE

I wake up, my head still spinning from the emotional whirlpool of yesterday's conversation with Mikhail. The bed is empty, and I know he came in late and left early. We're right back where we started.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand—Natalya reminding me of the dinner gala tonight. Ah, yes, the place where we all put on masks and pretend everything's perfect.

Later on, I stand in the emptiness of the closet, the scent of his cologne lingering in the air like an afterthought. His words carve themselves into my mind, searing and impossible to shake off. A knife in his back for ten years? Betrayal, insecurities... What happened to Mikhail?

And why is it bleeding over into our marriage?

I get ready, a black gown hugging my curves, contrasting against my pale skin. I add a bold red lip and just enough makeup to highlight, but not overshadow. A last glance in the mirror and my eyes fall on my neck.

Is there a bruise there? I touch the skin lightly, remembering how he touched it, wondering what had triggered his inner demons. With a wan smile, I walk out of the bedroom and hope enough champagne will cheer me up.



The dinner gala is a storm of satin and glittering gems; men and women from various circles pretending to like each other. Max and Leandro, my newly assigned security, floated like

professional shadows behind me, along with Alexei and Viktor somewhere in the room.

But Mikhail's absence is like a missing tooth, the space filled but the void still evident.

Natalya meets me at the entrance, dressed in a gown that screams sophistication and a touch of rebellion.

"You look gorgeous," she says, her eyes alight with its usual mischief.

"You too," I reply, lightly embracing her and offering air kisses.

We make small talk with people whose names I forget as soon as they walk away. I keep one eye on the door, but Mikhail won't walk in. He's a ghost tonight, felt but not seen.

"Can I steal you for a moment?" Natalya says, interrupting my wayward thoughts.

"Of course."

She guides me to a secluded corner, a safe haven in the sea of gossips and social climbers.

"I saw how you looked at the door. Mikhail won't come tonight," she starts, almost cautiously. "He's out with our father, apparently meeting with yours."

"I know," I reply, an emptiness settling in my chest. "He mentioned it last night."

She has a curious look in her eyes as she cocks her head to one side, and it seems like there's something she wants to say but doesn't. As far as I know, she and Mikhail aren't close, but they're not estranged either.

Would she know what happened? She would have been too young, but I wonder.

“Do you mind if I ask you something a bit personal?”

“That depends on the question,” she answers, my eyes not leaving hers.

“Did Mikhail ever have someone before me ... Someone who hurt him?”

Natalya hesitates and empties her glass. “It’s not my place to talk about it, Gabi.”

It’s a non-answer, but an answer nonetheless. I nod, taking it in. As I do, my mind drifts to what Mikhail told me about Sophia, and suddenly, the walls feel like they’re closing in. I take a sip of my champagne; the bubbles doing little to lift the heaviness that’s settled over me.

“Mikhail was different before... before whatever it was that changed him,” she says with a sigh. “We used to be close, but he became colder, more withdrawn after that. If you want to know more, the best person to ask would be him.”

The air grows heavier between us and I nod, my mind swimming with new questions, though I decide to shelve them for now. “Thanks, Natalya,” I say, meaning it.

We disperse into the crowd once more, our faces painted with fake smiles. For a while, I manage to drown out the background noise of my anxieties, focusing instead on the music, the dancing, the light banter.

Eventually, I make my way to the restroom, my heels clicking on the marble floor as I go. After taking care of the necessary, I open the stall door, my hand instinctively going to smooth my dress. That’s when my heart drops.

Soft eyes and a head full of curls — Damien. His dark eyes lock onto mine, and memories flash through my mind. I think of the ominous text he sent and take a step back.

“Damien?” My voice is a shaky whisper, barely audible over the dull thump of the music filtering through the walls. “What... what are you doing here?”

“I told you I’d save you, Bella. I’ve missed you.” He steps closer, each footfall echoing in the tiled space, reverberating through my chest like a drum.

“No...” I stand my ground even as he reaches for me. “No, you need to leave. If Mikhail finds you here, he’ll kill you!”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “That Russian scum can’t do anything to me. I’m untouchable,” he says, pulling me close, one hand on the wall next to my head. I suck in a breath as his lips near mine, the familiar rush coursing through me.

But I snap back to reality just in time. With a surge of adrenaline, I shove him away, my palm connecting with his face in a sharp slap.

“Don’t ever touch me again,” I hiss, my heart pounding so hard it drowns out all other sounds. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay away from me, Damien.”

For a moment, he looks stunned, as if my rejection is a language he can’t understand. Then his eyes narrow, and I can see the gears turning, recalculating his approach, but it’s too late. He’s already shown his hand.

“I’ll stay away for now, but you need to know that you’re mine,” he says finally. “I’ll show him parts of you he’ll never reach and make him see that you’ll always be mine, Bella.”

He grins and licks his lips. “Or should I say Gabriette?” his voice is laced with something I can’t quite place. It’s neither

love nor hate, but something far more dangerous—obsession.

When he leaves, I'm left staring at my reflection in the mirror, my heart pounding in my chest. Questions race through my mind, the most glaring is what he called me.

He knows my real name. How did he find me? What does he want? And what will happen when Mikhail learns about this?

I rejoin Natalya, forcing a smile and trying to appear as if nothing's amiss. "Did I miss anything?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Only the usual gala gossip," Natalya says, returning my smile. Her eyes, however, linger on me a moment longer, as if sensing that something's off.

"By the way," she continues, lowering her voice, "Mikhail's birthday is coming up. We're planning a party for him, and this time, we want to actually surprise him. He always seems to catch on beforehand."

"Who's we?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. "And when is it?"

"Next weekend, and it's the entire family. Me, Lee, our mother, cousins ... Okay, mostly the woman, but you get my drift!"

My eyes brighten at the mention of Mikhail's birthday, grateful for a subject change and something different to focus on. "I love that idea. Count me in."

Natalya grins, looking relieved and perhaps a bit conspiratorial. "Excellent. I'll send you details later. We're giving you the most crucial element to hide. Trust me, if anyone can keep a secret from my brother, it's you."

I chuckle, appreciating the compliment even as the irony of it hits me, given the newly minted secrets I'm already hiding. "Any hints on what this 'crucial element' is?"

She leans in closer, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "Let's just say it's something he's wanted for a long time but never indulges in. He's going to be floored."

"Intriguing," I replied, my curiosity piqued. The thought of planning something special for Mikhail lightens the heavy mood that's been clinging to me, if only a little. "I look forward to being your co-conspirator."

"Perfect," Natalya says, raising her glass in a toast. "To actually surprising Mikhail for once in our lives."

We clink our glasses together, and for a moment, the complications of the evening fade away, replaced by the simple joy of planning a celebration for someone we both care deeply about.

Yet even as we laugh and dive back into the social whirlpool of the gala, I can't entirely shake the shadows that have gathered around me. Damien's sudden appearance, Mikhail's growing list of enemies, the unsolved mystery of Sophia's death—each forms a dark undercurrent that pulls at me, threatening to drag me under.

But right now, I have a birthday party to plan, and perhaps, in the light of that happier occasion, some of these shadows will finally be banished.

So, with renewed resolve, I let myself be carried away by the evening, all while holding tightly to the plans for Mikhail's surprise. In a life riddled with uncertainties, it's a glimmer of something good, and right now, that's more than enough.



CHAPTER
FORTY THREE

MIKHAIL

I'm seated at an upscale restaurant with Liadan and Lorenzo, the dim lighting casting shadows on the fine china and cutlery. Despite the serious matters that usually occupy my mind, being around Liadan usually puts me at ease. She's family in every way that counts.

Her loyalties are split like mine, torn between the Irish and Italian mobs, but she's managed to navigate those treacherous waters with a finesse that I admire. In my line of business, sentimentality can be a luxury, but tonight, it feels warranted.

"So, you're officially taking the reins soon, huh?" I say to Lorenzo, swirling a glass of red wine. "Big shoes to fill, cousin."

Lorenzo smirks, exuding the confidence that's propelled him through the ranks. "If there's one thing the Vittoris know how to do, it's lead. You should know that by now."

Lee chimes in, "Oh, please. The only thing the Vittoris are better at than leading is boasting."

"You're one to talk," I say, raising my glass toward her. "Heard you've been globetrotting and telling everyone who will listen. Expanding your empire?"

"Someone has to keep the family on its toes," she replies, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

We sit, and the waiters spring into action, pouring wine and presenting the menu, a rehearsed ballet of discretion and efficiency. Lorenzo leans back, swirling his glass of wine thoughtfully.

“So, how’s life treating you, Mikhail? How’s it feel being called Pakhan?” he inquires with humor in his tone.

“You know me, always trying to be a pillar of the community,” I retort. We laugh, a genuine, unguarded moment among friends. I look down at the weight on my ring finger, thinking about how things went from 0 to 100 overnight in all aspects of my life.

Growing close to Gabriette, my ascension as Pakhan and now these doubts. Why the fuck can’t I just be happy without all the other added shit?

Our banter flows naturally, easing into discussions of past adventures, old friends, and even older enemies. It’s almost easy to forget the web of intrigue and violence that follows us on a daily basis. Almost.

Liadan laughs, a sound that’s both elegant and deadly, much like her. “Remember that time in Dublin, Mischa? When we had to scale that bloody fence?”

I chuckle. “I remember tearing my coat on that damn thing. You still owe me.”

“Oh, a coat is a small price to pay for a night you’d never forget,” she retorts, her eyes twinkling.

Lorenzo raises his glass. “To unforgettable nights, then.”

Our glasses clink in unison. We all share a laugh, reminiscing about old times, when things were simpler, when the lines between friend and enemy were easier to draw. My phone vibrates in my pocket, an intrusion I’d usually ignore, but something tells me to check.

Maybe it’s the fact that Gabriette and I have barely seen each other lately, living in the same house yet somehow just missing each other. So, I pull it out.

And then my world narrows to the image on the screen.

The laugh dies on my lips immediately. It's Gabriette in what looks like a restroom. There's a man beside her, his hand pressed against the wall next to her head, and their faces are so close it looks like they're about to kiss—or just did.

My grip tightens around the phone until it's a wonder the damn thing doesn't shatter. Rage floods my system, sharp and scalding. It's a white-hot blaze that threatens to consume everything, and for a fraction of a second, I let it.

I entertain the notion of storming out of this place, hunting down whoever the hell that man is and tearing his fucking dick off.

But then, as quickly as it came, I locked the fury away. It still simmers under the surface, but it's a controlled burn now. I've spent years mastering my emotions, turning them into tools rather than liabilities. I won't lose that discipline now, especially not in front of Lee and Lorenzo.

“You alright, Mischa?” Lee asks, her eyes narrowing as she observes my clenched jaw and tightened fists. “You look like someone just spat in your drink.”

Instead of answering, I wave over the waiter. “Bourbon. Neat.”

Lee and Lorenzo exchange a glance but say nothing. As the alcohol arrives and we pour ourselves another glass, my mind races. Someone sent that picture to provoke me, to get a rise out of me. The question is, who? And why?

The deep amber color of the bourbon reminds me of Gabriette's eyes, and I feel the anger roiling inside me again, mingling with a sharp pang of betrayal. For a moment, I

consider drowning the fury and hurt with a quick swig, but even alcohol feels like a traitor tonight.

Lee places a hand on my arm. “Mikhail, if something’s up, you know you can talk to us.”

I look at her, then at Lorenzo, both of whom have been with me through thick and thin, through blood and battle.

“Do you ever feel like you’re a spectator in your own life?” I finally ask, the words bitter on my tongue. “Like you’re watching scenes unfold and wondering how the fuck you even got there?”

Lorenzo’s eyes narrow, concern etched in his features. “You’ve always been the man with the plan, Mischa. If something’s throwing you off balance—”

“It’s like catching a shadow,” I cut in, unable to explain the tightness in my chest, the sense that I’m losing something precious even as I grip it tighter. “Every time you reach out, it’s already moved on.”

Lee, ever perceptive, takes one look at me and seems to understand the depth of what I’m not saying.

“Life has a fucked-up way of testing us, even when we think we’re unbreakable,” she says softly. “But it also has a way of revealing who’s real and who’s not. Just make sure you’re around to see it when the masks come off.”

I nod, her words hitting closer to home than she probably realizes. I leave the bourbon untouched on the table, my appetite for both alcohol and food completely gone. All that’s left is a simmering blend of emotions, waiting for a spark to set it all ablaze.

Gabriette. The name alone sends a tumult of feelings cascading through me. We need to talk, to sort out this tangled

mess that's threatening to choke us both. The walls between us have gotten too high, too fast. And one way or another, they're coming down. Even if I have to tear them down myself.

"To old times," Lee offers, holding up her glass.

"To old times," I echo, the words tasting like ash in my mouth.

I throw back the bourbon, letting its fiery trail blaze a path down my throat and displace, if only for a moment, the other fire that's threatening to break free.

As I set down the empty glass, my resolve hardens. I'll get to the bottom of this, unravel this newest thread of betrayal in a life that's been full of them. And when I find the person responsible, they're going to wish they'd never heard the name Mikhail Baranov.

But for now, I sit back and engage in the conversation with Lee and Lorenzo, who are still blissfully unaware of the storm that's brewing inside me. After all, in our world, composure is the first line of defense. And until I know more, it's the one thing I can't afford to lose.



CHAPTER
FORTY FOUR

GABRIETTE

Two nights. Forty-eight hours, and not a damn word from Mikhail. Anxiety gnaws at me like a relentless beast, its teeth sinking deeper with every unanswered call, every failed attempt to track him down.

I've tried his cell at least a dozen times, only to be met with that detestable voicemail greeting. Even his business line goes unanswered. It's like he's vanished off the face of the Earth.

I call Natalya again, desperate for any morsel of information. "Nat, have you heard from your brother? Is he okay?"

"I don't know, Gabi," she responds, her voice tinged with worry that mirrors my own. "He hasn't said anything to me either."

Alexei and Viktor, my bodyguards, are equally tight-lipped. Anytime I ask, they exchange a glance and mutter, "We're not permitted to say, ma'am."

"Not permitted to say what?!" I snap, my voice edging into hysteria. "Is he alive? Is he hurt?"

"We really can't say, ma'am," Viktor replies, and the formality of it all makes me want to scream.

The clock ticks away the seconds, each one stretching into an eternity. I can't eat; I can't focus.

I'm pacing our bedroom like a caged animal when the door suddenly slams open. I jump, my heart hammering in my chest, and there he is. Mikhail.

His appearance stops me in my tracks. His clothes are rumpled, his long hair disheveled, and what really gets to me are his eyes—bloodshot and dark, like he’s been through hell. And he smells like a goddamn distillery.

But it’s the anger, the raw, almost palpable fury that radiates off him, that chills me to the bone. It’s an emotion I’ve rarely seen on him, and never to this magnitude.

“Mikhail, where the fuck have you been?” The words burst from me, relief flooding my system even as anger bubbles up to take its place.

He eyes me for a moment, as though weighing his words. “Business,” he says finally.

“Business? Are you fucking kidding me?” My voice rises with each word as I walk toward him. “You disappear for two days and all you have to say is ‘business’?”

He looks at me, and for a moment, I see a flicker of something cross his face. But then it’s gone, replaced by that unreadable mask he wears so well.

“I had matters to attend to,” he says, his voice low. “Complicated matters.”

I scoff at this and shake my head, knowing that if I push him now, he could very well explode, but I am so done being patient.

“You can’t just do that! You can’t just vanish and expect me to be okay with it. I was scared out of my fucking mind!”

His gaze finally softens, just a fraction, and it’s enough to make my breath catch.

“I didn’t want to involve you,” he admits, and though his voice is nearly a whisper, the words echo loudly in the space

between us.

“Well, it’s a little late for that, isn’t it? I’m your fucking wife, so I am involved. Every second you’re gone, I’m here worrying, wondering if you’re even alive. You owe me an explanation.”

He runs a hand through his already messy hair, looking every bit the lost man he doesn’t want anyone to see.

“You’re right,” he concedes. “I owe you an explanation. But not now. I can’t.”

His evasiveness ignites the simmering frustration within me. “Then when, Mischa? When do you plan on letting me in? On treating me like a partner rather than someone you need to shield from your ‘complicated matters’?”

Ignoring my question and my presence, he moves past me with the kind of purposeful stride that invites no argument. It’s like I’m not even here. Like I’m a ghost in my own goddamn life.

My heart thumps loudly in my chest, each beat a cry for answers, for some kind of connection to the man I love.

He heads straight for the bathroom, and I hear the shower turn on a moment later. The sound of cascading water fills the silence, each drop echoing my growing frustration and worry. I stand there, feeling like an idiot.

Should I go in after him? Demand answers? Or should I give him space, let him come to me when he’s ready, if he ever will be?

The seconds stretch into minutes, but they feel like hours. Finally, unable to stand the suspense, the not knowing, any longer, I take a few steps toward the bathroom door. I stop

myself just in time, hand hovering in the air, inches from the knob.

No. If he wanted me in there, if he wanted to talk, he would've said something. Anything.

So I pull my hand back, my body retreating but my mind racing ahead, filled with worst-case scenarios and what-ifs. As the water continues to run, drowning out the questions I'm too afraid to ask, I'm left to wonder how much more uncertainty I can take. How much more of his silence I can bear?

The shower turns off, snapping me back to reality, to the now. I take a steadying breath, bracing myself for whatever comes next. Will he speak to me? Will he finally break his silence? Or will he continue to shut me out, leaving me to navigate this storm of doubt and fear alone?

The bathroom door swings open, and Mikhail steps out, towel wrapped around his waist, another one drying his hair. Our eyes meet for just a moment, but in that brief second, I see it—the turmoil, the inner demons he's fighting.

I take a tentative step toward him, but he doesn't step back. I take that as my cue. "Mischa, please," I beg as I feel stupid tears of frustration welling in my eyes.

"I was—I was so worried about you after what you said happened to Sophia. I didn't know ... I didn't know if you were safe or not, and no one would talk to me. You became Pakhan not too long ago and there's a bigger.... A bigger target on your back ... I—"

But I can't even finish what I'm saying as I dissolve into tears. Yes, I am pissed off with him, but I was terrified that someone would call to say he was dead. I was scared I lost him before we could even sort things out.

His arms wrap around me like a vise, pulling me into his embrace, and I finally break down.



CHAPTER
FORTY FIVE

MIKHAIL

It's a strange thing, feeling the weight of someone else's feelings. And as I pull Gabriette into my arms, I realize I've been carrying that weight around with me for a long time — carrying it and pushing it away, scared shitless of what it means.

She feels so fragile in this moment, and yet she's the strongest person I know. I hold her tightly to me as she weeps, my body towering over hers.

It's like coming home after years of being lost at sea. Her familiar scent washes over me, a soothing balm to the gnawing wounds that have been left open for too long. I take her to the bed and gently lay her down, the gravity of what I'm about to show her already weighing heavily on me.

I've been drinking myself into a stupor for the last two days, scared of what I'd do once I got back here. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her, so I knew the only way to get out of the funk I was in was to confront her.

So, here I am.

Wordlessly, I reach for my phone on the nightstand and flick to the image that's been the splinter in my mind these past days—her and another man in an intimate situation. My jaw clenches at the mere thought of it, but I have to know. I have to hear it from her.

“Explain this,” I demand, handing her the phone.

Her eyes scan the image, her face paling as she looks up at me. “I know what it looks like, but trust me, it's anything but,” she says, handing the phone back to me.

“It’s Damien. He cornered me in the bathroom. He tried to kiss me, but I slapped him and pushed him away. I would never risk what we have. Because I—I’m in love with you and —”

Her hesitation doesn’t go unnoticed, neither do her wide eyes and the blush on her cheeks. The words hang in the air, a confession she hadn’t planned on making. It’s as if she spoke her heart before her mind could catch up, and for some reason, that makes it even more meaningful.

It’s a tiny crack in the strong facade she maintains, and for the first time in a long while, I feel warmth spreading through me.

It’s an alien feeling, one I’ve avoided since ... since her.

My hand reaches up to cup her face. “I think it’s time I told you about my past. About why I am the way I am. It may explain things better.”

Looking into her eyes, I know I have to tell her, tell her about the scars that shaped me, about the shadows that still haunt my steps. I take a deep breath, feeling like I’m on the edge of a precipice.

“Ten years ago, I was engaged to a woman named Dasha. We were in love, or at least, I thought she felt the same,” I sigh, swallowing deeply. “I came home from a business trip and found her in bed with Michael, my second-in-command. They had been carrying on behind my back for three years.”

Her mouth opens in a silent gasp and I know she’s close to saying something comforting, so I continue and my grip tightens at the memory.

“I found out the hard way. Walked in on them in my own fucking bed. My father was there with me and witnessed the

whole goddamn fiasco. He... he made me deal with it, deal with them the Baranov way. And not in the way you might think.”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the next part. “My father is not a man who takes betrayal lightly; he loathes it with his entire being. I had to kill them, right then and there; slit their throats and watched them bleed out. It’s not something I’m proud of. But it’s a burden I’ve had to carry.”

Her eyes are wide, filled with a mixture of disbelief and dawning understanding. But it’s what comes next that really tears me apart.

“Afterwards, I found out Dasha was pregnant. I still don’t know if that child was mine. I’ve carried that weight with me, Gabriette. Every goddamn day, it’s there, reminding me of who I am, of what I’m capable of.”

That I’m a fucking monster, but with this life I lead, I’ve had to become one.

She cups my face in her soft hands and I literally have to breathe out a sigh I didn’t know I was holding. There’s so much emotion in those whiskey eyes of hers, emotion I’m not worthy of being the recipient of.

“In a way, that moment carved me into what I am today—a man less willing to trust, less willing to love. But you, Gabriette, you’re changing that. Your confession tonight, unplanned as it was, has given me something I haven’t had in a long time. Hope.”

I pause, letting my next words gather their weight because of what I’m about to admit, I haven’t said to anyone else in ten years.

“I’ve been fighting it like the coward that I am. But I knew from the moment you stood up to me, from the moment you drove that getaway car like a fucking bat out of hell, that I was going to fall hard, and I have,” I say, chuckling. “I love you too, *Malyshka*. I’ve been holding that back, guarding myself, because... well, you know why. But I can’t keep it in any longer, especially not after tonight.”

Her eyes search mine, as if validating the sincerity of my words, and those tears welling in her eyes now fall freely down her cheeks. She tries to say something, but then stops herself, her bottom lip trembling in the cutest way.

“I want to forget about all this shit—the picture, the suspicions, the fucking chaos it’s caused in my head. It’s tearing me apart. I don’t want to feel like that, not when I’m with you. Let’s move on from this. Let’s not let the past, mine or yours, ruin what we have. Can we do that?”

She leans in, her lips finding mine in a sweet, lingering kiss that says more than any words ever could. Yes, we can move on. Yes, we can confront whatever darkness lies ahead. Together.

And for the first time, that concept—of facing the future, not alone but with someone else—doesn’t terrify me. It strengthens me.



CHAPTER
FORTY SIX

MIKHAIL

After everything that's happened this past week alone, I never thought Gabriette and I would be saying those three little words so soon.

It's like a goddamn pressure valve has been released, letting out all the tension and worry that had been building up between us. I could have easily gone back to ignoring her, shutting her out, and making sure she killed her emotions for me.

But what's the point? I'm already fighting battles outside; the last thing I need is to wage a war in my own home, against the one person who's making it feel like a home in the first place.

I pull her into my arms, feeling her heartbeat against mine, steady and real. I kiss the top of her head, inhaling the scent of her shampoo, a small comfort that I'd missed more than I cared to admit these past two nights.

"I'm sorry I made you worry, *Malyshka*, but I didn't want to come back home while I was in that state of mind," I say, feeling the words spill out easier than I anticipated. "Seeing that picture, with that fucker so close to you—it twisted something inside me. I had to get a handle on it before I faced you. Otherwise, I might have said or done something I'd regret."

Her body tenses for a moment but then relaxes, as if she's letting go of a breath she's been holding.

"It's done now," I continue. "I trust you, and you trust me, and that's what we need to hold on to. Screw the outside

world. What matters is what's happening between us, right here and right now."

She looks up at me, her eyes soft but resolute. "I missed you, Mikhail and I was so scared that something had happened to you. I didn't know what to think."

Hearing her voice tremble, seeing the genuine fear in her eyes, is like a gut punch. Any lingering anger or mistrust is washed away by a wave of emotion so potent it chokes me up for a moment.

"I'm so sorry, Gabriette," I manage to say, my voice thick with regret. "You didn't deserve any of this shitstorm. I should've come home sooner, should've talked to you. I never meant to scare you."

She buries her face in my chest, and I tighten my hold on her. We lay there quietly, each lost in our own thoughts, yet connected by the palpable emotional tether between us.

For a moment, we just lay there, our eyes meeting in a quiet acknowledgment of the vulnerability we've both shown tonight. It's new territory for me, and maybe for her too, but it's a ground I suddenly find I want to explore.

The quiet is soothing, but there's something I have to tell her, something that could break the fragile peace we've just found.

Taking a deep breath, I finally speak up. "Gabriette, there's something you should know about Damien."

She lifts her head, a quizzical look in her eyes. "What about him?"

Right, time to rip the bandaid off.

“He’s not just some random guy from your past. Damien is the son of a Cosa Nostra underboss. Your father sent him to watch you in Seattle.”

The impact is immediate. Gabriette’s body tensed, her eyes widening in disbelief. “What? Are you serious? My father sent Damien...to spy on me?”

“Yeah,” I confirm, regretting that I have to shatter this temporary sanctuary we’ve found. “He wasn’t just your friend and boyfriend by happenstance. He was there to keep an eye on you, to report back to your family.”

She looks absolutely stunned, her eyes searching mine as if she hopes to find some hint that I’m joking. But I can only offer her the harsh truth.

“I don’t even know what to say,” she whispers, more to herself than to me. “Why did you have to tell me this now?”

“Because trust needs to be complete, *Malyshka*. No secrets. I won’t keep things from you, especially something like this. I know it’s a lot to take in,” I say softly, “especially considering everything that’s already happened. But it’s better if you know the truth.”

Gabriette falls silent, grappling with this new revelation. It’s as if I can see her processing everything, reevaluating her past and recalibrating her understanding of her life in Seattle, Damien, and her father’s manipulations.

Finally, she exhales, a heavy sigh that seems to carry the weight of her confusion and betrayal.

“I can’t believe it,” she murmurs, more to herself than to me. “All this time, I thought I was free of my family’s manipulations, but I was never really free, was I?”

She turns away, clearly struggling to process this, her body rigid with tension. I wish I didn't have to tell her. I wish I could protect her from the uglier facets of our world, but she deserves to know. If we're laying all our cards on the table tonight, then they should be truly all.

She sighs and then lays her head back down on my chest, resuming her earlier position but with a new tension in her frame.

“Thank you for telling me,” she says, her voice tinged with resignation. “It's just another ugly truth to add to the list, I guess.”

I stroke her hair, hating how even this sanctuary we've built can't keep the ugliness of the outside world completely at bay. But at least we're facing it together and right now, that's enough.



CHAPTER
FORTY SEVEN

MIKHAIL

I t's a few days after the dust settled and I'm standing in front of Gabriette, her eyes meeting mine, searching, questioning. I see a glimmer of apprehension, perhaps a touch of excitement, but mostly a willingness to proceed. It's as if we're both standing at the edge of an abyss, peering into the darkness, willing yet hesitant to take that last leap.

She looks at the thing in my hand with wide eyes. "What exactly are you planning on doing with that, Mikhail?"

Spread out naked in all her beautiful glory is my queen, while I'm sitting in between her legs with a modified knife in my hand.

I chuckle and twirl the knife around my fingers. It's the size of a hunting knife but blunt, the hilt is made of a soft, thick material, it's ridged and curved to a round point.

"It's something I had designed for a specific purpose," I say and run the blunt edge down her inner thigh. She gasps and I catch a tremble shooting through her body. "Hmm, gorgeous."

"Wait, wait," she gasps with fear in her eyes, but her pupils are completely blown out. "What are you going to do with it? You won't cut me, will you?"

"And ruin your flawless skin? No, baby, this isn't meant for that," I say and turn the knife around to run the hilt over her clit. "Remember, I told you on our wedding night that there's plenty of other fun things you can do with a knife?"

"Y-yeah?"

“This is one of them,” I say, leaning down to blow onto her pussy, and she shivers. “Do you trust me, Gabriette?”

She lets out a moan when I run my tongue down her slit and bucks her hips. “Yes, yes, I trust you—oh!”

I grin when she cries out as I slowly push the hilt inside her drenched pussy while flicking my tongue over her clit just the way she likes it. Moving the knife, I slowly fuck her with the thick hilt and watch as she arches her back.

It’s a sensation both intimate and ominous, a line that shouldn’t be crossed, yet here we are, teetering on the brink.

I look up to meet her gaze, and the shift is undeniable. Her eyes are darker, deeper, as if the simple act has stirred something both primitive and profound. It’s a mirror to my own emotions, a mixture of exploration and violation, of intimacy and distance.

“You like that, baby? I had it specially made to hit that sweet spot inside your pussy.” I groan, my cock aching with need. “But be careful, you could still hurt yourself. The blade isn’t blunt.”

She stills at this, and I hear her breathing picking up. I can’t help but smirk at her reaction to this lie and I peer up at her again. She looks lost between lust and fear and fuck me if it didn’t make my cock twitch.

I pull the knife from her pussy and lean over her, my hand braced on the bed next to her.

“Are you scared, *Malyshka*?” she shakes her head and I chuckle. “Do you trust that I won’t hurt you? That I’m doing this for your pleasure, and not just mine?”

Her gaze flickers from the knife to my face, and I catch the faintest quiver of her lips, a subtle shift in her eyes that I can’t

quite decipher. Is it relief? Curiosity? Or something more complicated that she's not ready to confront?

"Y-yes..." she trails off, looking me in the eye. "I trust you, Mikhail."

"Good," I grin and take the knife's blunt edge, running it between the valley of her gorgeous tits. "Walking the line between fear and lust can be exhilarating. Will the knife cut you? Will it sting? Will I draw blood? I guess we'll see. But just like every other time, you're in control here. Let me know if it gets too much and I'll stop immediately."

She nods and I tut. "Use your words, Gabriette."

"I will, I ... I'll tell you if it gets too much," she says in a breathy voice.

"Good girl," I say and watch the knife leave light red marks over her skin. "Turn around and push that gorgeous ass out."

With a tremble in her body, she does as she's told. Fuck, I love it when she's this obedient for me. It gets my cock hard even more than that mouth of hers does.

She pushes out her ass, and I bite my bottom lip while running the hilt down her slit. "Soaked for me, even though you're scared. Fuck, your trust in me deserves a reward, my good girl," I murmur, kissing her gorgeous ass.

Turning my focus to her back, I position the blunt edge of the knife against her skin. The air seems to thicken, the moment stretching out like a high wire strung tight with tension. I take a deep breath, aware of my own pulse reverberating like a distant drumbeat, and begin to slide the blade across her back.

She lets out a long, strained moan at the sensation as I drag it down all the way to her ass. My eyes widen when she pushes against the blade, as if asking for more.

I lied when I told her the knife wasn't blunt. There's no way I'd use one that wasn't dulled for this purpose. It's a power play for me, seeing the fear and uncertainty in her eyes but also how her desire overrules her apprehensions.

I drag the blade down her skin again, teasing the marks with my tongue afterwards to caress the sting and loving how fucking responsive she is. When I run the blade down both of her ass cheeks, I pull back and slap her pussy with it.

She cries out, tensing up slightly, but then she relaxes. "That feels so good, Mikhail," she moans. "More ... I want more—"

"Such a fucking brat, thinking you can order me when I'm the one with the knife," I growl, slapping her pussy again. "You'll get more when you deserve it. Now turn the fuck around."

Whimpering at the demand, yet obeying me, I grin when I see the look on her face. I never thought a woman like Gabriette would come to love something like this; to hand all the power over to me in such a vulnerable position.

Little does she know she's the one with all the power, even if I'm the one holding the knife.

I trail the knife's edge over her hardened nipples and she gasps, arching her back just as I push two fingers inside of her.

"My knife has you dripping, sweet girl," I groan and lean over her, running my tongue over her nipples to ease the sting.

"Mikhail..." she breathes out my name. "I ... wait—"

“Do you want me to stop?” I ask, trailing the dulled tip under the space below her breasts, close to her ribcage. “Is it too much?”

She shakes her head. “N-no, I want ... I want more. Please give me more!”

Fuck, this woman is going to make me come untouched. Who would have thought introducing a little danger would turn her into a little slut for me?

“Whatever my queen wants,” I growl, pulling at her nipple with my teeth.

I put a little pressure on the knife, I drag the blade across her skin, leaving deeper red marks. Her breathing becomes shallow the more I do this, and she suppresses her moans by biting her bottom lip.

Then I drag the knife all the way down towards her mons, replacing my fingers with the hilt and fuck her with it again. She moves her hips more and fucks the knife, and with every few thrusts, I slap her pussy.

“Do you like fucking my knife, Gabriette?” I groan, feeling the pre-cum slipping down my shaft. “Look at you, taking my knife like a good girl.”

She cries out whenever I slap her pussy, gripping the sheets in her hand until I see her tense up and actually fucking feel her clenching around the knife.

With a growl, I throw the knife to the side, grab her hips and slam inside of her. Fuck, she feels amazing and the aftereffects of her orgasm are still lingering, squeezing my cock.

She grabs my hair and pulls me closer, crashing her mouth to mine while wrapping her legs around my waist. I swear I’ll

never get tired of fucking her perfect pussy. And knowing danger turns her into a begging little slut has me coming faster than I expected.

Fuck me, I can't wait to show her what I can do with my Beretta.



CHAPTER
FORTY EIGHT

GABRIETTE

I'm laying sprawled out over the blankets, my skin deliciously tender after what Mikhail did to me last night.

I never knew being scared could turn me on like that, but then again, Mikhail always has a way of turning anything sexy. No one else could turn me into a slobbering, horny as fuck mess like he can.

The bathroom door opens, and he saunters out with nothing but a towel around his waist and honestly, it's my favorite sight in the morning.

He sees me biting my bottom lip and smirks. "Did my little brat finally decide to wake up?" he asks as he walks over to me and throws the covers back to find me still naked. "Hmm, delicious. Spread those legs so I can have breakfast, baby."

My eyes widened. "Wait—"

But of course he doesn't. Instead of waiting for me to open my legs, he does it for me and leaves me a trembling mess before going to the walk-in as if his face wasn't buried in between my legs.

The life of a Pakhan's wife, fucking hell.

Floating, I make my way to the bathroom to do my business and shower. When I'm done and making my way downstairs, Mikhail's on a call. He winks when he sees me approaching, and from the language he's speaking, I can tell it's supposed to be a private conversation.

Greek?

Shrugging, I busy myself with making coffee when I hear him mention Natalya's name and perk up. But then I decide to tune him out, because it's probably Bratva business and I am better off not knowing.

When he's done speaking, I hear him walk over to me and can't stop the smile spreading on my face when he holds me from behind.

"I'm disappointed that you can still walk perfectly fine this morning," he grumbles, kissing my neck. "Am I losing my touch?"

I chuckle and turn my head to face him. "I had to take Advil after getting out of the shower, babe. A queen doesn't show her discomfort."

He groans and I swear I feel his cock twitching against my ass. "Fuck, I don't want to go into work today. I want to stay wrapped up in you all day long," he says, nipping at my neck while I turn into a puddle.

"There's ... there's still tonight," I breathe, throwing my head back. "Then you can make sure I'm not able to walk for a few hours."

I feel him grinning against my skin. "Oh, you're on, *Malyshka*," he growls before spinning me around and kissing me senseless.

God, I love how he can reduce me to a quivering mess with just a kiss alone. Things have started feeling more heightened since we admitted our true feelings. I knew I was in love with Mikhail long before I admitted it, just admitting it was the hard part.

That I fell in love with the man who forced a ring on my finger, a man who now literally worships the ground I walk

on.

“Hmm, see you tonight, baby,” he says as he pulls away and plants a kiss on my forehead. “I love you.”

My heart warms along with my cheeks. “I love you too, Mikhail.”

The sheepish smile on his face is everything to me, those dimples making him look boyish even though he’s literally built like a tank and has that scar on his face. After another kiss to my lips, he walks out of the kitchen and I float for the next few minutes.

Until I start making some bacon.

The sizzle and crackle of bacon in the pan usually makes my mouth water, but today it does something else. My stomach churns unpleasantly, roiling with a nausea that comes out of nowhere. Confused, I turn off the stove and rush towards the guest bathroom.

I barely make it to the toilet before I’m emptying the contents of my stomach—mostly the coffee I’d had earlier. After a couple of dry heaves, I sit back, sweat forming on my brow. What the hell? Did I eat something bad?

It’s then that something dawns on me. My period. Shit, when was the last time I had it? I count the weeks back in my head, and a rush of realization hits me like a ton of bricks.

Two months. It’s been two fucking months.

My hand instinctively touches my stomach as a myriad of thoughts storm through my head. Could it be? Could I be pregnant?

The idea is as terrifying as it is exhilarating, and the emotional whirlwind makes me feel even sicker. I take a deep

breath, attempting to steady myself. I can't confirm anything on an empty stomach and a mind full of maybes.

One step at a time, Gabi. One step at a time.

But as I flush the toilet and wash my hands, avoiding my own gaze in the mirror, I can't help but wonder what this means for Mikhail and me. Especially for Mikhail, a man who's just started letting love back into his life.

How would he feel about a lifetime commitment that's far more binding than any ring?

With a feeling of surreal urgency, I pick up my phone and make an appointment with the doctor for later that day. They manage to squeeze me in, thank God.

The elevator dings, snapping me out of the trance I've been in for the last hour.

I walk to the foyer to find Natalya, who bursts in like a whirlwind, her eyes bright and a mischievous grin on her face.

"Hey, you! Got time for your favorite sister-in-law?" She doesn't wait for an answer, brushing past me into the living room.

"Always," I laugh, shaking my head. "What's up? You seem like you're about to burst with excitement."

"Tea or coffee? I need caffeine!" she exclaims, plopping down onto one of the plush couches.

"Tea coming right up," I say, making my way to the kitchen. The kettle whistles its readiness, and I pour the hot water into mugs. Carrying them over, I can see Natalya's already made herself comfy, her boots kicked off and her feet tucked under her.

“So, spill. What’s the big news?” I hand her a mug and sit down.

“Okay, so you know Mikhail’s birthday is coming up, right?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ve been racking my brain trying to figure out what to get him.”

“What do you give a man who has everything?” Natalya grins, her eyes twinkling as she pulls a small, elegantly wrapped box from her purse and places it on the coffee table between us. “This is it. The perfect gift.”

My eyes flicker from her to the box. “Okay, I’m intrigued. What is it?”

“Open it and see!”

I pick up the box and unwrap it. Inside is a beautiful, antique-looking key. I lift it out, turning it over in my hand. “It’s a key? To what?”

“Oh, not just any key,” Natalya replies, almost bouncing on the sofa with excitement. “That, my dear Gabriette, is the key to the wine cellar of an old Italian vineyard that our families have done business with for generations. The vineyard is home to a particular wine Mischa has been wanting to get his hands on for years, but they only release one bottle a year, and until now, he’s never been the one to claim it.”

My mouth falls open. “Holy shit, Nat, that’s brilliant. He’s going to love this!”

She squeals. “I know, right? But here’s the deal,” she says, leaning in closer. “You have to guard that thing with your life. Mikhail has this freaky sixth sense for sniffing out surprises. I want this to knock his socks off.”

“You got it,” I say, grinning. “I’ll guard it like Fort Knox.”

“Awesome. Now, where can we hide it?”

I think for a moment. “My lingerie drawer. He never ventures there.”

Natalya bursts out laughing. “Perfect! Hide it well.”

“I will,” I promise, re-wrapping the box and standing up. “I can’t wait to see the look on his face.”

“Me too,” Natalya agrees. “This is gonna be epic.”

The energy in the room shifts as Natalya’s smile slips, her eyes diverting to the sleek marble floor. “Let’s just hope this changes his mind about some other things, too.”

The abrupt change in her tone throws me. “Changes his mind about what?” I ask, sensing there’s something serious she’s not saying.

She hesitates, her fingers nervously toying with the strap of her purse before she looks up to meet my gaze. “Mischa’s arranged a marriage for me with some Greek kingpin,” she blurts out, as if saying it quickly might lessen the impact.

Now the conversation in Greek this morning makes sense.

“A what?” My stomach churns. I know this is how agreements are often cemented in our world, but knowing that doesn’t make it suck any less. “Natalya, that’s... That’s intense. Why would he do that?”

“Strategic alliances, political bullshit—you know, the usual,” she says, rolling her eyes but not able to mask the tremor in her voice. “Us women are nothing but chess pieces to be moved in this world.”

“That’s—Wow, I’m sorry. Have you talked to Mikhail about it? Maybe he’d listen.”

She lets out a mirthless laugh. “Mischa? Reconsider? Once his mind is set, it’s like trying to divert a river. But maybe, just maybe, if he sees what he has with you—how love isn’t the worst thing in the world—it might make him think twice.”

I feel my heart pull in two directions. On one side, I’m touched that she thinks my relationship with Mikhail could serve as a counter-argument. On the other hand, I’m boiling mad that he’d put his own sister in such a situation.

“I’ll try talking to him, Natalya. I can’t promise it’ll do any good, but I’ll try,” I say, determination filling my voice.

Her lips curl into a half-smile, a shadow of her usual vibrant self. “Good luck with that,” Natalya says, almost wistfully. “Anyway, I gotta go. Mom’s waiting.”

“Yeah, go ahead. And Natalya? We’ll figure this out. Promise.”

She gives me a half-smile, a glimmer of hope breaking through her cloudy expression. “I hope so, Gabi. I really do.”

And just like that, she’s gone, leaving me alone with my thoughts—and this newfound weight on my shoulders. How do you get through to a man who’s made a fortress out of his own will?



CHAPTER
FORTY NINE

GABRIETTE

The drive back to the penthouse feels like a blur, and I can barely remember how I made it back. The city outside the car window seems brighter, more vivid, yet strangely distant, as if I'm viewing everything through a new lens.

I step out of the elevator and into the penthouse; the envelope clutched in my hand feels heavier than any weapon I've ever held. The crisp, sterile scent of the doctor's office still clings to me, but it's already being overtaken by the familiar musk of home—of Mikhail.

The scent it like a dam breaking. Emotions flood in, swirling, chaotic: excitement, fear, love, uncertainty. I'm pregnant. Holy shit, I'm actually pregnant.

As the reality of those two words sinks in, my heart is a chaotic symphony, pounding in my chest as if it's trying to escape.

For a moment, I feel utterly overwhelmed, as though the walls of the penthouse are closing in on me, the New York skyline outside the window suddenly too vivid, too close.

I take a deep breath and steady myself. I can't afford to lose my composure, not when there's so much at stake. Still holding the envelope like it's the most precious thing in the world. Because it is.

“What do you give a man who has everything?” Natalya's question echoes in my head, and I can't help but laugh—a jittery, disbelieving sound. It's ironic how life has just handed me the answer.

I don't know how Mikhail's going to react. Will he be ecstatic? Scared shitless? Both?

This will be my gift to him this upcoming weekend. I could give him a thousand expensive gifts, but none would be as meaningful as the tiny life taking form inside of me.

I sit down at the kitchen island, my fingers trembling as they pull the ultrasound image out of the envelope. There it is: a tiny blob, a mere smudge on the screen, but already so full of promise. My eyes burn, and I wipe at them impatiently.

God, get a grip, Gabriette.

My mind races through scenarios, imagining his reaction—will his face light up with that rarely seen boyish joy, or will his eyes darken, clouded by the insecurities and fears that have haunted him for years?

I think about Mikhail, the steely-eyed Pakhan who's known for his ruthless control over both his empire and his emotions. Then I think about myself—my newfound role that goes beyond just being a wife. A mother.

It's terrifying, yet strangely empowering.

But then it hits me—I haven't had my shot in months. How could I have been so careless, so wrapped up in everything else, that I let something this huge slip through the cracks? I feel a surge of guilt, followed by a stab of anxiety.

What if Mikhail thinks this is a trap? Something planned?

No, I can't go down that road. Not now. I have to believe in us, in him. In the fact that, despite all our emotional walls, the goddamn criminal empire we're tangled in, we love each other. And this baby is a part of that love, planned or not.

A new sense of resolve settles in my heart. This is happening. We are having a baby. And I'll be damned if I let fear taint something this beautiful.

I place the ultrasound image back into the envelope, already envisioning the look of surprise and hopefully joy on Mikhail's face when he opens it. This will be my gift to him this weekend. In this crazy, messed-up world we live in, what better surprise could there be than the promise of new life?

So I tuck the envelope away, hiding it in the same drawer as his gift from Natalya. This weekend, our lives could change forever, in the most beautiful or terrifying way.



CHAPTER
FIFTY

MIKHAIL

I t's the night before I turn 36 years old and we're settled into the low-lit ambiance of an Italian restaurant that's exclusive enough to require a month's advance reservation. Inside reeks of old money and even older traditions—the perfect place where two leaders in the criminal underworld would feel at home.

The air is thick with the aroma of aged wine and truffle oil, expensive scents that makes your senses sit up and take notice.

With Sinatra providing a low soundtrack to the intimate conversations around us. It's the kind of place that's accustomed to hosting discussions that should never leave its walls.

Lorenzo, recently appointed Capo and riding that high, leans back in his leather chair, swirling a glass of some ridiculously expensive Barolo. It's strange to think that we've both grown into roles that once belonged to men we looked up to, men who molded us into the leaders we are today.

“So, what did Lombardi have to say about the man who snuck into his home and killed his daughter?” Lorenzo asks. “I don't see him as doing this. He's too invested in the agreement with the Bratva.”

I sigh. “The fucker claims not to know but had someone comb Sophia's entire bedroom. He said he would get back to me within the week with answers.”

I don't fucking get this. Someone from my past is trying to ruin me, but the question is who? I have many enemies, so finding this out isn't exactly an easy task.

“So, you and Gabriette. Heard you two are more than just playing house,” Lorenzo says, a playful edge to his voice. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

I can’t help but crack a smile. “I never thought there would be a day,” I admit. “But Gabriette... She’s different. She’s got me saying and doing things I never thought I would.”

He chuckles, lifting his glass.

“That’s how you know it’s real, Mikhail,” he muses, looking genuinely happy for me. “If you’ve found even a shred of what our parents had, you’ve got to hold on to that.”

Our glasses clink, the rich wine warm as it goes down. But after a while, something inside me shifts. It’s subtle at first—a sort of heightened awareness, as though my senses have been dialed up a notch. I can’t put my finger on it, can’t identify the source, but it throws my mind into a loop.

Did I have too much to drink already? I look down at my glass, half-empty now, and then at Lorenzo. Is it the conversation about Gabriette, about love? My mind spins, restlessly trying to anchor itself, but I’m awash in a sea of paranoia and a newfound alertness I can’t shake.

I try to tell myself I’m just being overly cautious. After all, paranoia is an occupational hazard in our line of work. But this is different. I feel anxious, cornered. My eyes dart around, half-expecting an ambush.

“Everything okay?” Lorenzo’s voice breaks through my internal spiral, and I realize I’ve been gripping my glass a little too tightly.

“Yeah,” I lie, setting my glass down. “Just a lot on my mind, I guess.”

Just then, a waitress walks over with a bottle of bourbon in her hands. “This is from the owner, sir, a gift for your birthday,” she says, her voice sounding oddly familiar, but I can’t put a finger on how I would know that.

“Thank you,” is all I say as I take the bottle and place it on the table.

Lorenzo tries to say something about it and I try to refocus on the conversation. But that feeling of dread, of inexplicable alertness, lingers in the pit of my stomach like a bad omen.

What the hell is going on with me?



I leave a few hours after that, sliding into the backseat of the SUV and feeling ready for bed.

The New York City air, usually a blend of exhaust, food, and indefinable urban scents, seems unusually potent tonight, but I barely notice. My mind is a jumble of questions and hazy suspicions, all of them centering around that inexplicable, nagging feeling that something isn’t right.

I haven’t felt this level of irrational paranoia in a long time, and it scares the hell out of me. Was it the discussion about love, about commitments? Is this what vulnerability does to me? I’ve been fighting battles for so long, I’m not sure I know how to handle peace.

My phone buzzes, lighting up the darkened interior of the SUV. I should ignore it—every rational part of me says to ignore it. But I’m already on edge; my nerves frayed. I snatch the phone off the leather seat beside me and look at the screen.

Unknown number. An attachment with the same untraceable number as before.

The screen flickers to life, showing a video that makes my blood boil in a way it hasn't for a long time. The rage that courses through me is swift and acidic, filling every cell, every thought.

“Fucking piece of shit,” I hiss through clenched teeth. I can feel that this is a trick, someone wanting to get under my skin, but the fury boiling in my veins doesn't care about logic. It doesn't care about the rational explanations that should come next.

All it cares about is what I've just seen, how it can't be explained away this time.

The SUV pulls up to the penthouse, but I barely notice. My mind is a tornado of confusion and anger.

“Wait for me,” I tell the driver tersely as I exit the vehicle with the bottle of bourbon in my hand. The elevator ride up to the penthouse feels like an eternity.

The doors finally open, and I step into the plush living area. The place is dark, save for the ambient lights casting soft halos around the room. It looks peaceful, a home that should be filled with love and trust. A mockery, my mind supplies bitterly.

And there she is—Gabriette, asleep in our bed, her face relaxed, innocent. She looks so serene, so peaceful, and for a moment, my heart wavers.

I stand there, staring down at her, my hands clenched into fists. The contrast between her tranquil beauty and the storm inside me is jarring. How did it come to this?

I've been around long enough to know when I'm being played, but the idea that it's happening within my own home again, by the woman I've just opened up to, makes me want to destroy something. Or maybe someone.

I look at her again, this time as if seeing her for the first time. Is this who she really is? Or is it me? Am I the one unraveling, unable to tell what's real anymore? But no, it can't be. I'm too old, too fucking experienced to second-guess myself like this.

I walk away, my footsteps heavy but soundless on the thick carpet, leaving her to her dreams or whatever lies she's living.

In my study, I pour myself a stiff drink from the bottle in my hand, watching as the liquid amber shatters the ice. I gulp it down, but the warmth it brings does nothing to quell the fire in my gut, nor the icy realization that things are about to change.

I sit in my chair, contemplating my next moves. The face of the man I used to be before Gabriette glares back at me from the dark corners of the room. If she's playing a game, she's about to learn that I've been a master at it for far longer than she knows.

She's in for a rude fucking awakening.



CHAPTER
FIFTY ONE

GABRIETTE

The hotel ballroom is an explosion of opulence, draped in rich fabrics and lit by chandeliers that twinkle like far-off stars. People mull around, glasses clinking, laughter filling the air.

This should be a night of celebration, of joy and love. But as I scan the lavishly decorated ballroom, filled with people who've come to honor Mikhail on his birthday, something feels off. Way off. Mikhail's been distant, his touches half-hearted, his smiles forced. It's like he's in the room, but not really here.

I glance toward the head table where Mikhail is standing, surrounded by his closest allies and family. The laughter and chatter around him seem to bounce off an invisible shield, never quite reaching him.

He's in a world of his own, a world that doesn't include me tonight, and that stings. But even as he engages in conversation, laughing and joking like he's having the time of his life, I can see it—the tension in his jaw, the tightness around his eyes.

Something is wrong.

And then there's that look in his eyes—a frantic, almost paranoid edge that I've never seen before. It's unsettling, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I try to lock eyes with him, try to send a silent message that whatever it is, we'll get through it. But he avoids my gaze, and my stomach tightens with unease.

He went out for dinner with Lorenzo last night. What could have happened in that time? I haven't seen him this cold toward me since our wedding.

Needing a breather, I excuse myself from the table and make my way to where Natalya is standing, her youthful face animated as she talks to some friends. She sees me approach and excuses herself to join me.

"Hey, you okay?" she asks, her eyes scanning my face.

"Do I look that bad?" I try to joke, but it falls flat.

"You look like you lost your best friend," she says, her eyes narrowing with concern.

"It's Mikhail. He's acting... strange. Distant. Have you noticed?"

Natalya hesitates for a moment, her eyes darting toward her brother before meeting mine again. "Yeah, I've seen it. Don't know what's eating him, though."

"I thought maybe you might have an idea. You know him better than anyone," I press, hoping she'd have some answers that could make this night less of a mystery.

Natalya sighs, glancing again toward her brother, concern etching her young face. But before she can offer her own thoughts, Liadan, Mikhail's best friend and a blonde vision of poise and elegance, approaches us. Her high heels clicking against the floor like a metronome.

Despite her beauty, there's an undeniable edge to her. She's built an empire that rivals Mikhail's, and I've seen her be as cold and calculating as he is.

"I couldn't help but overhear," she begins, looking apologetic. "You're right. Mikhail's off tonight, and I've seen

him go through every emotion in the book. Tonight's something different, though. He's like a coiled spring, wound up too tight."

"Exactly," I say, grateful that someone else is acknowledging it. "So what should I do? You're his best friend. How should I approach this?"

Liadan takes a sip from her glass and contemplates for a moment. "In my experience, the best way to handle Mikhail isn't to corner him. If you press him now, you'll just force him further into his shell. Give him a bit of room, and when he's ready, he'll come to you. He always does."

I let her words sink in, mulling them over. It makes sense, but the urgency of tonight makes it a hard pill to swallow. Then, driven by a need to share with someone who understands, I find myself spilling the news.

"I'm going to give him his gift tonight," I blurt out, suddenly needing to share it with someone. "I found out I'm pregnant. I thought it would be a meaningful present, a symbol of something new, something hopeful."

Natalya's eyes go wide, and she envelops me in a tight hug. "That's amazing news! But," she pulls back, "make sure the moment is right. Timing is everything with Mikhail."

Lee's shocked expression quickly shifts into something softer, warmer. "Well, that's news that could turn any man's world upside down—in the best possible way, of course. Congratulations."

"Thank you," I say, my voice tinged with worry. "I just hope whatever's going on, we can get past it. I don't want to start this new chapter on a sour note."

“Then let’s hope he snaps out of whatever this is,” Natalya says, casting another worried glance toward her brother. “Because news like that deserves all the joy in the world.”

Natalya, still a bit in awe, wraps an arm around me. “Something good in the midst of all this tension. That has to count for something.”

Liadan nods, thoughtful. “Oh, it counts. It counts for a lot. But,” she adds cautiously. “You’re correct, Natalya. Timing is crucial. Make sure the atmosphere is right before you drop a bombshell like that, especially given how he’s been tonight.”

They’re both right, and I feel it in my gut. “Okay, I’ll pick the right moment. I have to believe that this news will be a glimmer of light, no matter how dark his thoughts are right now.”

Natalya grins, her eyes glinting with emotion. “It will, Gabi. It has to be.”

“To new beginnings,” Liadan says, raising her glass for a toast.

I look back at Mikhail from across the room. Despite being surrounded by people, he seems utterly alone. “To new beginnings,” I murmur under my breath.



CHAPTER
FIFTY TWO

GABRIETTE

As the night wears on, I find myself becoming more anxious. Every time Mikhail's eyes meet mine, I don't see warmth or love—only a steeliness that makes my stomach churn.

I clutch my little secret, wrapped up and hidden away, a surprise that, under normal circumstances, would be a cause for celebration.

But as Mikhail continues to keep his distance, I can't help but wonder how this revelation will be received. Will it be the thing that brings us back together, or the final blow that drives us apart?

Gathering my courage, I set my glass down and make my way through the crowd toward Mikhail. As I approach, he disengages from a conversation with one of his lieutenants and turns to face me. But there's no warmth in his eyes, only a chilly detachment that makes my skin crawl.

I smile and sidle up to him, but he steps away, and it feels like a literal slap to the face. "Mischa, can we talk?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

He glances down at me, his gaze hard. "Now's not a good time, Gabriette. I'm busy, as you can see."

My heart drops and I swallow past the emotion in my throat.

"It's your birthday and I'm your wife. When is a good time, if not now?" I press, unwilling to back down. "Please, if we could just—"

“I said not now,” he bites out, his voice tinged with a harshness I’ve rarely heard directed at me. “Is that so hard for you to understand?”

I’m left standing there, struck dumb by the coldness of his words. My cheeks flush hot, then pale, a mixture of anger and hurt swirling inside me. Without another word, I turn away, weaving my way out of the bustling hall as discreetly as I can manage.

Tears blur my vision as I slip into an empty ballroom, the silence a sharp contrast to the raucous laughter and chatter I left behind. I wipe away the moisture with the back of my hand, cursing myself for letting him get to me like this.

What did I do to earn this from him? Yesterday, things were amazing. Now this ... this nothingness from him. Something must have happened to do this, and I have a feeling it concerns me.

And then I sense it as I feel the hairs on the nape of my neck stand on edge ... the distinct feeling that I’m not alone.

I turn around and see him standing there, a silhouette framed by the dim light filtering in through the grand windows—Damien.

“What the hell are you doing here?” My voice trembles, a concoction of surprise and irritation. “I told you to stay away from me.”

Damien steps closer, his face becoming clearer. “I got an invitation. It’s a big event, and well, I thought—”

“You thought what?” I cut him off, my emotions too raw for any more surprises. “That it would be fun to show up and make everything even more complicated? You lied to me,

knew who I was and continued to play me for a fool. I don't want to hear a thing from you!"

He hesitates, then sighs. "I missed you, Angel. I wanted to see how you're doing."

"By ignoring my direct request for you to keep your distance? I don't need this, Damien. Not tonight and you don't get to call me that anymore!"

As I say the words, the weight of everything; my suddenly strained relationship with Mikhail, the emotional whirlwind of a gift I've yet to give. And now Damien's inexplicable appearance—presses down on me, and I realize that I'm at a breaking point.

I don't know how much more of this I can take.

Damien takes a step closer, his arms outstretched as if to envelop me in an embrace I neither want nor need. My vision's a haze of tears, and I can't think straight. Before I can stop myself, I'm swept into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably into his shoulder.

It's not comfort I find in his embrace, but a momentary release for the pent-up tension, the emotional tempest that has become too much to bear alone.

But then a warm gush splatters against my face. It takes a millisecond to register the viscosity, the unsettling wetness.

My eyes snap open, and before me, Damien's eyes roll back in his head, the wound on the side of his head making my stomach roil.

He staggers back, clutching at nothing, and then crumbles to the ground like a marionette with its strings suddenly cut.

Blood. So much blood, splattering the floor beneath him.

My heart thunders in my chest, and a scream lodges itself in my throat, but it never escapes. Because when I look up, standing there with a smoking gun in his hand is Mikhail. His face is a mask of fury, eyes narrowed to slits, jaw clenched so tight I can see the muscles twitching.

It's a look that chills me to my very core, a look that makes me question everything I've come to know about this man. A man who just hours ago told me he loved me, but now stands before me as if he's staring at a stranger—or worse, an enemy.



CHAPTER
FIFTY THREE

MIKHAIL

The gun feels like a lead weight in my hand as I drop it to my side, my gaze pinned to Gabriette's horrified face. She looks like she's seen a ghost—or maybe the devil himself. I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, but that's all gone out the fucking window.

After the goddamn video, this embrace was the final betrayal. Her face is a mask of pure horror, disbelief etched into every line and curve of her beauty.

It feels like a shard of glass twisting in my gut. And yet, the image of her, wrapped in Damien's arms, stokes the fire of my rage into an inferno. But what burns through me, fuels the tempest of my rage, is that touch. The intimacy of her tears on another man's shoulders.

“How long, Gabriette?” My voice is a gravelly snarl as I approach her. “How long has this been going on?”

“How long, what? Mikhail, I don't—”

“Don't play innocent with me!” My shout echoes in the empty room, resonating with the fury pumping through my veins. “How long have you been fucking that piece of shit?”

She blanches. “What?! Why would you—”

I silence her with a glare and pull out my phone, jab at the screen, and thrust it in front of her face. “Explain this.”

Her face goes white, paler than I've ever seen her as the sounds of her moans echo across the empty room. She fucked this cunt in a music room, told him she loved him while taking his cock.

But I don't have time for her excuses, her explanations. I've seen what I needed to see. "Mikhail, listen to me. That video, it's not—"

"I'm not in the mood for your fucking lies," I spit the words at her, my whole body vibrating with a rage that's reached its apex. "You think I'm a fool? You stand there with his blood on your face, his touch still warm on your skin, and expect me to believe you?"

"Mikhail, please," she stammers, tears streaming down her fucking face like she's the victim here. "This isn't ... I didn't know he was filming this! I would never risk us, especially now since I—I'm pregnant."

Pregnant? I freeze. But it's a deceptive stillness, the eye of the storm where my internal chaos rages unchecked. The word is like a bomb, both a promise and a threat.

A life growing inside her that could be half me and half her, yet my mind races back to the damning video. To her in Damien's arms, to a past where another woman shattered my trust.

She's looking at me, her eyes all wide and desperate, as if she expects that one word to be a magic eraser for the shitstorm we find ourselves in. I'm not buying it, but for the first time since I walked into this room, I hesitate.

I flash back to Dasha, ten years ago—the lies, the betrayal, and the child that could have been mine. How fucking ironic that history should choose this moment to loop back on itself.

The bitter irony of it all tightens around my chest like a vise. It's like the universe is looking down at me and laughing its ass off.

“Get on your knees,” I say, my voice choking with a darkness I can’t shake off as I raise the gun to her head. “Now.”

She trembles, and takes a step towards me. “Mikhail, please—”

“I said, I’m not in the fucking mood for your lies!” I practically roar, my words echoing in the hollow chamber of the empty ballroom.

My chest feels like it’s about to explode, and my thoughts are a frenetic jumble. The air between us is thick with tension, a volatile blend of betrayal, heartache, and a murderous rage that’s reaching a fever pitch inside me.

“I’m pregnant with your child, Mischa,” she says again, her eyes brimming with tears that make my heart wrench in a sickening way. Her vulnerability does nothing to extinguish my blaze of fury; if anything, it adds fuel to the fire.

“As you’ve said,” I spit out the words, a venomous concoction of disbelief and disdain. “How convenient for you to bring it up now, isn’t it?”

“You have to believe me! That video, it’s not what it looks like. I love you. I was going to tell you tonight, as a gift. I would never betray you!” she pleads, her eyes locked onto mine, desperate, begging for something—understanding, love, forgiveness—that I’m not sure I can give.

Her words penetrate the red haze of my anger, but only just. A gift? As if life could be wrapped in a bow, presented as a token in some twisted play for my affection. But the part of me that loves her, that’s always loved her, quivers with hesitation.

“Your gift?” I snarl, almost spitting the words as if they taste vile on my tongue. “How convenient. A life created in the middle of deception. You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s true—!”

“On your fucking knees, Gabriette. That seems to be the perfect position for you after what I’ve seen in that video. No fucking wonder you came home with carpet burns on your knees. It all makes sense now,” I grit out.

She hesitates for a second, clearly shocked, but then does as she’s told. Her knees hit the floor with a soft thud, and she looks up at me, her eyes welling up even more. God, I hate the fucking pity that snakes its way into my chest.

I lift the gun, aiming it straight at her forehead. My finger’s still on the trigger, but it’s like it’s glued there, refusing to move no matter how hard I will it to. I look into her eyes, and for a second, I see a flicker of something that makes my insides churn.

Is it hope? Love? Fucking desperation? I don’t know, but it’s unraveling me.

“Open,” I say, and she immediately obeys. I shove the muzzle into her mouth and grin. “My little slut loves taking things in her mouth, doesn’t she?”

My hand trembles, just a little, and I feel like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, staring into an abyss. I could pull the trigger and plummet into that darkness, or I could—what? Forgive? Forget? Fucking absolve? I don’t even know if those words are in my vocabulary.

She gazes up at me with those whiskey eyes I used to be in love with, and I don’t even know where my life ends or begins

anymore. I never should have let her in, never should have allowed her into my heart.

My hand is as steady as my shaking soul allows, my finger heavy on the trigger. Every instinct in me, every shattered piece of trust, screams at me to pull it, to end this farce once and for all.

Even as the woman I love is standing before me as both my savior and my damnation.

And yet again, I don't know if the child is even mine and I doubt I'll ever know.

“History has a fucked-up way of repeating itself,” I scoff, cocking the gun.

To be continued...

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Hey, you made it to the end, didn't you? Buckle up, because that cliffhanger isn't going to resolve itself—I'll take care of that in the next book, promise.

First, let's give it up for my beta rockstars: Alle, Xenia, Pamela, Julia, Eszti, and Brittany. You guys dove into this dark abyss with me and came out the other side, making it way better than I ever could alone. I owe you more than you know.

Unalive Promotions, you're my hype dream team. Get ready for round two because we're definitely doing this all over again. You can't escape me that easily.

To my ever-suffering husband, who's perfected the art of patience while I obsessed over every word, you're the saint to my sinner, babe.

And finally, to my badass readers—you lot keep coming back for more, and I adore you for it. Whether you're an old accomplice or a new recruit, thank you for diving headfirst into this fresh hell with me.

So, still reeling from that shocker of a cliffhanger? Don't worry, answers are coming in December. You think I'd leave you hanging forever?

Stay twisted,

J. Tarr

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With over four years of full-time writing under her belt, J. Tarr has become a mainstay on the PTR app, GoodNovel, where readers are drawn into worlds filled with intrigue, passion, and danger.

Her exploration into the paranormal shifter and mafia genre has garnered a dedicated following, with her fans appreciating the depth of emotion and the authenticity of the worlds she crafts.

It's not only the dark and dangerous that captivates J. Tarr. When inspiration calls, she graciously answers with a pen dipped in sweetness and love, creating romances that warm the heart and nourish the soul.

Her dabbling in sweet romances showcases a versatility and richness in her craft, allowing readers to find joy and contentment in stories that celebrate love in all its forms.

But the journey doesn't stop here. With an eye always on the horizon, J. Tarr is looking to expand her literary landscape, planning to bring certain cherished works over to Amazon.

Watch this space!

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