



Unregrettable

MONIQUE  MOREAU



UNREGRETTABLE
A FORCED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

EMPIRE ACADEMY SERIES

BOOK TWO



MONIQUE MOREAU

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“Some of us think holding on makes us strong; but sometimes
it is letting go.”

Demian, Herman Hesse

CHAPTER 1

CRINA



“No. I won’t do it,” I seethe through clenched teeth, glaring at my mother as I pound the dining room table with a knife clenched in my fist.

It’s only a dull thud because the dining room table is made of heavy mahogany. I have a death grip on that knife and I wish I could use it to stab her right this second. That’s how infuriated I am.

I look across the marbled, polished wood of the dinner table. The mirror of the matching hutch makes my mother’s precious Bavarian crystal sparkle and shine like diamonds. It echoes the sheen of crystals dripping from the chandelier above the table.

But the sumptuous décor matters for nothing.

Dinner is ruined.

I could barely get anything past my lips after my parents’ announcement that I am going to marry Marku Popescu in a couple of days. They’re not even waiting until I graduate. I narrow my eyes as I stare down my mother.

Unbelievable.

She blinks back at me innocently.

My father puts out his hands and begs, “Please, Crina, understand, this is for your own good.”

I twist around to face him fully, shoulders hunched forward ready for battle. Jabbing the knife in his direction, I accuse him, “How could you? You of all people?”

The betrayal hurts so badly that it’s hard to breathe. I’d expect something this crazy from my mother. She’s the hysterical one, the one that jumps to conclusions and overreacts to the smallest things. But my father is the steady one. The solid one. My protector.

Until now.

“I told you in confidence,” I reply, a wave of hurt scorching me like hot lava. “I told you because I was worried and maybe a little scared. But I told you with the wild idea that you would keep what I’d said in confidence. I didn’t expect you to inflate this into a huge drama over nothing.” Knife in hand, I fling out my arms as if to demonstrate the enormous mountain they’ve made out of a molehill. Then, I thump the table so hard that the cutlery jumps and clatters.

My mother makes a sound of disgust.

I whip around to her. “Oh my God, Mama, you’re upset over making noise at the dinner table—”

“Scene, not noise,” she interrupts pertly with her nonsensical distinction. She’s eerily calm and it only pushes me further over the edge. She can give as good as she gets, but when she’s disturbingly unemotional like this, I know there’s no budging her. She’s past the theatrics. She’s made up her mind and nothing on God’s green Earth will change it. That strikes fear in my heart.

“Really ironic that you’re worried about noise or a scene or whatever when you’re ruining my life with this insane plan to marry me off to some made man.” Making air quotes, I continue, “You’re supposedly ‘saving’ me, but we both know what this is about. Just admit that you and Aunt Natalia have had this planned since Marku and I were babies.”

Her spine snaps straight, the corners of her mouth plunge down in disapproval. Yeah, she didn’t think I’d remember the

oath. She thought it was a cute little story to tell me to demonstrate how Marku and I are meant for each other, when nothing could be further from the truth.

I take in a deep breath and forge on, “This is only an excuse to fulfill that oath, which is insane. We’re not living in the Middle Ages. Welcome to the twenty-first century, where women don’t get promised in marriage as infants.”

Eyes blazing with cold fury, she retorts, “We may be in the twenty-first century, but you know very well that we live by a separate set of rules. It’s what distinguishes us from the rest of the toiling lower classes. It’s what makes us rich and powerful, especially in this new country, where we would be just another struggling immigrant community eking out a living to put food on our table.”

My mother leans forward, placing her elbows on the table. That’s a sign she’s losing her patience because proper etiquette means never dirtying the polished mahogany tabletop with your elbows.

“But there’s an underside to that success.” She pauses for emphasis. “Others want what we have, and they’ll go to any length to get it. Now, we’re not barbarians. We’re not auctioning you off to any random made man. That was for his benefit, not ours.” Okay, I have no idea what she means by that comment, but before I can ask, she goes on, “Aunt Natalia and I intended for you and Marku to be together from the beginning and you clearly need protection at the moment. This is a perfect solution. I don’t see why you’re having a meltdown over it. You would’ve married him eventually.”

Yeah, right, Aunt Natalia and her. I’ve known Aunt Natalia my entire life and there’s no way she came up with this harebrained scheme. This has my mother’s name written all over it. With Marku being my third cousin from a second marriage, he was a viable option. Aunt Natalia is too sweet and loves my mother too much (God knows why) to deny her anything. It’s always been that way.

And the way she assumes that I'd have married the bastard. I look at her incredulously. "We haven't spoken in years." Okay, we may have messed around, but there wasn't much talking happening. And, anyway, that didn't have to do with anything. I could suck his tongue, or his dick for that matter, and walk away without feeling a thing. That's why it's called a hookup.

"I do not need this kind of protection for being followed occasionally. And if I do, then just stick a bodyguard on me for a couple of weeks. But no. Those options are too rational and sane. Instead, the better choice is to throw me into a rushed marriage. One that can't wait until I graduate high school like every other *mafie* girl!" I glare at my father. "What's that about, Dan?" I use his first name as a way to demonstrate my deep displeasure with him.

Tortured guilt crosses over his face. He opens his mouth to say something, but my mother interrupts with a soft, "Dan."

They exchange a look. My head snaps from one to the other.

What? What was that?

He snaps his mouth shut.

Goddammit. He was about to tell me something.

"You were about to tell me the truth? What is it?"

My mother's tone brooks no discussion. "You may have caught those thugs a few times, but I can assure you that they were following you for much longer than that. You were right to tell your father. It was the mature and responsible thing to do but leave the rest of it for the clan to take care of. It's not business for little girls like you."

"I'm eighteen years old and you just called me mature. I can't be a little girl who isn't allowed to know anything *and* be old enough to get married. That's a contradiction. So either you tell me—"

“If you’re eighteen, then you’re old enough to marry regardless of when you graduate,” she snaps back. “As for maturity...” She gives a disgusted flick of her hand in the air.

Refusing to let go of this argument, I press on, “So which is it? Am I an adult or a child? Because if I’m adult enough to marry, then I’m sure as hell old enough to know why. I see a guy following me a couple of times and that’s cause enough for a marriage like this? We’re *mafie*. People follow each other all the time.”

I regret telling my father anything about my stalker. I certainly didn’t tell him of the many times I felt I was being watched. And growing up *mafie*, I trusted my guts. I’d subtly inspected my surroundings and found random men watching me. They changed frequently, until about a month ago. Then it became one man. The same middle-aged man with slicked-back hair and a dark suit.

He’d watch intently from the shadows. I’d see him when I went to the corner store or down Queens Boulevard to pick up bread at Adrian’s Bakery. Then I began to see him across the street from my school. But the freakiest time was when he was at a poetry slam in Harlem I’d sneaked out to attend. How he found me, I have no idea. And he boldly sat at a table near me, not bothering to be subtle. He didn’t reach over to talk to me, to hit on me, or whatever. No, he just stared.

Expectant.

Almost taunting, as if he was daring me to approach him.

And that rattled me enough to tell my father.

Of course, I didn’t tell him everything. My mother had guessed right. I thought Tata would tell me not to worry about it, that it was related to his work. Worst case scenario, he’d place a guard on me for a little bit. I mean, things are tense between the Romanians and the Russian Bratva. But mafia wars don’t tend to spill over to the women and children.

Instead of remaining calm, he lost his head and told my mother. He then spoke to our clan *şef*, or boss. Next thing I

know, I'm being married off to Marku.

“Yes, of course you're old enough to marry and you're old enough to understand, but you're not in a position to know everything that's going on. Just know that this is for your own good and leave it at that. It's a prime opportunity to learn a very important lesson about what being a *mafie* wife is about. Sometimes, you must do what you're told and shut your mouth.”

A rush of helpless fury tears through me. I swear I feel the top of my head blow off. Clutching the side of the table to stop myself from lunging over and throttling my mother, I thunder, “But you know. You're a wife and you know. So why the hell can't I.”

Before she can answer, my father raises a trembling hand and murmurs, “Enough, Crina.”

And just like that, his soft-spoken plea stops me in my tracks. I glance up at his face. He's pale, as he often is these days. His full lips were white as chalk. The multitude of fine lines around his kind eyes and forehead are drawn in tension. The tall, stately dining chair looks like it's swallowing him whole. His coffee-colored eyes beg me to stop. He lists a touch to the left and grabs the edge of the table to right himself.

Guilt pummels me from all directions. I'm furious, but I have no choice but to back off. It's too much for him and I'll be damned if I'm the reason he has another seizure.

At that moment, the doorbell rings.

My mother stands up and orders, “Check on him while I see who's at the door.”

I nod and get up, rushing to his side. I kneel beside him. He turns slightly and cups my cheek. Gazing down at me, he says, “I love you, Crina. I wouldn't do this if I wasn't convinced that it's the right thing to do.”

I shake my head. “Y-you're not feeling well, so you're letting Mama run with this.”

“Don’t blame her. Blame me if you must. I approached the boss about this. I made the final decision. I’m aware that you’ve had conflicts with Marku in the past, but he’s a good man.” I snort in derision. “More importantly, he’s a good made man. Those are harder to come by than you think, and believe me, I’ve been looking. He can protect you *and* he has the capacity to be good to you.”

“You can protect me.”

He looks sorrowful as he smiles sadly at me. Another stab of sharp pain. Does he think because he’s sick, he can’t protect me anymore? But he’s always been sick. Yes, there are the recent seizures, but there’s always been something. There always is with lupus. It’s a disease that never lets up, never gives a man a break. It just takes and takes from the body, ruthless and uncompromising. But he’s been battling it for twenty years. He has ups and downs, but he’s always bounced back. Somewhat.

“Is there something you’re not telling me about the seizures? About the lupus?”

“Of course not,” he replies instantly, almost too quickly.

I search his face for clues, but his expression remains neutral. I scan closely again. He seems sincere. I take an easier breath.

“Then why, Tata?”

“If I could tell you, you’d already know. I’m not holding out on you to be cruel. It’s clan business. Your mother’s right about that.”

Frustration squeezes my chest tightly. He’s lying, because if it was about clan business, then how does Mama know? “She knows...”

“She knows parts of it. Not the whole picture.” He shuts his eyes and wavers in his chair.

I wrap my arm around his torso, feeling the deep concavity of his abdomen. He’s lost more weight recently. “No more

fighting today. You're tired. Let's go upstairs."

The sound of men's voices drift into the dining room from the living room.

He stiffens and tries to get up. "Someone came for me."

I tighten my arm around him and effortlessly keep him seated. "No, you're going to exhaust yourself." I bite my lower lip. Of course, I'm the one who's exhausted him with my relentless arguing the past few hours. "I'll go see who it is and whether Mama can take care of it on her own."

My mother's either very good with people or very bad, depending on whether she likes them or not. In contrast, I can manage just about anyone who stops by the house. I've been running interference for Mama for years, just like Tata has. He relaxes into the chair and nods his approval, which reinforces my worry about his health.

I leave him, glancing back with concern. I was so wrapped up in my anger and feelings of betrayal that I didn't notice how tired he was until he practically fell over at the table. Of course, now I feel awful.

I head toward the living room, muttering recriminations to myself, and stop in my tracks when I see who it is. My heart sinks.

It's Marku, with his best friend, Lucian. I can't help but notice how good he looks, from his dark head of curls that look ruffled, down to his wing-tip shoes. He's in a suit, and boy, can this guy fill out a suit.

My chin snaps up, and I look down my nose at him. *Focus, Crina, Focus.*

A suit also means that he's either coming from doing business or church, and if I know anything about this guy, it sure isn't church. These two suited, uber-masculine men sitting on my mother's chintz sofa is quite a contrast, but he's been here enough times that he looks as comfortable as he would in his own house. At the sight of the comfort level of

this snake, sitting in my living room, one side of my lip curls up.

He's chuckling at something my mother had said, but the moment he notices me, his laughter dies. Scanning me from head to toe, he unhurriedly rises to his feet, and gives me his signature smirk.

I glance at my mother. "What the hell are they doing here?"

"Crina! Manners."

Ignoring her reprimand, I grind out, "Tata needs you to help him with something, *Mama*." I leave it vague for the sake of our guests, but she understands my message. "I just came out here to check if it was anyone for him." I give Marku a slow once-over that ends in a fierce glare. "If I were only so lucky."

"Crina, really."

Marku clasps his hands in front of him as if he's some sort of choir boy. Puh-lease. Who would ever fall for that fake pious act? Turning toward my mother, he says pleasantly, "*Tanti*, she's under stress. If you give us a moment, I'm sure I can address any of her concerns."

I narrow my eyes, throwing daggers at him with every ounce of hatred I have for him. Oh, he thinks he can address my concerns, huh?

Fat chance, buddy.

While I'm trying to keep it together, my mother's entire face transforms in response to Marku. She breaks into a smile, tilting her head almost coquettishly. I roll my eyes.

Dear God, this is ridiculous.

"Of course, Marku." She nods formally to Lucian whom she's never been a huge fan of. "Take all the time you need. I'll just go and see what Dan needs." As she passes, she gives him a hug and whispers—loud enough for anyone within a mile radius to hear—"Welcome to the family, *dragă*." I roll

my eyes at the endearment. “You’ve always been like a son to Dan and me. This only makes it official.”

I barely hold back from gagging at that last statement.

With a final pat of his arm, she glides blissfully away, leaving me stewing in fury.

The instant she’s gone, Lucian jets to the farthest part of the room and fiddles on his phone, blocking us out completely.

The moment we’re basically alone, I demand, “What the hell were you thinking coming here?” Jutting my thumb at Lucian. “And with your sidekick over there. What, is his presence and the fact that you’re wearing a suit supposed to somehow legitimize this entire farce?”

Now that there are no parents to impress, Marku’s entire demeanor alters instantaneously. Gone is the respectful choir boy. In its place is the raw brute I know so well. It’s why he’s only good for one thing and one thing only.

“It’s no farce, Crina,” he boldly states. “This is happening. In two days, to be exact.”

I gulp, the last dredges of hope extinguished like dying embers in a firepit. “You can’t seriously want this.”

His forehead creases in confusion. “Of course I want this.”

Forcing out a laugh, I step closer and place the back of my hand on his forehead. “Are you sick? Delirious?”

He irritably pushes my hand away. “Stop playing around. This is as serious as it gets.”

I shake my head, stumped. I’d prayed he was fighting this on his end until he showed up in a suit. Still, I’m legitimately perplexed. Sure we’ve messed around, but sexual attraction is not the foundation of a viable marriage, especially with our history. “Why? You hate me. Just like I hate you. Why would you possibly marry someone you hate?”

His espresso-colored eyes expand with incredulity. “I don’t hate you. Why would you think that?”

My head jerks back like I've been smacked. Is he making fun of me? Is this a joke to him? I inhale sharply, taking a moment to regain my bearings after the huge lie that shot out of his mouth. "You're unbelievable, you know that? And you have the audacity to sound sincere."

"I am sincere," he says somberly.

"Will you knock it off, already? My mother's gone. We're not at a family picnic." I wave my arms around the empty living room. "You don't have to pretend for anyone's sake. I already hate you so you certainly don't have to pretend for me."

He lets out a long-suffering sigh. "I don't hate you, Crina. I wouldn't ask you to marry me if I did. That would be insane."

"Yeah, it would be," I agree tersely. "And guess what... you're acting legit insane right now."

I'm not sure what I find more shocking, that he doesn't think this entire marriage is batshit crazy, that he wants to marry me knowing I hate him, or that he claims not to hate me.

I need a moment as my mind zips through these stunning revelations. Arching my brow skeptically, I ask, "Because... what happened a few years ago... that was what? A declaration of love to every boy in the locker room? I ran out of there with bruises up and down my back, scared out of my wits." I clench my jaw, anger coursing through me yet again. "And what did you do to protect me? Nothing, that's what."

Jabbing a finger in his chest, I warn him, "Don't come to my house and insult me with your blatant lies. You can pull one over on my mother, fine. She's always had a soft spot for you, and she has no idea what you're capable of. I, on the other hand, am not so ignorant. I remember ev-ery-sin-gle-thing." I punctuate the last words in short bursts of fury.

He presses his lips together in displeasure. I'm trying his patience, as I often do, but he won't rise to my provocation. He never does, the bastard. Never gives me the satisfaction of getting under his skin. Even now, after he's demonstrated a

certain effort by coming over— extended an olive branch of sorts—and I’ve taunted him by bringing up the worst moment between us, he still won’t take the bait.

I cup my ear. “Nothing to say?”

“Crina, you don’t understand...”

I cross my arms over my chest. “So make me understand.”

“This isn’t the time or place...”

I snort. “When is the time and place? After we’re married?”

“That would be better, yes.”

My brows shoot up. I can’t believe this guy. He’s delusional if he thinks I’d ever willingly spend time with him, much less marry him, before we address the ginormous elephant in the room. I mean, he abandoned me to the wolves and purposely destroyed our friendship. Does he think I’ll let something like that slide? Almost four years is a long time, but it’s like he’s never known me at all.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m not.”

And then he does the most unbelievable thing yet.

He drops down on one knee.

I jump back from him like he’s a cobra about to strike.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a black velvet box. My mouth drops open. He props it open, revealing a huge diamond ring. Despite myself, I lean forward to inspect it. Wow, that’s nice. I shake my head and squeak, “What the hell is that?”

“It’s an engagement ring.”

This is surreal. Really. I have no words for what’s happening here. Once upon a time, I might have fantasized about this moment. But those fantasies were childhood pipe

dreams that died long ago. Before I can process more, he says, “Crina Lupu, would you do me the honor of being my wife?”

I drag my eyes off the pretty, glittering diamond and stare into those dark chocolate orbs of his. He has the most earnest expression on his face, a combination of grave and...and... proud.

If there ever was a twilight zone, then I’ve fallen into it. I feel removed from the scene as if it’s not happening to me, as if I’m only an observer. Because it doesn’t feel real. It feels like a hazy blur has descended upon me. Everything is muted. The chintz sofa and heavy, dark wooden furniture falls away. Time slows down even more.

He plucks the ring from the box and slips the velvet cube back into his pocket. He reaches forward slowly, takes my hand, and gently slips it onto my finger. I gaze down at it. “What the fuck is happening right now?”

Waiting on one knee for an answer, Marku gazes up at me. I return his gaze. He inspects my face and whatever he sees there makes his face shutter in response.

“It’s a ring,” he says sarcastically. His eyes squeeze tightly for a moment. He snaps them open and speaks slowly, as if to a child. “For my future wife. That wife is you.”

And then everything comes rushing back to me. The past few slow, lumbering moments catch up to me in triple time and I’m bombarded with anger and shock. “No. I will never be your wife.”

“Fine. Fiancée, then.”

Panic sets in. The reality that they’re swooping around me like vultures, ready to feast on my entrails, settles into my gut. Clutching my hand as if it’s an alien thing, I take another step back and then another. “Not that either. I will *never* marry you.”

I yank the ring off, fling it across the room, and dash out of the house.

CHAPTER 2

CRINA



I look out at the passing buildings from the moving car, seething with anger.

Married.

On my eighteenth birthday.

Married to a man I hate.

A bully, that's what he is.

That's what he's always been. And if there had ever been a lingering doubt in my mind that he was anything but a bully, today completely swept it away.

Thoughts of cutting off his dick circle around in my head as the car glides down Forty-third Street to The Church of Saint Nicholas.

And a *secret* marriage to boot.

I press my lips and swallow down the bile coming up. Instead of holding back, I should projectile vomit all over the black leather seats of this car. Let them see what I really think of the man I'm marrying in name only. I grit my teeth. And one would think my parents would be torn up with guilt over forcing me into this sham marriage.

Shame on them.

Taking me out of school in the middle of the day to dress me up in this, *this*—I flick at the delicate lace of my dress. An ugly, virginal dress to bind me for eternity to Marku Popescu.

Another surge of acid roils in my tummy. Another wave of nausea surges through my core.

I wrench off the white tulle and lace veil decorating my head and thrust it down into the footwell of the limousine. I don't care if his mom is my mother's best friend. I don't care if she's like a second mother to me. I don't care if they've had this marriage arranged since the day I was born. I do *not* care.

My chest heaves in shallow breaths. I grab the handle above my head and suck in air as the car rolls around the corner to the ponderous edifice of the church. The meticulous brick façade is covered with gold-dipped icons on either side of and above the door. Topped with a cupola, this is the destination, the holy ground on which my greatest humiliation is about to be consecrated.

The car stops.

The door swings open.

As I place a toe onto the street in haughty disgust, a hand drops to help me out. I take it and instantly recoil from the sizzling heat that zaps through me.

A head dips down.

Marku.

Curly black hair and eyes so dark they could eclipse the sun. He may be only eighteen, but there's nothing remotely boyish about this man. Not one trace of the person I'd spent endless hours with as a child, and before that as a baby. Hell, I probably heard his baby giggles from my mother's womb.

Gross.

He arches one dark brow in that mocking way of his. God, I *hate* it when he does that.

“Get the hell away from me,” I snap as I shove him away while simultaneously struggling to get out of the limousine. My gaze momentarily catches the sexy tattoo creeping up his neck from underneath the collar of his tux, and then I get more enraged for having slipped like that. You'd think I'd be used to

it, that I'd have somehow learned to wrangle and control and *crush* this damn reaction to him after what he's done to me. But no. I've never had much luck in life.

He tsks me with that perpetual smirk on his face. I loathe his smile. "What language out of such a pretty mouth."

"Best not to antagonize her," comes a voice I know only too well.

I narrow my eyes at Lucian. About as tolerable a monster as Marku.

He gives me a grin and I itch to smack it right off his face.

Seeing my expression, he takes a step back.

Smart man.

My father finally pushes through them. "Take a step back, boys. I'll take care of her."

I throw myself out of the car, taking the opportunity to sharply elbow as many of the men circling around the open door as possible while lunging toward the pseudo-safety of my father. It's as if a part of me still hasn't realize that this man also betrayed me, even if he thinks he's saving me.

Looping my arm in his, I hiss, "How could you?" as I've repeated ad nauseum since he broke the news to me.

"There was no other way," he insists, reciting the same answer. And looking up at him—seeing the paleness of his skin and the tightness around his mouth—a wrenching pain tears through me. I don't know what hurts more, the fact that he thinks he's protecting me or the fact that he's suffering so much.

"And you let Marku's buddies come along to watch my humiliation, but you won't even let me tell my two *best* friends."

He sighs wearily. "They're made men, Crina. You know that."

"Ugh," is my disgusted reply.

Marku retrieves the veil and says, “You’ll need this.”

I pierce him with a vicious look and snarl, “Why? I don’t expect to be a virgin when you finally force me to the marriage bed.”

The cool expression on his face morphs into fury.

A vision of a white sheet streaked with blood scrunched in his hand pops into the forefront of my mind, but I brutally thrust that vision away as I stomp away from him. Damn me and my visions. I inherited this foresight from my mother. I shudder with revulsion. There is no way I will ever allow that one to come to pass.

Marku charges up to me, whips me away from my father, and drags me into the church. He stalks down the center of the nave with me in tow, swings left, and yanks open a side door. He backs me up against the nearest wall of the small, tidy office, and slaps a hand on either side of me.

“The fuck you say to me,” he seethes.

“Oh, is that your worry? My virginity. My *purity*. But forcing me into this sham of a marriage, that’s okay for you. That’s just peachy keen for you.”

Regret flashes across his face. “Fuck, baby, you know if there was any other way, I’d have taken it. I’m as much of a victim here as you are.”

I shove him hard. “I doubt you’ll stop fucking Luminita or Nadia or whoever your little fuck buddy of the month is.”

“I’m not going to fuck anyone but you from this day forward,” he grinds out, crowding closer and smacking his palm against the wall beside me for emphasis.

That makes me pause for a second.

It didn’t occur to me that he’d take our vows seriously. A sudden flurry of conflicting emotions I refuse to acknowledge floods through me, leaving my heart palpitating. I’d assumed we’d both go on as we had before. It’s not like we’ll be living

together. I'll be going back to my family and he'll go back to his, at least until after graduation.

Wait a minute... Did he have the audacity to call himself a victim?

My rage rushes back tenfold. After what he's done to me, he has the nerve to call himself a victim. As if forcing me into this sham marriage isn't bad enough, there's his past betrayal.

"Oh, so that's your huge sacrifice? Not fucking another woman? And did you call yourself a victim for marrying me? Is that what this is? A *sacrifice*?"

"For fuck's sake, don't twist everything I say. I know you don't want to marry me right now—"

"Try never," I interrupt.

"Tell yourself whatever you need to help you sleep at night."

He caresses down my cheek with the back of his hand. "But let me make one damn thing clear, baby. You're mine. You were since the day you were born and you will be till the day you die."

"That's a hard no, and if you think I'm going to our marriage bed a virgin—"

He presses a finger hard on my lips, cutting me off.

I glare at him, throwing as much hatred into my glower as I possibly can, and I've got a lot stored up for him.

"You'll be a virgin alright, and I'm here to remind you why." He straightens his spine and hunches his shoulders as if getting ready for a fight. I tense in anticipation. "Get on your fucking knees."

Inhaling sharply, I instantly go into struggle mode, writhing to escape his grasp. He tries to subdue me gently, but I take advantage of his weakness and fight harder until he loses his patience, clasps my throat, and pins me to the wall.

With a dirty grin, he asks tauntingly, “What’s the problem? It’s not like you haven’t done it before.”

I let out a gasp of outrage. “You’re a bastard for bringing that up.”

“And you’re trying my patience, Chuckie.”

I cringe at the playful nickname he gave me when we were kids.

“The last time was erotic. This is not.” I look him boldly in the eye. “I’m saying *no*. You’ll be forcing me if you put me on my knees.”

He chuckles indulgently. “Baby girl, we’re not American. Consent isn’t a thing, but even if it was, we both know how much you like being forced.”

My entire body lights up in flames. I break out in a sweat. My fingers and toes start tingling with the memory of the only time I had his cock in my mouth. Oh God. I swallow. That had to be the most excruciatingly delicious experience of my life. I’ve been haunted by it ever since. Hell, it’s my go-to masturbation fantasy.

Tugging at the neckline of my wedding dress, I pull it away from my skin and flap it back and forth to get some relief. I rub my thighs together, the gusset of my panties drenched from that one comment.

With his eagle-sharp eyes, he knows how he’s affecting me.

In a guttural tone, he says, “My little angel loves when I talk dirty, doesn’t she? Now get on your knees before I *force* you down.”

I bite my lip and suppress a moan. I shouldn’t, I really shouldn’t, but the bastard has this way of short-circuiting my rational brain. This is what happens when you grow up in a society obsessed with virginity. Any chance we get to hook up is too much of a temptation to pass by.

He hears my moan anyway, knows it because he knows me so well, and taking that as a *yes*, reaches for his belt.

Slipping it out of the loops of his trousers, he twirls me around and wraps it around my wrists. I should fight him, fight this, but he knows what he's doing. He knows I'd feel the need to fight him, even if I don't really want to fight him. He knows just how tight to wrap the belt, the bite of it around my wrists amping up my lust while simultaneously grounding me.

He whirls me back around and grasps the skirt of my dress. Inch by slow inch, he pulls it up and groans when he sees the set of white garters and net stockings.

"Fuck me, you're trying to get me to pop that cherry now," he groans as he skims a finger up my leg to the junction where they meet. "But I'm not taking you for the first time in the back of a church. No, I'll be taking my time with you."

"My first time won't be with you, I keep telling you."

"You say that." He briefly closes his eyes as he slips a finger beneath my silk panties. "And yet you're soaking wet."

He plunges his finger inside my pussy. I arch my back and cry out at the invasion.

"Tight as fuck," he murmurs against my lips. "Such a good little virgin and yet you want to be my dirty slut."

Carefully removing his finger, he slips it into his mouth and sucks. "I'm gonna need to taste that sweet honey directly from the source."

"No," I cry out, shaking my head roughly because there's no way I'll survive his mouth on my pussy. My hate will barely survive his big cock in my mouth again. Last time, it took me days to crawl my way back to the status quo.

He pushes my panties lower and lets out another groan. His eyes dilate and he licks his lips, but before he has a chance to touch my clit with his tongue, I quickly drop to my knees. With my hands bound behind me, there's no way to snatch my skirt up and keep it off the floor, but I don't care. So what if I

get patches of dirt on this pristine dress? Anything is better than going to the altar knowing he's made me come. He wants me to orgasm on his tongue, he's told me enough times, but I've never let him. There's no return from a surrender like that.

I gaze up at him, pleading with him to let me, but Marku's no fool. He knows I'm thwarting him again, and he lets me know by saying, "Bad girls who deny me don't get to come."

His dark words almost make my eyes roll back in my head, but hoping that's a yes, I pitch forward and nuzzle my nose along the hard outline of his cock against the fabric of his tux. Excitement thrums through me like the beat of a drum, pounding louder in my skull with each second that goes by.

He takes a step back, keeping himself just beyond my reach.

Biting my bottom lip, I glance up at him and beg, "Please, Marku."

"Fuck," he mutters as he tears open his trousers and pulls out his long, hard cock.

I should be terrified. The last time we did this, I was aroused for weeks. It was all-consuming. I felt like he'd devoured my soul and gotten me hooked on him like a drug. The guy's got vampire skills like you wouldn't believe.

But it's too late. I've asked and now I'm going to receive.

He towers over me, looking so exquisitely dangerous and male. The column of his thick throat, with the tat peeking above the collar of his shirt, makes him menacing. Meanwhile, the fire sparking from his dark eyes burns a path over every inch of me.

His jacket is off, and the bulges of his muscles are outlined against the translucent cotton of his shirt. They shimmer darkly beneath the pure white of his shirt. Unlike any other Romanian made man, he has tats all over his body.

Fuck, he's so damn sexy. I can barely think straight, and with my wrists shackled from behind, my choice has been

taken away. Granting me relief from questioning the sanity of what I'm doing here.

So by the time he says, "Now be a good girl and open for me," I'm impatient to part my lips for the crown of his cock.

He yanks at my neckline, tearing it to expose my breasts. He fondles one, tweaking my nipple harshly, making me twitch in need as he pushes his hips forward, moving past my tongue to my throat. His musky taste suffuses my mouth, the corresponding scent fills my nostrils. He surrounds me everywhere with his taste, his smell, his cock.

"This won't be like the first time. You'll swallow the whole of it today," he commands.

I should be scared because his cock is big, even I know that from the little porn I've watched.

I gurgle around it and he grasps my hair, undoing the elaborately made chignon, forcing me to take more. I moan as saliva gathers at the corners of my swollen mouth. This is already way more intense than last time.

I suck in a draught of air through my nostrils as he keeps going and going. Fisting my hair, he forces my head back and plunges deep until the very tip of my nose grazes his abdomen.

Holy shit.

"Such a good girl. Tight throat, tight pussy, and an even tighter ass. One day soon, I'm going to take all three and you're going to love it."

A powerful surge of desire whips through me because I am his good girl. Abruptly, tears sprout from the corners of my eyes, marring my perfectly applied mascara. He does this to me every time. Gets under my skin with dark words that breed even darker fantasies. Fantasies I haven't even put words or images to until he conjures them up like a wicked genie.

"Eyes on me. I want you to watch the moment I come down your throat," he says, his voice unexpectedly vulnerable.

My eyes snap to his and then he's thrusting hard into my mouth. I tilt my head back farther, softening my throat even further, and then he comes with a bellow. My mouth is flooded and I'm gulping semen down as fast as he spills it.

It tastes like salt and man and Marku.

He pulls out and swipes a thumb over my bottom lip before bending over and claiming my mouth in a brutal kiss, leaving my swollen lips feel bruised. Breathless, I'm left stunned and disorientated.

"Damn, that wedding lipstick looks so pretty around my cock," he muses as he tucks himself away.

I caught it, too. Another jolt of arousal. Another flood of my pussy.

Struggling to get up, I stumble to a standing position. Shutting down the pride I feel at my success, at the intimacy of the moment, I lie, "Ugh, you're disgusting. You force me to do these things and then you have the audacity to gloat about it after. Release my hands already."

I turn around and wiggle my hands at him to take off the belt. Once I'm free, I rub the marks around my wrist and take in a breath. No one will notice them, not even my mother, considering how rushed this bullshit marriage is. Taking in a bracing breath, I tug my panties up, slap at the skirt of my wedding dress, and fling the door open. Sprinting down the aisle to the priest is my only option to cut off the intensity between us, the tortured rightness of us. Because there is no *us*, I remind myself. He killed that a long time ago and there is no coming back from what he did.

The priest's eyes flare in surprise at my appearance. Hairdo ruined, mascara running down my cheeks, lipstick smeared around my lips. I look godawful, from the torn neckline of my wedding dress to the dark smudges at my knees.

My mother rushes toward me, fixing my hair and wiping off the lipstick as Marku saunters down the aisle. She

hurriedly slips on the huge engagement ring I threw in Marku's face when he proposed to me. A moment of respite and then Marku is back by my side.

I stoutly ignore him as the priest begins the ceremony with his Romanian Orthodox incantations.

He switches to English to ask, "Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

I turn toward Marku.

He smiles that smug smile, the one I hate more than anything. God, I want to wipe that smirk off his face.

Exploding with rage, I give him a grim close-lipped smile as I twirl my tongue in my mouth, gathering a mixture of saliva and seed.

And then, I spit in his face.

CHAPTER 3

MARKU



I pat the space beside me in my king-sized bed...
seeking...seeking.

My bloodshot eyes spring open.

My bed is empty. She's not here. Fuck. For half a second I finally fell asleep and conjured her up in my dreams. I'm awake, but my brain hasn't caught up to reality. I scrub my gritty eyelids.

Of course, she's not in my bed.

Another short bout of sleep. Another night plagued with nightmares of Cristian's murderer. It's a recurring nightmare where I'm chasing this demon-like figure down a dark corridor, close to catching him. My fingers snatch the sleeve of his jacket and he vanishes like a ghost. I don't think I'll ever get a full night's sleep until I kill that bastard.

I turn onto my back. A shaft of blinding sunlight crosses over my eyes, joggling my dream-filled mind. I raise my hand to shield the light and glance down at my aching cock. I might be married, but my bride isn't lying beside me in my bed.

I let out a long groan. I may be married in the eyes of God and man, but I don't have my feisty woman by my side. And as if that's not bad enough, I have to hide our marriage.

Disgusting.

I catch sight of the eagle tatted across my right hand lying on the empty pillow beside me. The things I do for this clan.

This is the part of life as a made man that my father warned me about. No one ever said it would be easy.

But marriage?

That's not something I ever thought would happen. I'd long ago told Cristo to take me off the marriage mart. After Cristian, how could my future *şef* possibly think I'd be an eligible match? I mean, the thought of putting me in charge of protecting another human being is preposterous. And Crina, of all people?

Fear strikes my heart.

I'm going to fuck this up, just like before...

And if that's not bad enough, how about the fact that I still haven't found and slaughtered Cristian's killer? I've vowed to go kamikaze if I have to, killing myself in the process. And with a man as wily as my nemesis, I there won't be an alternative. Once I finally find him, I'm going to throw everything I have into our fight. Even then, I may fail. I swallow the lump in my throat and distract myself by grabbing the cell phone on my nightstand. I check for messages, hoping against hope Crina texted me something.

Anything.

Nope.

See, she knows I'm not fit to be her husband. That's the real reason she's against this marriage. She *said* it was because she was being forced into it, but our mothers had this planned from our births. Her reservations come from another source altogether. If I couldn't keep my little brother alive, there is no way a woman as intelligent as Crina would think I could manage to keep her safe.

Guilt tickles at me. It didn't help that I majorly screwed up the marriage proposal. She can hold onto a grudge like no one else, but I'd assumed she'd forgiven me, at least somewhat, when she let me kiss her...and do a helluva lot more than that.

Apparently not.

I see the traces of lipstick smudged on the side of my index finger. Not gonna lie, there will be perks to being married to a woman as hot-headed and difficult as Crina. I didn't wash my hand after I swiped it across her swollen lips. Lips swollen from taking my cock whole, lips dripping with my come. And that's the other reason I agreed to go through with this. I wasn't about to let another man get his grubby little hands on those luscious curves and that fresh pussy.

Jesus.

I grasp my cock through my pajama pants. The phone topples out of my hand onto the bed. Leaving it, I swing my legs over the side of the bed and sit up. I crack my neck, left, then right. Feels better.

My gaze drops to my lap. I'm going to have to take care of this before school. Like I do every morning. I'd hoped that getting married would chase away the erotic dreams of Crina that hound me every night.

But soon—one day soon—I'll be taking what's mine.

Fuuuck.

I squeeze my cock again and saunter over to the bathroom with a ten-inch pike between my legs, every jarring movement of my legs reverberating up to the tip of my dick. I grab a toothbrush and jump into the shower.

I clamp down hard on the toothbrush when I grab hold of my cock and stroke hard. I imagine Crina spread-eagle and dripping beneath me, taking my thick cock. Smearing her virgin blood all over my shaft. It doesn't take me long to come. It never does with her.

I brush my teeth and step out of the shower. My cell phone lights up.

A text?

Wrapping a towel around my waist, I hurry to my bed and swipe the phone, opening it to a message from Crina.

I raise my face to the ceiling and let out a little prayer of thanks before reading it.

No, you fucking asshole. No, I won't be your virgin sacrifice. You better go back to screwing other bitches, 'cause you're never gonna see my pussy in the light of day.

I bark out a laugh.

This happens all the time, getting a text from her responding to the very thought in my head. That's how in sync we are. Despite the fights, despite the mistakes—and I've made some doozies—we're connected in a way that defies explanation.

Okay, Chuckie. Believe what you want, but I will bust through that pussy and make you come on my cock the first time. That's my promise to you.

I hate you, you Popescu pig. You're ugly and dirty and everything nasty. I'll die a virgin before I let you touch me with your cock.

I chuckle at her bluster.

Baby, it's already touched you. You were choking on it in church yesterday. Remember?

I can practically hear her head explode from her townhouse down the street from me. But I also know that she wouldn't text me without a reason, and I've got a good guess as to that reason. This isn't our first rodeo together; I put out my bait and see if she'll bite.

If you're so confident in yourself, meet me on the roof and prove me wrong.

Fuck you and your roof.

Not much of a bite, that. Hell, that wasn't even a nibble. But I'm not one to go down without a fight.

Is that doubt I hear...

Fuck you.

Too much protest, so I poke her again.

Not so sure of yourself, are you?

And what's her answer?

[middle finger emoji]

I can feel her fear ringing through the phone. I may have messed things up over the years. I wince. Okay, I may have torn her apart Freshman year, and my proposal clearly shows that we haven't moved past that, but, seriously, what had she been thinking waltzing into the boys locker room?

But I know Crina. She's afraid of me precisely because we're explosive when we come together. She may hate me, but she can't resist me any more than I can resist her. And she's afraid of my intentions—as she should be. I went the extra mile to keep a distance, to give her a chance at a real husband and family, but then her clan put her up for bid, available for marriage to any made man.

She's mine now and I have every intention of owning her, heart and soul.

Oh, and I will relish the moment she submits to me, the moment she's bound to me forever.

Only, not on a rooftop.

When I bust through that tight cherry, she will be in my bed and I will brandish the wedding sheet stained with her virgin blood to every member of my clan. Everyone will know who she belongs to.

But that doesn't mean I won't take a taste of her right now.

Are you scared, Chuckie? I swear I won't touch you unless you ask me nicely. I let that settle for a moment, then add, *Unless you beg.*

Lie, big fucking lie, but I can imagine her bristling with rage.

I'm not scared of you, you low-life thug.

It worked. Off of *fuck yous* and back to sending me texts with full sentences.

Prove it. Meet me at our spot in ten.

I see the three dots of her typing. It keeps going and going, and then dies off without a response.

Anticipation winds tightly in my gut. Praying that she's figuring out a way to escape and sneak up onto the roof to meet me, I throw on clothes, grab a blanket, and pad barefoot up to the rooftop. The roofs of every building on our block are connected, with a few low walls separating one from another. Smack-dab in the middle of the block between my family's house and Crina's is Mr. Albu, an old man who never steps foot on his. Hell, I bet his roof still has the same industrial-grade black asphalt that was slapped on the day his house was built.

The warm spring sun beats down on my shoulders and I strip off my shirt. Meeting her bare-chested, with my tats gleaming in the morning sun, will throw Crina off her game and I'm not above playing dirty. Knowing her, she'll be raring for a fight.

I launch over a low wall onto my neighbor's renovated wooden deck and cross over a few more until I reach Mr. Albu's desolate rooftop. It's early morning and a flock of sparrows chatter in the latticework of branches in a tree in his backyard. That same tree is tall enough to cast a bit of shade over part of the roof and I lay out the blanket in that shady spot.

Sure enough, Crina shows up.

She freezes as she catches sight of me before loping over the low wall and landing on Mr. Albu's roof. Her gaze scalds my chest, and as much as I want to pretend that her hot perusal doesn't affect me, it does.

Hell yeah, it does.

Besides our one clan tat, tats are kinda forbidden. Since mine derived from grief everyone let them pass. And the way

she inspects my tats, the way she unconsciously licks her lips, lets me know she appreciates what she sees. I can't help but flex my muscles a little as I take my time fixing the corners of the blanket.

“A blanket? You're unbelievably cocky to think that I'm going to do anything with you out here.”

I glance over my shoulder, catching her intense gaze on my multi-colored back. “I won't touch you unless you beg, remember?”

She stalks toward me, jabbing her index finger in my direction. “There will be no begging, mister. You might as well wait for hell to freeze over first.”

I lie down and lean back on my elbows to let her get another good eyeful of me. “Who's talking about doing anything? The ground is rock hard and pebbly. I brought the blanket as much for me as for you.”

I practically roll my eyes. Of course, I got the blanket for her.

She crosses her arms over her ample chest, her gaze unable to stop from meandering down the long length of my body. She jerks slightly when she reaches my bare feet. “That sounds about right.”

“Mm-hmm.” Shielding my eyes from the sun, I stare up at her and pat the space beside me. “Since I brought it, you might as well sit down.” I pause. “Unless you're scared.”

Wearing her pajama pants and a boxy t-shirt that stops at her naval, she huffs and unceremoniously plops down beside me. “I'm not scared of you.”

Her natural scent of crushed orange peels, cinnamon, and cloves wafts over me and my dick takes notice. It reminds me of when we used to huddle together with a blanket scrunched up to our noses, peeking over at horror flicks in her basement. It reminds me of wrestling with her in the foam-block pit when during gymnastics. It reminds me of when we were kids, of when Cristian was still alive. It was perfection. It was heaven.

It was everything. My chest tightens with pain. Before I fucked it all up.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

I shake my head, my throat too clogged to answer.

“No, Marku, don’t do that,” she murmurs, her soft tone clear as a bell despite the sound of chirping birds from the backyard and cars passing on the street below. The tension in her shoulders drop off. She lifts her finger and traces the heavy bags under my eyes. I’m sure they look like bruises, even with my dark olive skin.

I swallow. “I’m not doing anything.”

“You’re thinking about him.”

“Am not.”

“You can talk about him, you know?”

And that’s too much for me.

I jump to my feet and yank at the blanket. “You know better than to say anything like that to me. You of all people.”

“Hey,” she says, tumbling off the blanket. She rolls onto her knees, snatches hold of a corner and tugs it toward her. “Sheesh. Okay, okay, relax.”

I keep pulling. This tug of war over a ratty old blanket is ridiculous but the band around my chest cinches tighter and tighter. I should abandon the dumb blanket.

I drop it, ready to turn away, when Crina grabs my hand and attempts to drag me down. I stand stock-still, resisting her. My heart is pounding its way out of my chest. My throat feels scratchy and the muscles at my temples pulse like a ticking time bomb.

On her knees, she looks up at me with pleading eyes, and says, “I’m sorry, okay? Stay.”

I scowl and growl under my breath. She tightens her grasp on my hand, petting the top gently. Her touch soothes me. It

always has, and knowing this, she's taking advantage of the effect she has on me and keeps up her caresses.

And she keeps talking. "Come on, Marku, come down here. Stop being such an ass. You know I can't stop running my mouth. I don't mean anything by it. And I was upset. She upset me—"

"Who?" I knew the answer before I asked the question, but I couldn't help myself.

"Mama."

This isn't the first time Crina has met me since our fallout, and every time has been in retaliation to her mother. It doesn't take a genius to figure out it's Crina's way of taking back control. Of course, it hadn't occurred to me that she'd never forgive me for the locker room incident. Even if it had, it wouldn't have stopped me from meeting her. From making her choke on my cock. From touching her pussy and sucking her juices into my mouth.

Speaking of juices...she's evaded me for over a year and I'm determined to taste her today.

Now.

Except, I can't help but want to soothe her, so I ask, "What happened?"

She gives an irritated little shrug. "What always happens. She overreacts and then she refuses to apologize or even admit that she's wrong. Obviously, this is about the wedding. She keeps insisting it's for the best, but that's a bald-faced lie, and it infuriates me the more she doubles down. I'm sure there was another option, but she wanted to marry me off and took the first opportunity that fell into her lap. It's no secret she's wanted us to get married our entire lives, and with our falling out, she thought she'd lost her chance. Until now." Her face draws tight with anger.

She makes a derisive noise in the back of her throat and then sniffs. "And Tata is the biggest disappointment. He's always had my back. Until it matters. But he's parroting her

100 percent. And I can't do anything to upset him. His seizures are getting worse and I don't want to be the reason the next one kills him."

She fists her hand and brings it to her pinched mouth, stifling a cry. That sound brings me to my knees. Literally. I drop the blanket and sink down beside her. "Oh, baby. Hasn't it occurred to you that they might be right?"

Her head snaps up, suspicion clouding her eyes. "Why would you say that? What did they tell you?"

I take her hand in mine, savoring the feel of it, savoring the fact that she's innocently left it there instead of brusquely shoving me away. It's a rare moment, these days, when Crina allows me to touch her outside of the non-con games we play. "Not a thing. I didn't ask questions."

She tosses her head. "Why the hell not?"

Why would I?

A part of me has wanted Crina my entire life. The chance of a lifetime fell in my lap, and an undeserved one at that. I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. And when they told me that it was for her security, that if it wasn't me, it would be someone else, anyone else at this point—well, let's just say I didn't need to hear more.

I may have fucked up our relationship. I may have tried to set her free. But the instant Cristo told me she was in danger, the protective feelings I'd stifled for years came roaring to the forefront. There was no way I'd let anyone take my rightful place. Now she's mine to protect. If I screw this up, I'll never forgive myself... I haven't forgiven myself about a lot of things. If I mess up with her, I won't be able to go on. I'll have to end it, right then and there.

"I don't know anything other than that Cristo was on board with this, along with your *şef*. There's no way they'd be so quick to agree to a rush marriage unless it was serious."

Her eyes sharpen. "What do you know exactly?"

“Cristo called me in the day before yesterday. Alex and your father were there. Cristo explained the course of action and that was it.”

He told me it had to do with the Bratva but refused to get into the details for now. He did make it clear that things were in flux and I wasn't to speak about this to anyone.

She lets out a huff of frustration, motioning for me to continue.

“I'm a soldier, nothing else,” I reply. “If—I mean, once Lucian becomes *consilier* things will change, but now, I shut my mouth and do what I'm told.”

“And that's all I am, right? An order to be followed. Nothing more.”

A wave of anger rushes through me. Before the fallout, she'd never dared ask such an idiotic question. I open my mouth to deny it, but then snap it shut. She's not ready for the truth. For my apology. But then, I think—*fuck it*. I can't let her walk away thinking I married her for no other reason than that I was following orders. That's downright ridiculous.

Grabbing her throat, I press her down onto the blanket. Her auburn hair flares out behind her. “You know better than to say something like that.”

Anger makes the brown of her eyes recede and sparkle blue, green, and gold. “Do I?”

“Yes, dammit, you do. I'd never marry you if I didn't want to.”

“You swore you'd never get married, period. That turned out to be a lie.”

“There was one caveat to that statement, and only one.”

“Oh? And what was that?”

“Your safety.”

I didn't know how she came to the attention of the Bratva, but that was as dangerous as it got.

The light in her eyes dims.

Wanting her to understand, I forge on, “I couldn’t save *him*. Do you think for a moment that there’s anything I wouldn’t do to make sure *you* stay alive?”

Her eyes zip away from me. “No,” she replies with a sniff. “Cristian—”

Pain slashes through my chest like a broadsword. My heart pounds so hard it might be hemorrhaging blood. In a low, controlled tone, I warn her, “Don’t say his name, Crina. You know better than to say his name out loud.”

She slaps me in the chest and screams, “I loved him, too, you know? You won’t let me talk about him. No one ever talks about him. Everyone acts as if saying his name is a curse. As if his name embodies the way he died. But he was so much more than that. We need to honor him, not shut him into a small dark room. No, we need to bring him back to life. To talk about him and how much we loved him.”

“Enough,” I roar.

She stills beneath me, her eyes flutter with shock.

“We can never bring him back to life. His name conjures up the worst nightmare of my life. His name is a curse. It’s the worst failure of my life.” I shake my head. “But none of that matters here. I’ll be damned if I ever fail you that way, you hear? So yes, even though I swore I’d never get married, I tossed that out the window the moment they told me you were in danger. Did I ask questions? No, I did not. Why not, you ask? Because I knew what I had to do.”

Enough talking. My neck is tight as fuck. I feel close to choking. There’s only one way to tear off the invisible hands wrapped around my neck, squeezing, squeezing... I lift her up by her throat and smash my lips against hers.

It’s not a gentle or precious kiss, but she opens right away. I ravage her mouth. I bite down on her plump bottom lip, stopping just short of drawing blood. I drag my hand down her chest, slip it under her shirt, and squeeze one of her luscious

tits. My fingers tease her nipple until she's writhing beneath me. I tug at her pajama bottoms and seek the comfort of her moist, hot cunt.

Bingo.

Just as I expected, it's hot and juicy. And mine. This sweet innocent cunt is all mine. That cherry's just waiting for me and, when the time is right, I'll be taking it. No one else but me. It was always meant to be me.

With a groan, I tear myself away and slide down until my mouth is on her bare nipple. Her hands clutch at my hair. She arches her spine, giving me more, but I'm nowhere near satisfied. I won't be satisfied until my tongue is on her pussy.

I shimmy down farther, licking down the curve of her belly.

She begins twisting the locks of my hair and yanking. "No, no, no."

"Yes," I growl against her supple flesh.

She tries shoving my head away, but nothing will stop me. I yank her pjs down and flick the tip of my tongue against her mons. Her malty, sweet flavor explodes in my mouth.

"Holy fuck." And then, "Get off me!"

No fucking way.

Ignoring her, I plunge my tongue into her slippery slit and suck on her clit. She's even tastier than I imagined. She's been a bad, bad girl, selfishly keeping this away from me. I don't know why she's fought me on this, but I'm glad I pushed past her resistance. Sometimes she's so damn stubborn that she leaves me no other choice but to override her.

Some would call it lack of consent.

I'd call it knowing my woman.

Her fingers have softened, loosened around my curls, and turned from yanking to seeking. She tugs me closer. Her thighs press against my head, and I love that, too. I love the feel of

her toned legs on either side of me, my nose tucked into the folds of her cunt.

I'm breathing, tasting, licking her. This is the definition of heaven.

"Jesus," I hear above me. "Why did you do this to me?"

I answer with my tongue, twirling it around her clit, sucking it good.

It doesn't take long before she explodes under my ministrations, covering my mouth and jaw in her slick. The late April sun kisses my bare back. A soft breeze feathers over my glistening, hot skin. Her fingernails scratch my scalp, then claw my shoulders. Crina heaves and gasps.

I tilt my head up to catch her expression. Her eyes are blind with desire, her mouth open in a wide O. She rocks into me, her thighs clamped around my ears, taking what she wants. Using my mouth.

I love watching her fall apart.

This is the first time on my tongue, and it's been a long time coming.

Breathing heavily, she comes down from her climax. Her thighs drop open. I glance up and get snared in her riveted, shocked gaze. I tilt my head to the side and smirk at her.

Did she doubt my skills or something? Did she question whether I could tongue fuck her into ecstasy?

My smirk morphs into a bold grin. She'll never underestimate my abilities again. "Different from coming on my fingers, huh?"

She shakes her head. Her eyes clear and instantly turn brittle.

Uh-oh.

Here she goes...

"Ugh, you're so crass."

...shutting me out.

Frustrated at her for ruining the moment, I turn my face and bite down on her inner thigh.

She claps me upside the head.

“Ouch!” I rise above her and yank her toward me. “Why do you always do that? Anytime you let down your guard, anytime I make you come, you go and ruin it.”

Her shimmery eyes harden. “Damn you. How dare you ask why? You know why. The entire *school* knows why.”

Shoving me away, she stumbles to her feet and jerks her pajama pants up. I grind my jaw in vexation when she covers her pretty pink pussy from me. Without another word, she launches herself across the rooftop.

Her dark red head bobs away and a moment later, she’s gone for good.

Fuck.

She just had to bring that up again, didn’t she?

CHAPTER 4

CRINA



*F*our Years Earlier

I'M SO EXCITED.

Today is the big day. Tryouts for the JV soccer team. Marku and I have been practicing and strategizing the entire summer. On the scrawny lawn with large patches of dirt at the back end of Sunnyside Park, where kids meet every day to scrimmage. On the rooftops of the buildings on our street. Juggling competitions in our rooms.

I'm obsessed. He's obsessed. And we're not the only ones obsessed. The soccer team is the single most respected athletic team at Empire Academy. And, *hellooo?* It's soccer. It's the place to be. It's the ultimate proof that you've earned respect based on agility and skill. I'll go to any lengths to make it onto this team.

There's a girls team...but let's just say that it's not nearly as competitive, and I want to compete against the best. Initially, it took some doing to convince Marku to help me prep and train. Truth be told, I'm not sure he would've backed me without the big blowout fight we had, but that was before Cristian's death. Since then, he's been much quieter. My heart squeezes at the thought of Cristian. And at the thought of what Marku and his family have been going through. Aunt Natalia is like my second mother and she hasn't been the same since.

I shake it off. I can't let anything affect my mood right now. I need to keep my head in the game. And whether Marku was originally supportive or not, I would've eventually won him over. That's how badly I want this. And I always get what I want.

Being the only girl trying out, I'm milling around outside the boy's locker room, unsure where to go. It's a week before the official start of school so the building is mostly empty. We were supposed to meet on the field outside, but the coach sent out a last-minute email to all prospective players to meet up in the locker room first.

Which leaves me in a bit of a pickle.

See, Coach doesn't know a girl is trying out. I don't want to risk him knowing I'm a girl before he checks out my foot skills. I want him to judge me solely on the field. I certainly couldn't tell Mama. This must be kept from her for as long as possible. Even when I get chosen—and I've worked hard enough to know that I've got a chance to make it—she'll pressure me to quit. But if I get in, there's no way I'm quitting.

Which means, I need to make sure I get a fair shake.

I got here an hour early and the flow of boys entering the locker room has dwindled to nothing. Enough time has passed that I'm guessing they're probably dressed by now. I pray they are.

Wringing my hands, I fret. *Do I go into the locker room now?*

The plan is for Marku to poke his head out, text me, or give me a signal that it's all clear. Then I'll sneak into the locker room, blend in with the boys as they're walking out, and slip onto the field as one of them. If that's not possible, then Marku will let me know that they've started. I'll take the stairs up to the lobby, book down the hall to the back door, and meet them on the field. The potential downside to the backup plan is that I may not blend in as easily.

I fidget as I wait. I can practically taste victory. All those hours of playing and working out, of having to prove myself day after day at the park, of those same boys talking shit about me whenever Marku is too far away to hear, will have been worth it. I'd hate myself if I didn't give it my best shot.

Leaning against the puke-green colored wall, I chew on my nail and lean closer and closer to the door until I have my ear pressed against the wood. I can make out Coach's booming voice on the other side of the door.

"What are you doing?"

Shooting off the door, I whirl around and come face to face with Dinu and one of his little minions, Adrian.

Dinu grins at me and I melt a little. He's in one of the other boy cliques, not with Marku and his besties, Lucian and Anton. He's the opposite of Marku, but still cute with his platinum blond hair.

Clutching the ball tightly against my chest, I wait for his perusal of my entire body, from my cleats to my shorn locks.

He frowns slightly as he inspects my hair. He gestures toward my head. "What happened to you?"

Yes, I'd cut my hair like a boy just for this.

I touch it gingerly. "What? It's hot out. I needed a cut."

He breaks into a soft smile. "Looks good on you." He takes a step closer, reaches out and grabs a strand of hair, rubbing it softly between his fingers. "I like it."

Our eyes lock. My cheeks blaze hot, but I can't tear my gaze away from his cerulean-blue eyes. And there's another difference between him and Marku. He doesn't call me "Chuckie" from the old horror movies we watched as kids. He sees me as a girl, even when I'm trying to pass for a boy. Heck, Marku doesn't see me that way when I'm dressed up in a dress and heels. It's one of the main reasons I've forcibly friend-zoned my crush on Marku. He only sees me as a pal, or even worse, a sister.

Adrian clears his throat, breaking the moment. My gaze skitters away from Dinu. He reluctantly drops his hand and takes a half step back.

Jutting my thumb toward the locker room, I ask, “What’s happening in there? I need to know when tryouts are starting.”

He arches a white-blond brow at me. “You tryin’ out with the boys?”

I bristle at the question, hunch up my shoulders, and jam my hands on my hips. “You gotta problem with that?”

His eyes widen and he raises his hands in the air. “No, nope. Not at all.”

I sigh, frustrated at myself for snapping at him. “I got the tryout info, but I…” My mind goes blank. How am I going to explain this? “I want to know what’s happening in there right now.”

Dinu might not be brilliant like Marku, but he’s no idiot. I bet he’s already guessed my plan, what with my boy haircut and the fact that I’m lurking outside the locker room like a thief.

I check my phone and let out a sigh. I’ve texted Marku several times, but he hasn’t responded. Maybe he can’t text while Coach is talking or maybe his cell phone is in his locker. I haven’t given up hope of sneaking in behind the boys, but it might be better to have a backup plan in Dinu.

Squaring my shoulders, I turn my full attention on him. “Look, Dinu, can you go in there and let me know when Coach is done talking and they’ve started filing out?”

His brows jump.

Huh, guess he hadn’t figured out my plan. Oh, well. What’s done is done, right?

He shares a fleeting look with Adrian that I can’t quite read but he shoots me one of his million-watt smiles and responds smoothly, “Sure thing.”

Mollified, I lean against the ugly tiled wall. “I’ll be right out here until you give me the go-ahead.” I grab his arm gratefully as he passes by. “And Dinu...thanks.”

He stares at me intently for a moment before answering, “Anything for you, Crina.” Pleasure courses through me and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Dinu pushes the door open to a roar of voices as the boys shout in unison. My blood pressure instantly spikes at the raucous noise. The door whooshes closed, leaving me alone in the muted, empty hallway once again.

It’s gonna be okay, I comfort myself. Either Marku or Dinu will let me know when to slip inside. I will blend in as the boys leave and no one will be the wiser. I’ve played with enough of them that they shouldn’t be entirely shocked to see me. I cross my fingers.

Hopefully.

Jittery, I alternate between pacing the hall and pressing my ear to the door. Each minute passes with excruciating slowness. I check my phone. I stuff it back in my bag. I pace. I stop. Then I restart the whole cycle from the beginning. My nerves wrench tighter and tighter as one minute melts into the next and I feel my window of opportunity slipping away...

The door opens abruptly.

I plaster myself against the wall.

Dinu pokes his head out.

“Now,” he says and vanishes.

The door swings shut. I reach out my hand and catch it before it slams down on my fingers. Hauling it open, I step inside.

I’m besieged by a cacophony of voices.

It sounds like a lot of noise, but maybe it’s the acoustics of the locker room and the boys are actually clustered near the door leading to the field, lined up to go out.

Pee-yew! The smell in here. It's like the worst dirty socks in the world. But I won't be daunted by loud shouting or nasty boy odors.

I step into a small foyer-like area with a frosted glass wall shielding me from the rest of the locker room. My skin prickles like it's on fire, but I take a deep breath and stride farther into the room...

"Heeey, Marku, looky who's here for you."

Was that Adrian?

Marku's head snaps up. Shock lines his face as he stares at me. Him and another thirty-plus more boys. His mouth drops open.

Oh, shit.

Have you ever had thirty pairs of intense male eyes on you before?

I freeze, my gaze bouncing from place to place. Some boys are fully dressed, but some are only half dressed, their chests bare. And then a few—*help me Lord, no!*—are only covered by spandex athletic shorts that leave nothing to the imagination.

Coach's gaze shoots to me. He opens his mouth to speak, but before he can say anything Marku rises from the bench, and bellows, "What the hell are you doing here?"

His roar bounces off the walls, reverberating in the air. Fury pours off him like fast-flowing lava off an exploding volcano.

There's a snicker to the right of him.

I narrow my eyes.

Adrian.

I flash that kid a look of pure hatred, but I'm in the middle of a group of half-dressed boys and the coach I so desperately want to impress. There's a sharp pain in the back of my nose. Tears burn behind my eyes, but I can't show weakness.

Fumbling, I say, “I-I was going to t-try out.”

Whoosh.

And there goes any hope of not showing weakness.

Pointing to the door, Marku yells, “You were supposed to wait outside until I gave you the green light.”

“B-But Dinu said it was time—”

Marku shoots the blond boy a glare of complete distrust.

“*Dinu.*”

The word drips with venom.

“Yes, Dinu—”

“You mean your *crush*?”

My face goes from beet red to sheet white as it drains of blood. The boys whistle along with suggestive *ooh*'s and *aah*'s, followed by a smattering of disgusting kissing noises. *How could he?* I told him that in confidence.

“Goddamn it, why can't you ever do what you're supposed to do? I didn't want you trying out, but you had to push. So damn stubborn. But look at yourself now.” He looks me up and down with a look full of disgust.

Waving his arm around the locker room, he forges on, “Look what kind of mess you put yourself in with your impulsiveness. Fucking hell, why can't you ever just sit still like the other girls and do as you're told?”

Wow. Just, wow. It's a slap to the face, a stake to the heart. I stumble back with pain, clutching my chest where my heart shatters in a million brittle shards. Not sure what part of that tirade hurts the most, but his last phrase breaks something deep inside me. How dare he repeat the same words my mother uses? How dare he weaponize the things I've told him in confidence?

Coach scrunches his nose and squints his eyes. “That's a girl?”

The boys explode into a bout of deafening laughter, punctuated with hoots and howls. Adrian dramatically bowls over in glee. The dirty rat.

I grasp my ball to my chest as I absorb the blast of pain roaring through my body. Then I stretch out my arm and hurl the ball at Marku. It flies past his head and bangs hard against one of the red lockers.

“Hey!” says Coach, but Marku makes a slashing gesture with his hand and the man has the good sense to shut up because it’s a showdown between me and my former best friend. My former crush. My former everything.

Pointing at me, Marku trembles with rage. “Leave.”

Tears bead at the corners of my eyes. As much as I hate him, I don’t want my hard work to go to waste. What about my dream? I still care about soccer, I still want to succeed.

I stiffen my posture. “I want to try out.”

He waves his arm around maniacally. “Look around you, Crina. That shit’s over with. No one on this team will be comfortable around you now.”

Boys had quickly finished pulling up shorts or grabbed towels to cover themselves. There’s a combination of embarrassment, irritation, and anger on their faces.

“B-But—”

“No buts,” replies Marku in a tone dripping with contempt. “You can never be part of this team. There’s nothing left for you here. The only thing you can do is to just go.”

I swipe at a tear with my trembling hand. A thought shoots through my head. A terrible thought. A thought so horrible that I blurt it out, even among this pack of half-dressed, angry males as witnesses. “Were you pretending to help me?”

My heart lurches with anticipated dread. I should hate him for what he’s said to me in front of these idiots, but I’ve known Marku my entire life. I was there, holding his hand front and center at Cristian’s burial. If he’s been lying to me

this whole time... I-I won't even know what to feel. What to do.

He stiffens at my question. He swallows once and his gaze falters for an instant. Not a good sign. I shake my head, silently praying he...lies.

Lie, if you have to. Just lie.

"Yes, of course, I was," he replies thickly. "You're so stubborn. I didn't have the energy to fight you but you should've never tried out. You may be good for a *girl*, but you're sure as hell not good enough for this team."

"Damn," a random whisper hovers in the air thick with tension.

A tremor rumbles through me, followed closely by a blade of red-hot pain that slashes my heart into strips. It's left dangling like flailed meat hanging from a hook on the killing floor of a slaughterhouse. I have trouble getting in a full breath of air around the steel band constricting my chest.

"Go home," he continues. "Get outta here."

Coach points his finger at me. "Hey, I know who you are. You're Dan and Marina's girl. I'm going to call your mother, young lady. I don't know what kind of joke this is, but I know your mother. She's not going to like this one bit."

"Yeah, Coach," Marku adds, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring across the locker room at me. "She did this on purpose. Mocking you. Mocking the team. Mocking the sport." He spreads one hand and waves it across the locker room. "Mocking every single boy here."

Those words hang in the thick tension of the room and the mood switches instantly. At the suggestion that I was doing this as a prank, as a joke, the boys' faces transform from laughter to anger.

All of a sudden, something moist and dirty hits my face.

Some kid's dirty boxer briefs.

I strangle out a scream but another comes at me, and then another.

A ball whizzes past me.

The boys start pelting me with everything they've got. Dirty underwear, dirty socks, soccer balls, whatever they can get their hands on.

Coach's voice rises above the growing din, his face red with fury. He shakes his finger at me accusingly. "I'm going to tell your mother. You'll never play soccer again. Not with the girls here. Not anywhere. Hell, not any sport."

Now the dam breaks. Tears pour down my cheeks. Snot drips from my nostrils, staining my jersey.

"Look at the crybaby," someone cackles. A chorus of scathing laughter explodes amongst the flying objects.

One soccer ball hits me against the side of the head. My vision goes woozy. I grab my temple, my blurry vision seeking Marku. He stands to the side, leaning against a locker, and turns his back.

He wanted this. He did this on purpose.

Another ball hits me in the stomach hard and I bowl over, winded. From my crouched position, I see the boys inching closer and closer. I take a step back.

Marku doesn't turn to make sure I'm okay, doesn't make a move to stop them. More balls come at me. It's like a feeding frenzy and I'm the bait. Through my haze and pain, I realize he's not going to protect me.

I've got to get out of here.

I twist around, hunker down with my hands over my head as balls and cleats pelt my back. Sharp pain radiates from the impact of the blows. I'm going to be covered in bruises and I'm pissed and scared at the same time, but the most important thing is to escape.

Crouching down, I aim for the glass partition. I scramble around it and pause for a moment when something hard hits the glass. It shatters above me, shards of glass rain down on me, knifing me with piercing little cuts. The din increases as the boys heckle and screech, circling me like sharks in bloody water. I see the shadows of boys rushing me.

Petrified, I let out a scream and propel myself off the floor.

I throw the door open and escape, jeering hoots, cackles, and shrieks following me out.

Hugging the wall, I drag my foot behind me as I hobble down the hall as fast I can. I cast a look over my shoulder and see a posse of boys burst out of the locker room, their faces twisted in anger. Adrenaline pumps through my veins. I slam the double doors open and sprint down the stairs, but trip down the last couple of steps.

I fall forward, fear and panic gripping me. The linoleum floor rushes toward me. I crash forward, falling flat on my face. Pain explodes in my nose. Blood spurts out, hot and wet, like my tears. There's a ruckus at the top of the stairs. Objects fly down on me, pelting my back, already throbbing with pain. I cover my head and curl into a fetal position. Blood gushes onto the front of my lucky Marta jersey, pooling underneath me as I stiffen with fear, terrified of what they'll do next.

Feet hit the stairs behind me. Fingers snatch at my jersey. I feel the collar cutting into my throat. There's a loud rip. I scramble forward, struggling to get on my feet. But before I can, another boy hits me square in the back. I'm propelled forward and slam my forehead into the wall. Pain explodes at the point of impact. My vision goes fuzzy. Sounds are muffled.

Hands drag me up and back toward the stairs. My breath stalls. Through the fog of pain and the rushing sound in my ears, I hear Coach's booming voice. He calls them off.

I hear his footsteps pounding down the stairs, his voice getting louder by the second. I glance through blurry eyes to see him yanking boys back and tossing them toward the stairs

with harsh reprimands. They retreat; *cunt* and *bitch* spew out of their mouths from the top of the stairs.

There's one last, "Lucky bitch. Better watch your back."

And then there's the blessed sound of silence.

Sprawled on the floor, I shake as fear and unspent adrenaline ricochets through my body.

My teeth chatter as I spit out blood and swear aloud, "I fucking hate you, Marku Popescu. You better pretend you don't know me because from this day forward, you don't. Don't talk to me. Don't look at me. Don't breathe in my direction because you're dead to me. Dead."

I sniffle and spit on the floor one more time to make my oath official.

If he hadn't wanted to work with me throughout the summer, if he hadn't wanted me to try out, if he didn't think I was good enough, then he should've told me instead of luring me here to humiliate me in front of everyone. It's like he'd planned it on purpose. Like he wanted to kill the love between us. Like he knew just how to do it.

We'd had spats before and gotten over them, but never anything like this. He'd never abandoned me to a pack of wolves before. And between Coach stopping by my house to talk to my mother and Marku talking to Aunt Natalia—another nail in the coffin, as far as I was concerned—I was grounded for months.

Every soccer item was tossed out of the house and left on the curb. I watched morosely from my bedroom window as random strangers picked through the high-end soccer equipment and jerseys one by one. Tucking them under their arms, they jauntily walked away with my stuff. At four in the morning, I was woken up by the sound of garbage trucks. I dragged myself out of bed and watched as sanitation workers flung the last remnants of my love for soccer into the back of their truck.

And that was the end of it. My dream was crushed under my feet, skittering away like so many errant dust bunnies.

I never kicked another soccer ball again. Between what Marku started and my mother finished, it broke me. I've resented them for it ever since. It was during those lonely afternoons and weekends that I turned to writing my thoughts down on paper. First out of boredom. Then for sustenance.

Those words eventually turned into poetry.

I may have found my way out of that dark time, but I've never forgotten what Marku did to me. How could I forget, much less forgive, such a betrayal? Not only had he humiliated me in public, but he'd turned his back and abandoned me to those filthy boys. And then he'd colluded with my mother by telling Aunt Natalia what had happened. That was one line too many crossed. One too many betrayals to forgive.

I did what any self-respecting girl did. I held a grudge. Then, I built a wall so high that the bastard could never get close enough to hurt me again.

And that's the stalemate we've been in ever since.

CHAPTER 5

CRINA



*P*resent Day

I STORM AWAY FROM MARKU, my clit still tingling from the workout it got with his tongue.

Not counting the forced marriage situation, I know what he's thinking, and no, I haven't forgiven him for the past.

Besides our occasional tryst, I've successfully kept him at bay. It had been easy for the first three years. I'd see him at the occasional family holiday and avoided him like the plague. Things have gotten a tad more difficult since our clans stopped fighting each other. Since then, I've seen him at nearly every social event. It was that repeated exposure that led me to slip. That's what you get for being an overly protected virgin in a highly restrictive society.

That one slip turned into another, and then another. Basically, whenever my mother drove me to the edge of sanity. Add in a horny virgin, stir in a hottie like Marku, who lives a few doors down, and I end up in a clusterfuck like the one I've just put myself in on the rooftop.

Not that I've tripped up that many times. I grimace. Half a dozen times, at most. Considering it's been almost four years, that's not too shabby.

Of course, that was before I was forced into marriage. I still have three months to go before graduation. Three months

to figure out how to get the hell out of this. Three months to gather up enough money to run away. Fortunately, I'm a poet, not a soccer player. I don't have a team to contend with. I fly solo and that's how I like it. And I have Star and Gabby now. They're nothing like Marku. They support me flying. They don't knock me down like he did four years ago or try to tie me down like he has with this sham of a marriage.

I glance over my shoulder as I speed walk across the rooftop. He's still lounging on the blanket, his olive skin mouthwatering in the morning sunshine. He licks his lips, garishly shiny with my slick, and I snap my head away with a shudder. That wasn't a shiver of arousal. That was disgust.

I stiffen my spine and lift my chin. Yup, definitely disgust.

I unhook the bungee cord I'd wrapped around the outdoor knob of the door to keep me from getting shut out. I drop it on the pile of containers of wheat paste I have near the door and hustle back into my bedroom to get ready for school.

I usually meet up with Gabby and Star at the street corner and we walk to the subway together to Empire Academy in Manhattan. Since I'm running late after wasting so much time getting an early morning orgasm, I text them to go ahead without me. I'll have to get to school on my own, but considering my foul mood, it's for the best.

I reach the street entrance to the subway and step onto the covered stairway going up toward the platform of the elevated subway when a sleek, black car swerves onto the sidewalk, stopping with a screech just a few feet from me. I stumble back in fright.

Doors fly open. My pulse races as two burly men clad in black jump out. I scream as they grab me. It might be too late to run, but that doesn't mean I'm going down without a fight. Screeching at the top of my lungs, I lunge forward and go for the eyes on one thug. He turns his head at the last moment and my long nails scratch down his cheek. He curses in Russian.

Oh shit. Bratva.

They're chatting to each other in Russian over my head as I try to claw my way out from between them, but they're too much for me.

One shouts in heavily accented English, "Be still. It's your father, for fuck's sake."

I don't know if this is a ploy, but it stuns me long enough for them to bundle me into the car and slam the door shut. The doors lock. Heaving in draughts of air, I grab the door handle and shake it.

The car bumps as it drives off the sidewalk and back onto the street. A second later, the tires squeal as the car careens around a street corner onto Queens Boulevard, and I'm spirited away to God knows where.

"It's locked."

I snap around to see my stalker settled calmly in the seat beside me. He's dressed impeccably in a tailored pinstripe suit. His dark auburn hair has shots of white running through it. He watches me carefully.

Fear shoots through me. I shrink back into the seat. "What do you want from me? I'm a Lupu, I'm telling you now. Once my parents discover I'm missing, all hell will break loose. I'm just warning you."

He chuckles softly, amused. His clasped hands loosen in his lap. "They told me you were feisty. I see they didn't lie."

"Who the hell are 'they'? Your thugs? Because you don't have any issues following me yourself."

He nods evenly. "True enough. I wanted to see you for myself."

"Why would you want to see for yourself? I'm nothing to you. I sure as hell don't know who you are, but I can tell you right now, I don't appreciate being kidnapped on my way to school."

He presses his hand to his heart and leans forward in a small bow. "I apologize for the abruptness of our meeting. It

was the simplest option and I'm an economical man. Pray, let me introduce myself. I'm Alexei Kotov."

The blood drains from my face. I blink at him. "Th-the Bratva boss."

"The one and only." Another one of those old-style mini bows. "At your service."

"What would a man like you want with a woman like me?" Panic jolts through me. Now I'm really scared. I swerve left and right, desperately looking for an escape. This guy has power like few men in my world. He can do anything to me. And I'm not even worried about death. Gang rape? Torture? Dismemberment? Hell, point-blank murder is the least painful option at the moment.

He tuts gently. "I would never harm you."

My eyes widen in terror. For some reason, that softly murmured promise sounds particularly menacing coming out of his mouth.

His tone takes on an edge, just a slight variation in his voice, but it's enough to scare me senseless. I claw the grey leather seats and press back into the corner to get as far away from him as possible.

"Stop," he commands. "I swear I won't hurt you."

Ba-boom. Ba-boom. My heart is pounding out of my chest. I'm nodding numbly, but panic swells through my body.

"Look at me," he demands.

I wasn't looking anywhere but at the dangerous predator in front of me.

"Look into my eyes."

What is this? Some snake-charming sorcery? My gaze instantly dashes away.

"My. Eyes."

The tone is strict. Like, scary strict.

I cautiously look toward the side of his face, to his cheekbone, then dart down to his lips and chin, and shoot quickly to his eyes.

His eyes. His eyes his eyes his eyes.

By now, I'm breathing through my mouth. God, it's hard to breathe. The air seems to only come in short, little puffs.

Special eyes.

Pant.

I've seen those same, special eyes.

Pant.

So many times.

Pant.

Dear God, those are my eyes.

"Yes, you see it now," he says, nodding encouragingly.

Then there's the angle of his nose, his chin, his...his...

As realization dawns on me, I shake my head harshly. "No, no, no."

"Yes," he replies smoothly.

But it couldn't be. She'd never...

"You're my uncle?"

His face falls. "I'm Belarusian. Of course I'm not your uncle."

A gust of power hits me full force. I see flashes of arms and legs intertwined on a bed. I gag, the images too real, too wrong, but either way, the truth blooms in the pit of my stomach.

And yet, I can't help but deny it. "No, she'd never do that. Never. She loves my father. She may be awful, but her one redeeming quality is that she loves him."

He arches one mocking brow. "She does."

I'm burning up inside but my skin feels frozen, like someone dumped ice water on a raging fire. I clench my thighs with cold, clammy hands. "What the fuck?"

"This was before him."

"They were married before I was born," I rasp, as I try but fail to wrap my head around this new information. I keep talking as if I'm having a normal conversation, but my head's buzzing like I've been drugged.

He settles deeper into the seat, probably because he's comfortable now that he has my full attention. "They may have been married, but she was here alone for quite some time. She petitioned for him to join her, but she'd arrived in America first."

His Russian accent is lighter and more refined than his numbskull bodyguards.

"I know the story," I snap at him.

No one—especially not this stranger—is going to recite my parents' love story and marriage to me, their daughter. Especially this...this...Russian thug. Because I don't care how much his suit costs, I know a thug when I see one. I grew up among them. Hell, if I'd been born a boy, I'd have been the worst of them.

"Then who the fuck are you? And don't even try to lie and tell me you're my *real* father."

He huffed out a laugh. The sound of it is husky and oddly familiar. *Eww*. My school blouse feels like a hair shirt, scraping over every inch of skin it touches. I cannot, absolutely cannot, be related to this guy, laugh or no laugh. "I knew you'd be quick. Like your mother." He pauses. "Like me."

I curl my lip. "Never compare the two of us. We are nothing alike."

There's a darkness that clings to this man, and it's more than the regular darkness that surrounds any of the made men I

know. If I can see it, how could my mother not? Damn her and her idiocy. What the hell had she done, getting mixed up with a man like him. He looks like a snake, a rodent, a sniveling hyena. She must have been temporarily insane to fall for him in any capacity.

“I don’t have to tell you anything, do I? You already know the truth.”

“Fuck you, you low-life prick.”

“Tut tut tut, such language from such a pretty girl.” He laughs lightly and that laugh... Makes me want to rip the vocal cords out of his throat. “Only proves you’re mine. Dan would never curse.”

Fuck.

“I am not half-Russian,” I spit out because seriously, *yuck*.

“No, you’re not. You’re half Belarusian.”

This Russian-Belarusian-I-don’t-give-a-fuck-what-he-is low-life scum is nothing to me. I don’t care what he is because it has nothing to do with me. I clench my fists in fury, but I have to keep it in check. Sure, this is shocking, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of watching me lose my shit.

I may half hate my mother, but I look exactly like her (not including the eyes), and everyone tells me that I act like her. That’s why we don’t get along. But my father, my *real* father, not this sperm donor my mother picked up off the filthy New York sidewalk, is everything that I’m not.

Even if we share the same eyes and nose and laugh, I’m nothing like this dirtbag. And maybe not even the eyes... Sure, they’re unique, but Aunt Natalia always commented how I have the perfect combination of my father’s and mother’s eyes.

Oh. My. God. Was she *covering* for my mother’s affair?

I gulp down the bile that rises up my throat.

Fuck you, Aunt Natalia.

No, you know what really tipped me off? It's the fact that Dan is nothing like me or my mother. Tata is everything that's kind and loving in this world. And while I may be kind and loving to a select group of people, I'm not kind to everyone. And he's calm. I'm the furthest thing from calm. There isn't much I can identify within myself that's him, unless it was cultivated. Like our mutual love for soccer and the arts, for poetry and painting.

I take a long, hard look at this sperm donor. The eyes are a dead giveaway, and the hair color is a strong runner up. I may have my mother's round face and a-little-too-full lips, but his nose is my nose. That nose doesn't come from anyone in my mother's or father's line. I glare at his nose. That nose must be Belarusian. I gag.

He smirks at my inspection of him, and damn him, but at that moment, a dimple pops out on his right cheek. Just like me.

Panic starts crawling up my throat. I gulp down a breath. Then another. Christ, I don't want to know this. My breakfast is fighting a battle with my tummy and it would serve this guy right if I just upchucked on his fancy leather interior. Even if you've known something your entire life, that doesn't mean you want to be confronted with the hard truth.

And if we're so much alike, if he's known about me for a while, why did he reveal himself now? I glare at him. I have a strong inkling as to why, but I want to hear it from the bastard himself.

Gulping down the bile, I cross my arms over my chest tightly and declare, "We've lived in the same city my entire life. Why now, after all these years?"

"You're assuming I knew about you."

A deflection if I've ever heard one, and not one I'm going to let pass. I want answers, and I want them now, since I don't know when I'll see him again. Hopefully, never.

I give him a bland look. “Are you telling me you didn’t know you had a kid running around with the same exact eye color and laugh as you?”

“So you noticed as well.” He shrugged. “There were a few years when your mother gave me the slip. She ghosted me, so of course my first assumption was that Dan had arrived on these shores. She’d always made it clear that our arrangement was temporary. I didn’t go searching for her, but one day, I was bored and…” He gives a little shrug. “Call it curiosity.”

Jesus, he must think I’m an idiot. More like someone tipped him off. Or he’d kept tabs on Mama and he found out that she’d birthed a child. That’s where the curiosity came in.

“I happened to see her pushing a stroller,” he continued, lifting his chin in my direction. “Of a beautiful baby girl.”

Was that supposed to be a compliment? I paste a bored look on my face. “If you’re looking for a reunion, you’re eighteen years too late.”

“It’s never too late,” he returns.

Oh, yeah? Fuck you, dude. Like hell it isn’t.

Ignoring him, I go on, “You must need something. No other reason for a man like you to come looking for a girl like me. I bet you have a dozen baby mamas to choose from. You wouldn’t bother with a *girl* from another mafia without a good reason. Remember, I’m *mafie*. You’re Bratva.”

Just so he gets the message loud and clear, I lean toward him and hold his stare as I murmur, “Whatever you want, you won’t get it from me.”

“As your father—”

“You’re not my father.”

His face hardens. Aah, now his true colors come out.

“Fine, as your biological father, I have certain rights, and I’m here to call in my cards, as the Americans say.”

The American idiom rolling off his tongue is strange. And technically wrong. I roll my eyes and sigh. “Chips.”

“What?”

“Call in your chips, not cards. The saying is ‘to call in one’s *chips*.’”

He waves his hand dismissively. “Whatever the words are, the point is you’re my child and I intend to utilize you as I see fit.”

A tremor of rage convulses through my frame. I clasp my ribs tightly to hold myself back from going for his face. These men. So fucking presumptuous. He thinks just because he shares my DNA, he can waltz into my life and turn it upside down. Push me to do something I don’t want to do. I already have a mother for that. I don’t need another random-ass parent popping up like a noxious weed trying to dictate my life.

For once, I’m grateful for my mother. At least, she tried to hide me from this guy. She may be a bitch, but she’s no dummy. At some point, she saw that the man was toxic. He doesn’t care for me one bit, unless you count using me like a pawn. Mama might have had a passing fling with this loser, but she’d had a good man—an honest to God, one of a kind, good man—and she wasn’t about to give him up for this crocodile in a suit. She gave me my true father, and this ruffian sure as hell wasn’t him. As much as I have issues with my mother, I know that, in this one instance, she did right by me.

Needing to hear what this idiot thinks he’s got planned for me, and more importantly, to what lengths I’ll need to go to evade or fight him off, I ask, “Yeah, and how is that?”

He spreads out his hands. “Your clan may have no interest in recognizing you as my blood relative, but a DNA test will determine that I am indeed your father. And with that, I get certain rights. There will be a tug of war, a tit for tat, but in the end, I will renounce all of them for just one thing.”

I raise a suspicious brow. Motioning with my hand impatiently, I prod, “So what is it? I’m on the edge of my

seat.”

“Marriage, of course.”

I jerk back into the smooth leather seat. My fingers are clenched so hard, I may have cut off the blood going to them. I crush my lips together to hold back the raging screams that want to escape. The bold presumption of this asshole. Taking a moment to grapple with my rage and wrangle it into submission, I peer at him closely to make sure he’s for real.

Yup, he’s dead serious.

And then the tension within me cracks and I burst into laughter. I laugh in his face, my laughing gets louder and louder until it’s hearty and strong. And for the first time that I can remember, I’m grateful for both my tenacious mother and for my moron of a husband, because I get to tell this human dumpster to fuck off.

He leans forward, his face stiff like rigor mortis. “What the hell are you laughing at?”

“At you,” I sputter between giggles. “Better go back to the drawing board with your master plan, because I’m already married, father dearest.” I grin at him viciously. “As of yesterday, in fact.”

His eyes bulge out of his head. He lets out a string of curses.

“Yeah, to whatever you just said.” I lift my chin and stare him down with narrowed eyes. “That’s right, I’m fucking married.”

“Your mother—”

I shove a finger in his face. “Don’t you dare say one word about her.” He’s smart enough to snap his lips shut. “Are we finished here?”

I wait, watching as the realization settles in his stiffened shoulders and the twisted angry expression he’s trying, but failing, to control. He must have had a lot riding on this

marriage he'd conjured up in his head. I wait an extra beat—to amp him up, to make him feel just how powerless he is.

Yeah, buddy, how does it feel?

Taking in a deep breath for courage, I demand, “Now, tell your goons up front to open the door of this car. I’m going to be late for school and I can tell you, the interruption wasn’t worth it.”

Infuriated that he didn’t get what he wanted, he raps on the divider separating the front seats from the back of the sedan.

A few minutes later, we’re back at my subway station. *Had we just circled the neighborhood this whole time?* The locks click and the door swings open.

I step out. One of the bodyguards who’d manhandled me into the car earlier steps up politely and hands me my backpack with a tight bow. I want to say *fuck you* to him, but not wanting to press my luck, I snatch my backpack and storm away.

On impulse, I turn back, lean down into the open car, and say, “And in case you’re wondering, no, I’m not a virgin. You know how thorough my mother is. Next time, no need for theatrics. Just call.” I airily wave a hand. “I’m sure you can get my number from somewhere.”

With that, I slam the door shut and stalk toward the staircase. It’s almost *déjà vu*, considering I was on these steps less than twenty minutes ago. Next time, if there’s ever a next time, I’ll know not to fight and break my nail on some gangster’s face. I’ll know who it is. My deadbeat criminal overlord of a father, Alexei Kotov.

I curse him with every stomp up the stairs to the elevated subway platform. Thanks to him, my life has blown up. He’s the reason I’m married, and he’s the reason I’m stuck with Marku for the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER 6

MARKU



Once upon a time, life was simple.

The Bratva were busy fighting the Dominicans. The Popescus and the Lupu clan were sworn enemies. My brother was alive. I was a rising star of my clan. And Crina was part of my life.

I guess when one domino falls, they all fall.

Cristian died and everything went to hell in a handbasket. I destroyed my lifelong friendship with Crina. My desire to rise in the clan collapsed. Nowadays, I'm more than happy to be second-in-command and support Lucian in his obsession to get to the top. Why? Because I need to avenge Cristian's death. With his killer still on the loose, I honestly don't care about myself. The *mafie* clans arriving at a peace treaty might be the only silver lining in this new world order. I would've never otherwise gotten the chance to marry Crina. It would've been an impossibility rather than a *fait accompli*.

History class is almost finished. Twenty kids in a class, seated in rows, and Crina is nowhere to be found. Sure, she might have a doctor's appointment, but it's more likely a result of this morning's tryst.

Did I push her too much?

She has a thing about me not licking her pussy, another way of keeping a distance between us. Usually, I push past any resistance—within reason. Knowing Crina as well as I do, I didn't think I'd gone too far. She seemed more than happy

when she came on my tongue and did her usual fuck off dance afterward.

I feel a rumble of unease in my chest.

But did I go too far this morning?

I check the door once again, like I've been doing since class started. Now that she's my wife, I can't sit still not knowing whether she's okay. The city is a dangerous place. It's one thing when I know she's riding the subway with her two little friends. It's another when she's taking it by herself. Crazy shit can happen. She could get shoved onto the subway tracks by some madman. Attacked and slayed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or what about the Bratva? Isn't that the reason I married her in the first place?

I stand up from my desk.

"Marku, what is it?" asks a startled Ms. Bogdan.

I start shoving my laptop into my backpack, about to jet out of the class and track Crina down, when the door swings open. My head snaps to the door and everything inside me deflates like a punctured balloon.

She slips in softly. With my hand stuffed down in my bag, I watch as she smoothly offers the teacher the late slip and slides into her seat in front of me.

"Marku?" Ms. Bogdan prompts again.

I drag the laptop out of my backpack and drop back into my seat. "Never mind, I thought I had to leave for a dentist appointment."

She frowns down at me.

"Must be tomorrow," I mumble.

"Since you're here for the rest of the class, you might as well answer the question I just asked. What was Britian's primary purpose in the Opium Wars?"

Crina glances over her shoulder at me. She looks disheveled, her hair a mess. She tugs on the sides of her shirt,

closing a large gap. I narrow my eyes. Is that a tear in her shirt? My brows shoot up. One button is missing and her shirt's mussed up like someone's manhandled her. I curl my hands into fists. What the hell happened? Did someone dare touch my *wife*?

"Marku?" Ms. Bogdan prods, a little irritated by my distractibility.

I cast my eyes down. I can't even remember the question. Something about Britian and opium.

"I don't know," I mumble as I slump down into my seat, eyes riveted on Crina.

"That's a first," mutters the kid behind me under his breath. I let out an irritated huff. I don't care about my school reputation. My ego's not in the game. Whether school or clan politics, how can it be when I have a huge job left undone. My life can't go on until I end the man who ruined it.

Thankfully, the bell rings. Ms. Bogdan gives some last instructions about the upcoming test as kids pack up and talk, drowning out her voice.

I lunge over my desk. "What the hell happened to you?"

Crina glares at me and waves her hand up and down her body. "This is what happens when a man takes advantage of a woman and eats her out against her will."

A girl in the aisle next to Crina sucks in a breath.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I mutter in exasperation.

Nice try, making me feel guilty about this morning to throw me off the scent. No way that's gonna work. I already had a jittery feeling in my chest before she stepped into the classroom looking like she'd been mauled by a wild animal.

Nervous tension thrums through me, memories of Cristian shooting through my skull. I'll get to the bottom of it, if it's the last thing I do.

She stands up and I check out her skirt, which also looks like it's been through the wringer. I jump to my feet and grab her elbow before she can escape.

“Owww,” she complains, but I'm not having any of it.

Pressing her close, I hustle her out the door and swing into the empty science lab. Slamming the door shut, I dump my backpack, lean against the door, and cross my arms over my chest to show her that I mean business.

“What the hell, Marku? Stop manhandling me. I'm not a doll you can move any place you want. I've already missed one class.”

She drops her backpack to the floor, juts out her hip and crosses her arms over her chest, mimicking me. Her sassy attitude relieves some of my stress. Crina's as bold as they come, but even she would be shaken if she'd been the victim of an attack.

“Get out of my way.”

I let out a laugh. “You're not leaving until I find out what's going on.” I inspect her carefully, taking in every little detail. “So what will it be?”

She arches an eyebrow at me. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me, Crina. Don't blame this on me. You got dressed after I made you come. And there's no way you would leave for school like this. Not in a million years. Your mother wouldn't let you out the door. Which means something happened on the way to school.”

The emotions crossing her face are hard to read. Something rageful, something irritable, something fearful.

That last one makes me stand up straight. “What. Happened.”

“You're such a bully, you know that? You're annoying and way too nosy. Did it ever occur to you that it's none of your business?”

Irritation bubbles up inside me at her dismissal. “Of course not. Anything having to do with you is my business.”

“Because we’re married? You’re such a hypocrite, you know that? The day before yesterday, we weren’t married and you couldn’t care less what happened to me. Now you think you own me. Nice, Marku, real nice.”

I huff out a breath of disgust through my nose. “You think I started caring for you yesterday? Come on, you’re smarter than that. I may have maintained distance between us, but I’ve always kept tabs on you.”

She adjusts her stance, and obstinately pushes out her bottom lip. She doesn’t believe me.

I slap a bland look on my face. “You questioning me? You think marriage has changed me?” *It abso-fucking-lutely has.* “No way. I’ve always watched out for you, but if they were worried enough to marry you off without waiting for you to graduate high school, then you better believe that your safety is now my number one priority.”

And speaking of safety, I’m cycling through the possible Bratva figures involved? Her parents must know. I’m going to have to do some digging... Start by talking to her mother. She’s always had a soft spot for me. While I stand there, contemplating my options, the sound of the students outside has fallen away, followed by the sound of the bell.

She swats my arm. “Let me out. I need to get to my next class. It’s bad enough that I was late to History.”

I look her over critically, noting every element that’s out of place. “Why were you late? Still haven’t answered that.”

“And I won’t.”

“Guess you’re not in a hurry to get to class then.”

She pushes at my side, trying to get me to scoot over and let her pass. “This is false imprisonment, dammit.”

Yeah, she can call it whatever she wants, I’m not moving until I get answers.

“I want to know what happened.”

She gets that stubborn look on her face that I know all too well. “I told you, I’m not going to tell you. You’re nosy, and marriage or no marriage, it’s none of your business.”

There’s no getting through to her unless I either seduce her or straight-talk her. Seduction is out of the question in the middle of school on a Monday morning. That leaves me with option two. Wouldn’t be my first choice, ’cause it’s going to hurt. She’s as stubborn as they get, but she seems to have conveniently forgotten that I can be just as stubborn as her when I put my mind to it. She rarely sees this side of me, but things have changed in a big way.

She’s mine now.

She’s in danger.

And she’s not leaving here until I get what I want.

I point my finger at her and start, “This is the reason I didn’t tell you to forget the soccer tryout even though it was a bad idea.”

Her chin lifts high, sparks of anger flying from her eyes.

“You won’t listen to reason,” I continue. “Won’t hear anything but what you want to hear. Even when it’s not good for you. I let it go one too many times and look what happened. I’m not going to make the same mistake twice, especially when it comes to your safety.”

I can practically see steam shooting from her pink-tinged ears. “What happened is that you humiliated me in front of everyone and left me to get attacked by a pack of savage teen boys.”

“They may have thrown a few things, but they wouldn’t have really hurt you.”

“Is that it? *A few things*, you say. How about running out the locker room to attack me? How about that?”

My brows slam down. Pressure builds in my chest. In the locker room, I had to turn my back away from her to stop myself from running to her rescue. “I didn’t see that.”

“They threatened me!”

Her shout bounces off the walls of the science lab. This conversation has taken an unexpected turn. Although it happened four years ago, it’s obviously very much alive for the two of us. If she wants a confrontation, then so be it. I have no issues going toe to toe with her. I tried to side-step this subject the day I proposed to her, but we can’t seem to be able to move forward without first clearing the air.

“You wanna do this now, then let’s do it,” I declare. “Right here, right now.”

She glares at me and seethes, “I’m not afraid of you.” She leans forward. “It’s been a long time coming, so let’s do this.”

“I might have lost my temper and embarrassed you, but you refuse to see my side of it. It’s not like I set out to hurt you, but you came into the locker room unannounced. It was incendiary.”

“Perhaps you may not have meant to hurt me, although the jury’s still out on that one,” she fumes. “But you certainly didn’t defend me. You stood there and let those boys throw balls and cleats at me. Glass shattered all over me. It was everywhere. And don’t forget the kicking and punching and running me down the stairs. They *hurt* me. And they would’ve done worse if Coach hadn’t shown up when he did.”

I start. *Shattered glass all over her?* I vaguely remember a loud noise and glass everywhere but I don’t remember Crina still being in the locker room at that time. *Running her down the stairs? What the fuck?*

“I wasn’t altogether there,” I say, keeping it vague.

Not altogether there is the understatement of the year. A daze was more like it. The months after Cristian’s death could best be described as an interminable season of darkness. On that day, I’d allowed the boys throw things at Crina, true, but

I'd thought she'd gotten out before the glass barrier broke. In the ensuing chaos, I didn't realize some of the boys had left. I definitely didn't know they'd attacked her outside. I curl my hands into fists. Even after all these years, my first thought is, *I'm going to kill them.*

"I didn't mean for you to get seriously hurt," I repeat. "I wanted to scare you into giving up your plan, sure. I wanted to teach you a lesson. Swear to God, I will run down every boy that went after you that day and beat him to a pulp."

Seeing her shoulders sag in relief, I can't help but lecture her, "But you've got to see your part in that fiasco. What about the fact that I was drowning in grief over—" I pause. "Him."

That's the second time today I've spoken of Cristian. It's a record for me. I take in a deep breath before forcing myself to continue. "You took advantage of my weakness to push your agenda. An agenda you knew was risky. I'm not even talking about the team or the coach. What about your mom? She wasn't about to let you play soccer on a boys' team. That would be *uncouth*." I say the last word in her mother's haughty tone.

Indignation burns in her eyes. Her cheeks turn pink, as tends to happen when she gets emotional. "Don't you dare talk to me about my mom. She would've never found out if people had kept their mouths shut. This is about you and me. About what you specifically did to *me*."

"You were delusional if you thought you could have kept it from her. As for you and me, I just explained what had happened on my end. Let's talk about you. About what you did to yourself. About how you're impulsive as shit and pushy as fuck."

Hurt flashes in her eyes. Her cheeks take on a brighter shade of pink. Yeah, I'm inflicting pain on her, but this must be addressed. She's got to learn to take herself in hand. I can't spend my life trying to protect a woman who's running with scissors.

“I wasn’t being impulsive,” she argues back. “I’d planned for that tryout. I’d practiced with you for months, remember?”

“How could I forget?”

It’s her turn to point a finger at me. “You!” Crina jabs me in the chest. “You let me go on and on, pretending to help me only to entrap me in the locker room that day. You shamed me in front of everyone and crushed my only dream. You did that. And then you let them attack me and hurt me.”

Does she think I’d purposely plotted for months to humiliate her in public? I mean...that’s downright insulting. I’m an inch away from feeling that insult right in my solar plexus, but then I remember that they attacked her. I clench my teeth. When I get the names of the kids who touched her.... I take a deep breath and exhale, centering myself. Grounding myself like I’ve learned in meditation. If we both give in to our emotions, we’ll never come out on the other side.

I touch her. She flinches.

I wrap my fingers around her forearm and tug her toward me. “You can’t possibly think I’d planned that. Baby, I was in hell. I could barely drag myself out of bed in the morning. Could barely dress. Couldn’t keep food down. I saw the train wreck coming but didn’t have it in me to fight you over it.” I gentle my tone and call her on her shit. “You knew that.” I wrap my arm around her and quickly add, “I shouldn’t have let them hurt you, and I’m sorry for that. I’ve always taken care of you, gone to bat for you, fought you when I had to, but I just wasn’t myself.”

I didn’t offer her a complete explanation. I wasn’t being fully transparent about why I let the boys go at her. Why I sat back although every muscle in my body wanted to leap across the locker room and cover her body with mine. Every hit she sustained by flying balls or cleats was like a gouge in my chest. I had to turn my back or I would’ve pounded my chest, roared, and torn through those boys like King Kong.

I'd purposely turned away from her, but only to save her from me. Crina deserves to hear the whole truth, but she already hates me. If I tell her, not only she will despise me, but she will look at me with disgust.

I swallow hard and rasp, "A part of me never came back from that night." My throat cinches tight, but I push through and choke out, "I never came back."

Her big, wide eyes are fixated on me, shock pouring out. This subject is as hands off as it gets, but now that we're here, I have no choice but to explain myself. I can't let her walk away with this ridiculous notion that I plotted to hurt her. The very idea that she's been harboring these thoughts makes my stomach go sour. No wonder she refused to talk to me, except for the half dozen times her mother drove her into my arms.

Her bottom lip is pouty again. It trembles slightly. "You hurt me. You let them hurt me."

"Chuckie," I say low and hoarse. "I snapped. Coach was talking, making crude jokes. The boys were rowdy. Some of them were undressed. I told you to wait outside until I gave the signal. When I saw you with Dinu... My emotions were running riot and when I saw you..." I shook my head sadly. "I lost it."

She gazes up at me. "I was outside, pacing up and down in that stupid, ugly hallway. Did you know the paint job on those walls is the color of puke? I was desperately waiting for any signal, but I heard nothing. Then Dinu and Adrian passed by on their way to the locker room. Dinu stopped to talk to me. I don't even remember what he said, but I ended up telling him about my plan. He said he'd help. Only, he set me up." Her gaze dropped to the floor, her lips turned down in a sulky frown. She looked so dejected. "He's the one who screwed me over."

"And me," I add. "I could've done better, but my protective instincts came roaring to the surface. The boys were ogling you and when I caught the look on some of their faces, I wanted to tear them apart. And I wanted you out. Out and

safe, away from those assholes. But I didn't handle it well. I don't even remember half of what I said to you."

"You said that I sucked at soccer and shouldn't try out."

I caress her hair. "You know that wasn't true. You were good. Really good. But the boys' team wasn't the place for you." She shoots me a vicious look. "No, don't look at me like that. I'm not saying you weren't tough enough. I'm saying it wasn't the right place. There should have been a good girls' team like there is now."

Still looking down, she scuffs the linoleum floor with the tip of her Jordans. "But there wasn't."

She glances up at me, her expressive eyes glassy with pain. I want to tear at my chest, leave it open and gaping, gushing out blood for hurting her, but the pain that has been festering for years. It must be excavated and dragged out, stomped out and eliminated.

There's no going forward otherwise.

"You know how much I loved soccer," she says. "I lived for it. It was the only thing that mattered. The only thing that felt good. That made me feel strong and powerful. And it was mine." She looked away. "It wasn't my mother's and it was never going to be. I would've lied to her about practice. The games were after school. I would've managed to hide it from her."

I gently lift her chin until her eyes are back on me. "She would've eventually found out. Nothing stays a secret among Romanians and that woman has eyes everywhere. I bet she chose me as your husband because she doubts you're a virgin, just from the half dozen times we've fucked around."

"You can't throw this on her. The crime is still yours."

It's not worth pushing this angle. It won't get me anywhere, and it's irrelevant. Sure, her mother would've found out and stopped her, but so what? It wasn't the reason I went ballistic that day. And if I need to explain it a thousand times and apologize another thousand, I will.

“I’m not trying to shift the blame to your mother, of all people. I’ll explain again. I didn’t plot to hurt you or humiliate you in public. I was in pain over *him*. I went along because I was grieving and then...” I swallow. “I lost it, and I’m sorry about that.”

The brown center of her eyes, jagged pieces of chocolate, get overtaken by the brightest turquoise blue, green, and gold. “I’d accept your apology if I believed it. You were struggling with grief and I may have taken advantage of that, but there’s more. You’re holding back, Marku. Tell me the truth. The whole truth.”

Fuck.

This girl.

She gets me every time. This is why I ached for her, tortured by the thought that she would be another man’s wife during my hopeless phase of trying to set her free. Not because she was in trouble. I was always going to protect her, no matter what. Not because my clan demanded it. Not because our mothers wanted it. Not because she was the sassiest woman alive, and the only one I’ve ever really wanted.

Because of this.

Because she was so damn intelligent and so damn brave. Only a lucky man stumbled on a rare treasure like her. And when he did, he snatched it up and never let it go.

She’s gazing up at me, waiting for my answer.

How did the tables turn so quickly? I was determined to get to the bottom of what happened to her this morning and look how swiftly everything turned topsy turvy. Now, I’m the one that’s been thrown off kilter and plunged into the past, into the worst time of my life, and she wants to know the truth. She already knows. That’s the fucking irony, of course. She just wants me to own up to it. To man up.

I take a bracing breath. “The truth is that I wanted to push you away.”

She's nodding her head encouragingly. My throat is closing up again and she's asking for more.

"You're right," she agrees. "It took me a long time to get over the details of that day and really look at what you did and why you did it. *Why*, I kept asking myself, *why*?"

I shake my head, and attempt to pull away, but she grasps my shirt and drags me closer. "You owned up to the what. Yes, you pushed me away, but *why*? We were closer than any two kids could be. We were closer than the closest of siblings, so why would you push me away?"

I grab her hand, cover it, and implore her with my eyes to let me go. She twists the shirt material tighter into her fist. "You saw that opportunity...and you snatched it up. Pushed me away." Another clench of her hand. Another twist of her wrist. "Why, Marku?"

"Don't make me say it," I beg.

Her tone is firm. "You must."

"No."

I tear myself away, hear the popping of buttons on my school oxford as I pull away from her.

She follows me relentlessly and says, "Oh, for Pete's sake. I deserve to hear it."

And that rare rage rears its ugly head again. Only with her. Always with her. I twist back around, storm toward her, and shove her up against the classroom door. Before I know it, I've wrapped my hand around her throat. Smashed my lips to hers.

Her small fists beat my chest. I force my tongue in and she bites down on it. Fuck, that feels good.

She rips her mouth away. "Don't you dare. Get off me and finish this conversation!"

I ball my hand into a fist and punch the drywall, leaving a hole. Bits of plaster tumble to the floor.

I fling myself off her and stride halfway across the room. We're in the science lab, three perfect rows of large bolted-down tables with black resin tops.

I clench and unclench my hands as I struggle to get hold of myself. I'm willing to do nearly anything to avoid this conversation. Staring at the periodic table tacked onto the far wall, I focus on each element as I snort through my flared nostrils. Eventually, I focus long and hard enough that my breathing slows down and I have enough control to face her again.

Crina's colored lip gloss is smudged around her entire mouth, looking almost like a bruise from my rapacious kiss.

"Okay, fine, you wanna hear it? I pushed you away because of him."

"Why?" she replies, pressing for more.

"You're a smart girl. You can figure out the why."

"No, I can't figure out the why," she replies in a whine. "I have a theory. Several, in fact. But some are outrageous, so no, I don't know why." She stares at me with desperation, and I can barely stand to look at the anguish in her eyes. "But I want to know."

I mutter a string of curses under my breath. What could she possibly be thinking? I mean, it's obvious, isn't it? But if she needs to hear it so she can push me away, as she should, then I'll tell her.

"Because I fucking killed him, that's why. And if I can kill my own brother, then I sure as fuck can't trust myself around you, now can I?"

She halts, her body tightens. Her lashes flutter. "*What?*"

I shake my head a little, giving her an incredulous look. What is she not understanding? I stated it clearly enough.

"*You* didn't kill your brother. The Bratva killed your brother."

And that gets me laughing. I crack up so hard at the absurdity of her statement that my stomach hurts. Tears gather at the corners of my eyes and I wipe them away, laughing until I've got nothing left to laugh about. The only thing left to do is cry. And I can't do that. I don't deserve to. I lost that right.

"Bratva, shmatva. He was *my* brother. *My* responsibility." I pound my chest. "I haven't found the man who killed him and destroyed every single person he loved. I'm still failing him and inevitably... I'll fail you, too."

"Th-that's ridiculous," she sputters. Crina opens her mouth to say something more and I slash the air with my hand, cutting her off.

"No, don't do that. Don't make excuses. There's one person at fault here." I hold up my index finger. "Only one."

I take a deep breath as panic and fear grip me by the throat. I'm about to throw it all away, throw away the closest thing I've had to happiness, but I don't deserve it anyway. I'd been a fool to think I could avoid my fate.

"That's the reason I pushed you away, and come to think of it, I was right. We can never be together. It was stupid of me to think we ever could."

Having said that, having said the words that needed to be said, I stalk past her and yank the door open.

She catches my arm and begs, "No, Marku, don't. Don't leave like this."

This is a farce, a figment of my imagination, thinking I could have her. But I've gotten the slap of reality that I deserved. Coiling away from her, I twist my head, and march forward like the soldier I am.

I'm doing this for her sake. Not mine. She may not understand it, but one day, she'll be grateful for it.

CHAPTER 7

CRINA



My mouth drops open as Marku storms out of the science lab, the door clanging loudly in his wake.

He can't possibly blame himself for Cristian's death.

Only, he does.

I know that man and that's exactly the kind of twisted rationale he'd believe to his very core. He's always been one to take his responsibilities too seriously. It's sacrilegious to even think it, but that was the one upside to Cristian's death: Marku dropped out of the running for the next Popescu *consilier*.

Rumors have it that Nelu, the current Popescu boss, is planning to retire. With the Popescu and Lupu clans at peace, and his only daughter married off to Luca Lupu, he figures it's his time to step aside. It only follows that he'd hand over the succession to his son, Cristo.

Sure, being *consilier* is one of the most prestigious positions a man can hope for, but it'd be too much for Marku. Despite his lighthearted mask, he's hyper-responsible. He'd never stop working. He's the kind of man to bring his work home with him. He'd never have a family life. None of them do. *Şefs* and *consiliers* live for their clan, end of story.

I slide onto the nearest lab stool, giving up on making it to my next class.

Then there's the fact that Marku is too smart for it. He's not a Lupu so there's no thought to go to college and graduate school, like every man in the Lupu clan is expected to do. But if any Popescu made man should go, it's him.

I plunk my elbows on the black tabletop, prop my chin in my hands, and stare out morosely. As for Marku's rationale for pushing me away, I'm flabbergasted. My guess had been that we were hitting puberty and he wanted to experiment with me but didn't feel he could. Or he wanted to mess around with other girls, so he created distance between us.

Instead, it was because he'd blame himself. My heart lurches, sadness seeping in. Marku was just a kid himself.

I'd heard what had happened.

How Marku and the boys had a rendezvous with a Bratva crew for his initiation when he'd turned thirteen. They were supposed to meet up in some back alley of Koreatown in Flushing, Queens. It was supposed to be an old-school street brawl. Only fists, knives, and nunchucks, that kind of thing. No guns. Because that's how a Popescu gets inducted. You have to kill a man with your bare hands. I grimace at the thought. Barbaric, really.

Cristian was a year younger than Marku and always followed him wherever he went. They'd caught him skulking around them a few times that night and sent him home. From what I pieced together by eavesdropping during the funeral, Cristian ended up in the melee and was slayed by one of the Bratva. Guted like a pig. Bled out on the street. Nothing to be done. No way to save him. The whole thing happened in the blink of an eye.

I stare up at the stupid periodic table at the far wall in front of me. The canary yellow of the elements in the center light up like neon lights, surrounded by the other elements in duller colors.

He blamed himself for his brother's death, and, in his tortured mind, it only followed that he didn't deserve me. As

horrible as he was to me, knowing this changes things...

Behind me, I hear the opening and shutting of doors. Kids are streaming into the hallway. I thump my forehead on the table. Another class missed. That means detention this afternoon. When I know I'll miss something, I use my mother's password to get into the school's system and excuse my absence, but there's no fixing it after-the-fact. I grab my backpack, sling the hefty sack of books over my shoulder, and make my way to my locker before my next class.

I'm almost there when Star steps into my path, one hand on her hip. Inspecting me thoroughly, she gasps. "What in God's name happened to you?"

I turn into my locker to avoid her scrutiny and focus on the combination of my lock while trying to comb my brain for a valid excuse. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

She smoothes her pleated skirt, her dark eyes zoomed in on me, alight with curiosity. "Try me."

I move close enough so that I can whisper. "I messed around with a boy."

Her hand shoots to her mouth. "Oh my God, Crina! That's...that's...you'll get into serious trouble. Like, your mother would go ballistic if you got caught."

I roll my eyes. I love Star, but she's such a good girl. Even with her big brother off to who knows where and the chance to relax the reins, she just can't let go. And while I love her, there's no way I can tell her about either Marku or Alexei Kotov, aka the Sperm Donor.

I waggle my brows at her. "I never get caught. I'm an expert at evading her traps. That's the reason she has to make up shit to punish me."

Star's glittering eyes dim at the mention of my mother, but she won't be easily diverted. Clenching her pleated skirt, she leans closer and whispers, "How was it?"

I shrug a shoulder. "Meh. Sloppy kisser."

“Where? The music rooms in the basement? That’s always the safest bet.” She blushes. “I mean...if I were ever to try.” She rushes on, “Which I’d never do.”

Hmm, not a bad idea. I hadn’t thought about the basement. Either that or the stacks in the library if I’d ever put some thought into it ahead of time.

“But you’ve clearly fantasized about it,” I tease.

She flushes bright red.

I pat her hand and put her out of her misery by saying, “It was in the science lab.”

She lets out a little gasp. “The science lab? That’s crazy. It’s on the first floor, in the middle of the school. Anyone could’ve walked in.”

“But they didn’t. I’m not saying we went all out. No clothes off or anything like that.”

She looks me over critically. “You sure about that? You clearly didn’t have a chance to fix yourself up. It looks like he got his paws all over you.”

Thinking back on Marku this morning, I mutter under my breath, “I wish.”

She gives me a worried, perplexed look. “Well, you better clean yourself up before your next class. You don’t want any questions asked or any calls home. Your mother will immediately know what happened just by one look.” She points to the button of my skirt hanging by its string and leaving a view of my thigh. “You better stop by my house before going home. I can fix that button.”

I squeeze her arm. “Always got my back, Star. One of the many reasons I love you. But I’ve ditched a class, so I’ve got detention. You and Gabby will be riding home without me.”

“Even more reason for you to stop at my house first. With this detention, you don’t want to give her another reason to go crazy.”

“Hey, what happened to you?” Gabby walks toward us, her gaze sweeping up and down my frame.

Suddenly self-conscious, I check my hair and face in the mirror on the inside of my locker door. I quickly grab a makeup wipe and clean the smudges around my lips. I pull the elastic from my messy ponytail and start brushing my hair out until it’s smooth and shiny.

I look down at my outfit to see what else needs to be fixed when I feel a strange sensation at my nape. The hairs stand on their ends. And no wonder. A second later, Marku passes by, his eyes raking me from head to toe. It’s an angry, spiteful look, with plenty of hunger thrown into it. A burning sensation sweeps over my skin, leaving me feeling hot and tingly.

Gabby catches Marku’s look and does a double take. “What was that?”

Star asks, “What was what?”

“Marku. Staring at you like that,” Gabby replies to the question, but directs her answer to me.

Star turns to me, her eyes narrowed slightly in question. Her brows draw together as she starts putting two and two together. Cutting her off before she comes to the obvious conclusion, I blurt out, “He caught us.”

Gabby’s eyes widen. “Caught you doing what?”

“Caught me making out with a boy.”

“Which boy?” she says in a hushed tone.

“A girl never tells.”

Gabby pouts. “Since when?”

I sigh. “Believe me, if it was remarkable, if it hadn’t been such a waste of time, I’d tell you. But this isn’t a guy I’m going to marry. It was nothing more than one kiss, and a bad one at that. If I tell, you’ll never let me hear the end of it and I never want to be reminded of that boring kiss.”

Gabby eyes me suspiciously. “And how many kisses have you had so far.”

I count the number of times I’ve hooked up with Marku, ticking them off in my head. “Six.”

Gabby screeches, “Six?”

“Shush,” says Star, making a hushing motion with her hand.

“I haven’t even had one,” says Gabby angrily. Anton and her brother, Soren, happen to pass by the same moment she says it. Soren swats her jokingly on his way, while Anton looks straight ahead without acknowledging her. She turns a pissed-off look in Anton’s direction, which he doesn’t seem to notice. “Not. One.” Then I think I hear her murmur, “Bastard.”

I roll my eyes. “Believe me, it’s not that hard.” I gesture toward the flow of kids streaming down the hall. “Look at them. Free for the taking.”

Gabby shakes her head as she stares at me in wonder. Sure, for her it seems like an impossibility. Considering her romantic propensities, it’s probably for the best. Plus, she has a brother who would look upon any transgression as a mark on him. Men and their misguided pride. Go figure, but that’s the kind of backward upbringing we’re dealing with. I have only my mother to dupe, and I have no qualms about doing that. Hell, I take pleasure in it.

Thankfully, the bell rings, saving me from Gabby’s interrogation.

The rest of the day is uneventful, the teachers not even noticing my torn blouse or missing skirt button. After school, I slink to the back of the library for detention and plop down in a seat at a blessedly empty table. Of course, I’d forgotten Marku had also missed a class until he saunters into the library. He looks irritated and bored. Then his eyes fall on me and those twin dark orbs light up into black flames of fury.

Considering I won our last showdown, I should be happy that he’s angry. After all, he’s the one who dragged me into the

science lab to find out what happened and ended up none the wiser about the Sperm Donor. Since I now know what Marku's tongue can do, I count that a solid win on my part.

Only it doesn't feel like a win with him glaring down as he stomps past to get to the table at the other side of the library. I'm usually the one mad at him. I can count on one hand the number of times he's lost his temper with me, and the last one tore our friendship apart. He'd suffered more than I had imagined these past four years, and while he might be acting like he's furious with me, he's more pissed at himself than anyone else.

Which makes me sad.

The self-loathing carved on his face was like a knife to my heart. Just because I don't want to be married to him, just because he acts like a domineering asshole, doesn't mean that a part of me doesn't still love him. I mean, I love my mother and she's done far worse. I clench my teeth at any reminder of her or Alexei or of them together.

I shake my head, putting that aside for when I get home.

The point is that love doesn't require reason. Love doesn't need to make sense.

It just is.

Like a tree or a mountain. A mountain doesn't go around justifying itself to anyone. Neither does my love.

And maybe this new revelation can help me let go of the feeling of betrayal, of him letting those boys attack me. Maybe we can regain the friendship that we'd lost that day.

Maybe.

But that doesn't mean I want him to find out about what happened this morning. Honestly, I barely want to think about it, much less acknowledge it to anyone. It's embarrassing. No, it's more than that. It's shameful.

Once the students have settled in, the librarian calls out the roster of names. I glance over the wide expanse of glossy-

topped mahogany library tables at Marku. Towering behind him, like a throne, are stacks of books set against a couple of tall, arched windows. The metal muntins divide the windows into a grid-like pattern. Gives the feel of what prisons were like back in the day. This building was formerly a New York City mansion and, despite the millions poured into modernizing it, details of its original life remain. And I can only imagine that it was the home of a wealthy recluse who wanted to lock the rest of the world out.

Marku glares back at me, his mouth set in stern disapproval. His gaze drops to the tear in my blouse and then back up, a menacing promise in his eyes. *Oh shit.* He's remembered. I snap my head back to the front of the library. Okay, I need a plan to get out of here before he nabs me because if he gets to me first, I don't know what he'll do...

CHAPTER 8

MARKU



*G*oddammit to hell, I'd forgotten that I hadn't gotten the information I'd wanted earlier until I saw her in detention.

My blood boils at the thought of my neglect. She's a menace to herself and society, and as fucked-up as I might be, I'll be damned if I let her get away from me again.

I bide my time, grinding my teeth and clenching and unclenching my fists underneath the library table. The *tick-tock* of the second hand on the library's grandfather clock matches the relentless tempo of my beating heart. But a wait like this is nothing for me. I've spent many an hour lying in bed listening to the beat of my heart and hating every second of it. Fantasizing of all the different ways I could make it stop. All the ways to do away with this useless life I was left with after I failed him.

Tick-tock.

The only reasons I didn't kill myself were my mother and Crina. My mother, because I knew she'd never survive the death of both her sons. Crina, because I wasn't sure she'd survive to adulthood without my surveillance. I had to watch over her and make sure she didn't do anything truly stupid, like put her life in jeopardy.

Tick-tock.

And then there was Cristian. Don't know if my mind's playing tricks on me, but my brother comes to me in my

dreams on the regular. He's made it clear that he would not be happy to have me join him anytime soon. He was furious I'd abandoned the race for *consilier*. I don't know what's worse, the night terrors about his killer or when he drops in to berate me.

Tick-tock.

I let the soft stroke of every second sweep through me as the hands smoothly brush across the clockface. Beneath the calm surface, I'm tense, ready to pounce on Crina the instant this dumbass detention is done, but it's an elated, heightened tension.

The last stroke of the minute hand crosses the finish line. *Dong, dong, dong, dong, dong.* Five o'clock. Students pick up their belongings before the librarian has officially ended detention. A flustered Ms. Albu shakes her attention off the book she's reading, stands up, and calls an end to our collective suffering.

Crina races for the exit, but I'm up and out of my seat. She glances over her shoulder at me as she charges straight into a table near the entrance, toppling a wobbly rack of paperbacks.

"Crina Lupu," calls out Ms. Albu.

She halts in her tracks, turns around slowly, and looks up at Ms. Albu, who beckons her with the crook of her finger. "Now, you weren't about to walk out after turning over my display of Penguin Classics, were you?"

Looking at Crina's slumped shoulders as she walks back toward Ms. Albu, I stifle a laugh. Ms. Albu gently rebukes her for a moment, and they return together and fix the fallen display until the librarian is satisfied. Then Ms. Albu gives Crina a hug. She catches me waiting just inside the door, and asks, "What is it, Marku?"

At the sound of my name, Crina stiffens in her arms and Ms. Albu glances at her in concern. "Is anything wrong?"

"No, no," replies Crina, giving me a vicious side-eye glare.

I grin over at her. “I’m just here to make sure she gets home okay.”

“Oh, that’s nice of you,” Ms. Albu replies, releasing Crina with a pat on the back.

Crina shuffles quickly toward the exit, passing me without a word. As the library door shuts, she grumbles, “Why does she have to be so nice? Seriously, if it was any other teacher, I would’ve run out that door. But with her, she...she *kills* people with niceness.”

I let out a laugh. “Chuckie...”

“What? It’s true! That’s why they have detention in the library because they know we can’t hate someone like her. It’s so annoying.”

Crina pounds the elevator button a few times, and that snaps me back into reality.

I take her elbow. “Hey, wait a minute ...”

She takes one look at my face and starts shaking her head. “No, no, we finished whatever we had to say this morning.”

“We sure as hell didn’t.”

“I don’t want to rehash any of that.”

“Ha, funny. You damn well know we didn’t get to the bottom of it.”

The elevator dings. The door opens. I tighten my hold on her elbow and drag her away.

“My mother needs me home,” she whines.

“I’ll get you home as soon as we’re done,” I promise, pulling her back into the library through the side door. We enter near the back of the spacious room. Ms. Albu is busy at her desk in the front. Placing my finger to my mouth in warning, I prod her to the farthest stacks of books.

At first, I was going to take her into one of the study rooms, but Ms. Albu will likely check them before she leaves

and I don't want to be interrupted, so I urge her past the row of soundproof rooms toward the very back of the library.

She hisses in a low tone, "You can't keep manhandling me like this, ya know."

"And you can't keep getting away with shit."

She stops hard, making me bump into her. Letting out a huff, I check our surroundings. We're deep in the stacks, safe from detection by Ms. Albu. I hang back and let Crina take her little stand.

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"It means you got yourself in trouble and you're trying to get away with it, as usual. But I'm not your mama. She's no dummy, but I'm a helluva lot smarter." I pause. "And I know all your tricks."

Crina releases a little growl.

Cute.

"I don't recall making you my keeper."

I lean in close so she can see how dead serious I am. "You don't have any say in that. I've had the job my entire life, these past four years included. It's been authorized by our clans and, oh, there's that little matter of a marriage certificate between us."

"Earlier, you said we were done."

I pull back, incredulous. "You think that's going to stop me from finding out what happened?"

"Listen, you sanctimonious asshole, I relieve you of that duty right now. I can take care of myself, thank you very much."

I almost laugh in her face. Relieve me of that duty? What, is she kidding? If our fight four years ago hadn't relieved me of it, did she think she could? I open my mouth to respond when she holds up a finger and says, "And so help me God,

don't you dare make a comment about me being a woman and not being able to take care of myself.”

I snort. “That never occurred to me. We've already established in the science lab that you're an impulsive hot mess. So no, it's not because you're a woman that I don't trust you to take care of yourself. If anything, you're the strongest woman I know. It has everything to do with you being *you*.” I wave my hand up and down her front. “And if I needed any proof, here it is. Just look at you.”

“How dare you,” she sputters, but I talk over her because I'm not done. “Something happened between the time you left me this morning and the time you showed up in class. I don't yet know what it is, but I'm going to get to the bottom of it. Fight me all you want.”

She draws herself up to her full height, slamming her fists onto her hips. Pushing her shoulders back, chest out, she challenges me, “Oh, I'm going to fight you all right. You better be ready to get your eyes scratched out.”

A low rumble erupts from the depths of my chest. I'm trying to hold on to my temper, but this is too much. We're in the same exact situation we were this morning. I spent the day brooding about Cristian, about the fact that I still haven't avenged his death, but I'll be damned if I get duped again.

If this is how she wants it, then so be it. She can't say I didn't warn her...

I charge up to her, forcing her back. Her spine hits a wall of books. I grab her shoulders and spin her around, pressing her tight against the shelves. She gasps and squirms, but I don't move an inch, don't give her any more space than necessary.

“I can't breathe.”

“Yes, you can,” I reply. “So what's it going to be? Are you going to tell me what happened or are you fighting?”

Through clenched teeth, she spits, “Fighting.”

I nuzzle her auburn curls. “Wrong answer, Chuckie.”

Sliding her hair to the side, I grasp the back of her neck. I yank her shirt to the side and sink my teeth into the soft flesh of her shoulder.

“Ow, goddammit, owww.”

That was a warning bite and nothing else. A few notches of pain, nothing serious. It’s not like we haven’t done worse. Anyway, we both know she likes a prick of pain to her pleasure. A nip to let her know I’m not playing.

I glance down at the teeth marks, marks of my ownership. Fuck, that’s precious. Crina wriggles and writhes to get out from under me, snapping out of my reverie. I raise her skirt and give her a swat to the ass.

She twists her head back, her eyes flashing with defiance.

Clearly that wasn’t enough. I drag her panties down and give her another solid smack, this time to her bare ass. She must feel that one because she intensifies her struggle.

I’m not here to fuck around, I’m here to get information, but just out of curiosity, I slip my hand between her thighs and check. Soft, wet warmth greets me. Oh, yeah. I may not have come looking for it, but you bet your bottom dollar I love discovering it.

The beast inside me stirs—the one I didn’t want wakened. Now I remember why I shouldn’t have touched her. I have no choice but to switch tactics. Don’t worry, though, I’ll use it to my advantage. I may not have had the opportunity this morning, but I sure as hell do now.

I press two fingers inside her sweet cunt, but not too far. I let them hover just past her entrance, not teasing her clit, not pushing in to give her anything substantial—just teasing.

She presses her ass back, trying to take my fingers deeper.

“Nah-ah,” I warn, pulling out a fraction so my fingers are back in at the same mockingly shallow depth.

“Fuck you.”

I push my fingers in and spread them apart to give her pussy a little tension, a little more taste of what it's missing. I hear a sharp intake of breath. “So what's it gonna be? Are you going to talk?”

I pull my fingers out almost completely, biting my lip when I hear a squinching sound. She's so wet. Fighting is part of our seduction, always has been. Maybe it's because we only started messing around after we became enemies. Pulling myself together, I finish in her ear, “Or not.”

She turns her head again and gazes at me over her shoulders. The full-on defiance is gone, replaced by a range of conflicted emotions. “Marku, come on. Don't be such a clit-tease. Put them back.”

I smother a moan. My woman, almost begging for me to satisfy her. My head is bent and our faces are so close that we're sharing the same hot, sultry air. She exhales and I promptly take in her sweet breath. I exhale, and she breathes me in. Energy zaps between us.

I wanna break. I wanna thrust my fingers into her hot cunt or, better yet, drop to my knees and eat her out again. But this time, I'd come in from behind. I'd throw up her school skirt, spread the cheeks of her round ass, and display her soaking pussy. I might smack her ass cheek once or twice, just to see it bounce back on the flat of my hand. Then I'd slide my tongue right inside and feast on her sweet nectar. I'd dart in and out between her pink slit—

But no.

“Tell me what I want to know and I'll put *your* fingers in. I know you rub that needy little clit, but have you put your fingers inside, Chuckie?” She shakes her head. I tap her clit. “Put your fingertips here. I'll guide you and we'll make you come together.” Her mouth drops open, panting. Her eyelids sink in anticipation. “Just as soon as you promise to tell me everything.”

She snaps back to attention, but I continue playing with her clit. She huffs and puffs as she goes through her internal push and pull. At last, she says, “Fine, you pushy bastard. I promise.”

My chest explodes with victory. I want to crow and shout at the top of my lungs because it’s rare that I get the best of Crina. Honestly, I can’t remember the last time it happened.

My voice husky, I say, “Good girl.”

I take her hand, place her fingers on her clit, and then slide them down farther, taking the place of mine. Her eyes lose focus. I’m desperate to drop to the floor and get a front-row seat to her touching herself, but I don’t dare break the mood. I cover her hand and press her fingers firmly inside.

Fuck me, she’s drenching both our hands. I push our fingers in deeper and she lets out a long moan. Making sure she’s taking care of her clit with the heel of her palm, I fuck her slick heat with our combined fingers. I smell her arousal, mixed with the faint scent of orange peels and cloves. My body is going up in flames. I’m pinned to her back. Cock hard as a pike, I unzip my trousers and place my shaft between her ass cheeks.

“W-what are you doing?”

“I need to feel you, baby.”

At that very moment, the lights go off.

I hear the far away sound of the library door clanging closed. I might even hear the click of a lock. There’s almost no light in the dark recess of the stacks, but I don’t need light. I just need to follow her loud panting and the wet smacking sounds of our fingers co-fucking her cunt.

Making her feel good is my only mission right now.

“Who do you belong to?”

“You,” she breathes out.

My fingers, along with hers, slip and slide between her folds. “Are you my good girl?”

“Yes.”

“Good girls come for their man. You’re going to come for me, you hear?”

“Yes,” she mewls as she rocks harder into our fingers, pushing back and forth around my cock. Precome spurts out, slicking me up even more.

“More,” I demand. “You give me what I want. *Now.*”

And that last command does it. Her thighs clamp around our hands, her pussy sucking my fingers in deeper. I snake my other hand in front, pinch her clit, and she throws her head back against my chest, shrieking up into the ceiling. My baby’s a loud one and thankfully the library is empty. She works my fingers until they’re sopping wet.

I clamp my teeth where her shoulder meets her neck to stop myself from coming. She shudders into the bite. I force my entire body to stiffen and hold it in, hold it in. There’s no way I’m driving home with come in my pants, but it’s a close thing. The second her aftershocks finish rippling through her frame, I pull out my fingers and suck every last drop of her. I quickly step away and force my hard, purpling cock back into my pants.

Taking advantage of her weakened condition, I twirl her around, wrap my hand around her throat, and demand, “Speak.”

CHAPTER 9

MARKU



In a daze, she mumbles, “The sperm donor kidnapped me.”

“The what? *What?*”

Did the orgasm go to her head like a drug? Can that happen?

Crina’s eyes regain focus and bore into me with a glint of anger. She closes her eyes and repeats, slowly, like I’m the stupid one, “I said, the sperm donor kidnapped me.” She snaps her eyes open again. “You wanted to know what happened, so I’m telling you. Sperm donor. Kidnap. Returned me to the subway after a ride around the block.”

My clasp around her throat tightens in frustration and I have to actively loosen my grip.

Christ, I forgot how she can talk in riddles.

“I understood the *words*, Crina. I just don’t understand what they mean. What sperm donor? Whoever this sperm donor is, I’m going to tear his head off for touching you. And how did he touch you exactly, because if he *touched* touched you, I’m going to kill his entire family and everyone he loves.”

Alarm flashes across her face. Her hand grasps my hand around her throat. “You can’t. You *cannot* hurt him. If you try and he figures out it’s you, he’ll murder you in cold blood. I told him we were married. I’m sure he already hates you for

foiling his plan. Don't give him a reason to kill you because he'll take it in a heartbeat."

Again, what the hell is she talking about? Trying to follow her is giving me whiplash. But hold up—did she say married? "You told him. You told a total stranger you were married? What the fuck, Crina?" My voice is a harsh shout by the end. She won't even tell Star and Gabby, but she told this random fuckhole. "Who is he? Tell me who he is."

She flounces her hands in exasperation. "Alexei Kotov, that's who he is!"

My eyes bulge and I feel the distinct pounding of a headache coming at me like a runaway train. In as controlled a tone as I can muster up, I warily recap, "The Bratva boss kidnapped you on a Monday morning."

"Yes, and he's not just the Bratva boss. He's my piece-of-shit, sperm donor of a father."

Seething, she drops her hand from mine and makes a gesture as if she's strangling someone. "I could kill her for this. I swear I have no idea how she got caught up with that loser all those years ago, but once she got pregnant, she knew how dangerous he was and tried to hide me from him. But he figured it out. Somehow, the rat bastard found me, got his thugs to grab me off the street, and tossed me into his car for a *chat*."

The more she divulges, the more my temples throb. A rushing sound floods my eardrums. He grabbed her off the street. In our 'hood? In Sunnyside, Queens, aka Little Bucharest, where there Romanian *mafie* made men are crawling the streets? That's like me, Lucian, and Anton riding down to Brighton Beach and blatantly abducting a girl right off the street. I mean, that's insane. That's a level of bold I don't have words for. Bold or...desperate.

"What did he want with you?"

"Marriage."

I slap my hand on the wooden bookshelf above her head and grip it hard. Icy fury fills my chest. “Come again? And explain it in detail, Crina, before I lose my temper.”

“He wanted to use me like a pawn in this imminent war between the Romanian and Russian mafia. To force me to marry some Russian prick, no doubt. So I told him I was yours. I threw it in his face, watched him choke on his worthless plan, and ordered him to let me go.”

A flood of pure, unadulterated satisfaction rips through me. It’s so forceful, so all-consuming, its aftershocks linger long afterwards. Fuck yes, she did. Crina told that fucker that she was mine. *Mine*. And then she managed to trick him into letting her go. It’s a miracle. She’s a miracle.

She keeps going with a haughty lift of her chin, “I told him he was a day too late. That we got married yesterday. And before his beady little eyes could light up with mischief, I told him I was no longer a virgin. I told him you made sure of that so he was good and truly fucked. Then I demanded he let me go. He may *claim* to be my father, but in front of God and everyone, you’ve already claimed me as your wife.”

I grip her throat and bring her lips to mine. Slowly, reverently, my lips brush hers. It’s her reward for confiding in me, but more importantly, for her cleverness. “Good girl.”

There’s just one chink in my clan’s plan, in our mothers’ plan, in my plan and I know what I need to do to seal it. “You were such a good girl, such a clever girl, but we’ve got to get rid of that pesky cherry, don’t we?”

Going completely still, she absently licks her top and then her pouty bottom lip. Her eyes glaze over again as she scrapes her lower lip repeatedly. “Huh?”

“Married or not, you always knew I’d be your first. Might not be the setting you planned on, but this is happening. Here and now. I gently release her, pull out the white kerchief in the pocket of my school jacket, and wave it in front of her face. And this is going to catch the proof we need. I’ll send it to him

personally.” Fear tightens her features. “No one else needs to know,” I assure her. “Not your mother. Not your friends. But he must.”

She snatches at the handkerchief, but I quickly lift it out of her reach and sprint away from her.

Crina runs after me. “No! I don’t want you near that madman. I already told him that I’m not a virgin. There’s no reason to prove it to him.”

My chest burns with the necessity to flaunt that she’s mine to that Russian maniac. Her mother sure as hell couldn’t protect her. Only I can.

She grabs for my shirt, but I feint left and then right. She lets out a little scream of frustration as she runs after me.

“You’ll only mock him,” she insists, “goading him to come after you. How do we know he isn’t plotting to kill you at this very moment?”

I chuckle at her fears. “No one’s going to kill me.” I pause and answer soberly, “But let him try. I’ll gut him like the Bratva pig he is.”

“No, you won’t,” she replies in an agitated tone as she rushes up to me. “You won’t gut him.” She lunges and snatches the handkerchief from my hand. “You won’t bring him anything. You won’t even breathe in his direction. You won’t do anything. Do you hear me?”

God, I love her bossiness. *Mafie* men are always going on about the sweet, soft-hearted girls they want to marry. But me? I like them just like Crina, boss bitch all the way. She’s a challenge and challenges get my blood going.

I step toward her, making her back up until her butt hits the edge of a table. We’re so close our chests are touching. Expression hard, I make my own demand. “On one condition. I take your virginity now. We take care of it and I promise that I won’t flaunt it,” I pinch the handkerchief back from her and shake it. “That’s the deal.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Ugh, why do you have to be such a pain?” She presses her hand on my chest and tries to push me back, but I don’t budge an inch. “There’s nowhere to...to do this. The carpet is,” she glances down, “eww. And the tables? What, are we going to f-fuck on the table?”

Are those nerves I hear?

I grab her hips and sit her on the mahogany table. “Are you doubting my skills, Chuckie? ’Cause I’ll have you creaming on my cock wherever we do it.”

She shoves me harder. “For God’s sake, Marku, you’re so crude.”

We’re talking quietly enough but we must have made enough noise to earn someone’s attention because the door to the library suddenly swings open and the overhead lights click on.

I yank Crina’s hand and drag her down to the ground. Three rows of tables and chairs cover us. Through the latticework of table and chair legs, I see a black trousers and a pair of solid, brown shoes with little scuffs on the tops.

Security guard.

We’re no longer tucked away safely in the stacks but exposed in the central area of the library. If he makes a sweep of the room, we’re royally screwed. Crouching down as low as she can, Crina glances at me, eyes wide with fear. Worse than the gossip that will blaze through the school about getting caught in the library together, her mother will go ballistic. Sure, we’re married, but no one knows that. She’ll put Crina on lockdown from now to kingdom come.

The guard makes his way down one end of the library, peering between the bookshelves to our left. He comes back out—I’m tracking his movements from between the table legs and chairs—and searches another row of books. I consider moving, but the library is dead silent. It’s too risky. I briefly consider killing him but dismiss the idea. A man’s life for doing his job seems a tad extreme.

I squeeze Crina's hand to reassure her that I will handle this as the guard comes out of the second aisle of books. The next aisle is where we left our backpacks. Once he finds those, it's game over. I slow down my breathing, focusing on the draw out inhales and exhales as I brace myself for the worst. And just as his shoes pivot toward the next aisle, his two-way radio at his hip crackles.

He pauses and grabs the radio. "Yeah, boss?" There's crackling speech I can't make out and then he responds, "I'm in the library. Thought I heard voices." Another flurry of crackling nonsense, but I did catch something about the basement. "Yeah, okay. Be right there."

My shoulders droop in relief as he ambles toward the library entrance, turns the lights off, and locks the door behind him. We remain frozen in place until the automatic hallway lights click off, signaling that there's no one on the floor.

I let out a sigh, but the instant we're plunged back into the welcome darkness, Crina hisses, "No way we're having sex here. No. Way."

Yeah, our location has been compromised. Between her nerves and the possibility that the guard could return to check on his hunch, she's right.

I stand and stretch out my hand. "Come on, baby, let's get our backpacks and go home."

As I push the bar of the side exit, I murmur near the curve of her ear, "You've gotten away tonight, but don't think I'm going to wait much longer."

Despite my worry over the fact that she's not fully mine, I'd much rather fuck her under the night stars on the roof than in the library any day.

CHAPTER 10

CRINA



*M*y mother grabs a snow globe from my bookcase, the one I got in Aspen on a ski vacation I took with Marku and his family. If I recall correctly, I couldn't have been more than eight years old. That's at least how long I've been collecting them.

I grind down on my molars. Is she trying to test me? She may not know what happened this morning, but she's testing my patience like never before. The snow globe in her hand happens to be one of my favorites from the collection on my shelves. It's the only snow globe I have that's all trees. No snowmen. No buildings. No silly miniature humans. Just trees.

Maybe my love for snow globes came from the simple beauty of them, just like one's love for fairy-tale happily ever afters. So different from my childhood, where I'd learned that you were loved for what you could do, not for who you were.

Unconditional love wasn't a thing for my mother. How that came about, I have no idea. My father loves her beyond reason. Natalia loves her like a sister. No, more than a sister. Sisters argue and fight, or so I've heard, but they've never exchanged so much as a cross word. Despite the people devoted to her, she taught me early on that her love was dependent on what I did.

Perfect adherence to social rules was paramount. That was one of the reasons the spectacle with Marku in the soccer team locker room had been so damaging. Marku was one of the

only people who'd loved me without reservation, but when I'd unwittingly crossed a social boundary and been rejected publicly for it, something broke inside me. Not only was it a shock, but I'd felt doubly betrayed because he'd done exactly what Mama had always done.

Maybe another girl could have gotten over it. But me? Me, I held and nursed the grudge of the century.

Mama leans against the bookshelf, peering over my shoulder as she handles the snow globe, leaving her prints all over the glass. "Not poetry again."

I tense my shoulders and squeeze my eyes to keep from responding. My eyes flash open and I focus on the wall, seeking to shut her out. Her and her grating voice. The wall is decorated with posters of poems and a bulletin board covered with postcards of brilliant poets.

Yes, it's poetry. It's been poetry for years and you damn well know it.

If only she knew that I'd applied to as many writing programs as I could in colleges around the city, even if my heart is holding out for Cooper Union. A lead weight settles in my chest.

Thanks for reminding me about the acceptance letter I'm waiting on.

Between sneaking into the house, past her watchful eye after Marku drove me straight to my front door, and the fact that my nerves are flying high after this morning, I can't risk opening my mouth.

I'm still processing. How am I supposed to do that properly with her barging into my private space and asking me asinine questions? More importantly, how do I deal with discovering that my perfectionist mother has the largest stain on her pristine reputation that any mother can have? And what about her conscience? Or the fact that she had chosen the worst kind of man to have an affair with. He's not just scary.

He's scary with an edge of cruelty that hovers right below the surface. It will take years of therapy to get over this.

"So much writing, and for what? You're married now. You'll have children soon."

My fingers fist my favorite marron Mont Blanc fountain pen. She does this to goad me into losing my temper and revealing my feelings. I cannot engage.

Do not engage!

"At least when you were playing soccer, you were staying fit. But what does this give you?"

"Mama!" I swallow my scream and lower my tone. "Mama, is there something you need?"

I glance up at her. She has a perplexed expression as she stares over my shoulder at my desk. There's my poetry journal, my array of fountain pens, and a bunch of tissues stained with ink. There are ink stains on the white desk, but I don't care anything about that.

"I'm doing my homework for English," I lie as I smack my hand over the open page of verses I was working on.

"Ahh," she replies as she grabs a bunch of old candy wrappers that have been languishing on my desk. Picking up a dirty plate, she makes a tsking sound. "You cannot be so messy, Crina. You'll be living with your husband, starting your own household, having babies."

I shudder at the succession of crazy talk coming out of her mouth.

She throws the wrappers into the wicker basket, overflowing with crumpled papers. "It's bad enough that Marku is messy, but you're a girl and you're my daughter. I'm so clean and tidy. You grew up in an organized household."

Well, actually, I spent half my childhood over in Marku's disorganized house, but I don't bother correcting her.

“A woman has to be perfect. One mistake and everything goes kaput,” she snaps her finger. Gesturing to my unmade bed and the piles of dirty clothes on the floor, she gives me a pointed look as if I’m the prime example of what happens when a girl has gone bad. “How did it get like this?”

I thought I had a good handle on my temper but that last unfortunate comment about perfection tips me over.

I whirl around on my swivel seat and jeer, “Oh, a woman’s supposed to be perfect, is she? And you think you’ve held yourself to that high standard?”

She blinks a few times, taken aback by the blatant revulsion in my tone, and answers slowly, “I try to, yes. In everything I do.”

“Everything?” I flick a finger at my unmade bed. “Or just the menial things, like beds and linens. The arrangement of the dishes in the kitchen cabinets. The setting of the dining room table.” I wave my hand around carelessly. “You know... the unimportant things.”

Narrowing my eyes accusingly on one specific pile of clothing, my wedding dress and veil, I continue, “Because those things aren’t that important, but loyalty, now loyalty is the most important thing a *mafie* woman should possess. Loyalty to the ones she loves.”

Following my glare, she notices the dress and lets out a horrified gasp. She swoops it up and swats at the dark patches of dirt from when I kneeled to suck off Marku in church.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with you,” she clucks as she carefully shakes out the dress and folds it over her arm. “What were you doing to get it so dirty...”

If she only knew...

I look at the ceiling, praying for patience. Nothing good can come from bringing it up now, especially with the way I’m feeling.

“This is not the way to treat your wedding dress.” She leans down to pick up the tulle edged in delicate lace. After tossing it on the floor, I’ve stepped on it at least a dozen times over the past twenty-four hours. “Or your wedding veil.”

“You can burn it for all I care,” I mumble under my breath.

“Crina!”

“Oh my God, Mama.” I rush to my feet so quickly that the chair falls back, hitting the wooden floor. “You’re the worst kind of hypocrite, you know that? I don’t care about beds or dresses or wedding veils. What about wedding *vows*? Those are what really matter.”

She pauses in her fussing and scrutinizes my face. My emotions are right at the surface, clearly displayed on my face, and I do nothing to hide them. Carefully, she replies, “Yes, wedding vows are one of the most important things in a woman’s life. I hope you stay true to yours.”

“And have you stayed true to yours?” I snap.

There. I’ve said it. I’ve asked the burning question. Or rather one of the burning questions.

Mama stills, her eyes widen. She drops to the edge of my bed. “Why do you ask such a crazy question?”

“Why don’t you answer?” I shoot back, my heart breaking at the thought of her answer.

But instead of going for the truth, she presses her lips together, and doubles down. “I don’t believe my marriage is at question here.”

She’s stalling, her mind racing to work out what I may or may not know.

I know everything, Mama.

“Before you start giving me advice about my marriage, I’d make sure you’ve been the perfect wife you claim to be.”

She shrugs her shoulders in that annoying way she has of dismissing something important as trivial. “What is perfect?”

Fury rumbles through me. “Oh, wow. You were just lecturing me on being the perfect wife and now you’re asking the hypothetical question of what’s a perfect wife?” I throw up my hands. “The double standard is just too much. Too much.”

She leans forward, her face hard. “What are you saying, Crina? Are you questioning whether I love your father? Whether I’ve been faithful to him?”

“Those are two very different questions. I know the answer to one, but not the other.”

Her tone turns brittle. “And you think you are owed the answer to both. You think you deserve that answer. That it’s any of your business?”

She’s scarily calm, I’ll give her that. Usually, she spirals down into anger. But not now. “Yes, I do believe it’s my fucking business.” Considering it has to do with the makeup of my genetics, yeah, I’d say so.

She purses her lips in a firm line of disapproval at my use of a swear word. “I am not your friend. Do not think you can speak to me in whatever way you want. I am your mother and you will address me with respect. As for my marriage, it does not concern you. I love your father and your father loves me. We have been loyal to each other for the twenty-five years that we’ve been together.”

Note to self: She used the word loyal, not *faithful*.

Again, I don’t doubt they love each other, but what about her affair with the Russian? Doesn’t she feel guilty for cheating on Dan? Doesn’t she feel any responsibility to tell me who my biological father is? I mean, this is unbelievable.

Is shame holding her back? Yes, I already know the answer to that. But she’s got to own up to her mistakes. And let me know who fathered me, for Pete’s sake.

“You know, a father is a man who raises a child from *birth*. That is a real man. A man who shows up for his family and for his responsibilities, no matter what. I chose the father for you. It’s the man I married and the great love of my life. The man I

know, with every cell in my being, who loves you completely for who you are.” She rises, her spine straight, her chin up. “And do you know who that man is?”

I swallow and then whisper, “Who?”

“Dan Lupu, that’s who. He is your father. He will always be your father. There is no other father but *him*. He is the man who will love you and protect you till his dying breath.”

She leans over to me and murmurs hoarsely, “As you know, he may not always be with us. Instead of digging into the past, I suggest you appreciate every moment you have with him, and that you honor and protect him in turn.”

With that, she sweeps out of my room like a regal queen who’s been insulted by her lowliest servant, slamming the door behind her.

Stunned, I stare at the door as it shudders in its frame.

What the hell happened?

Just as she intended, I came out of that confrontation as ignorant as ever. And feeling deeply ashamed. Mama refused to admit to anything, which is typical. She wasn’t going to enlighten me about anything. Again, typical.

She did confirm one thing, unknowingly or not. She used the word loyalty, not faithful, which is as close as she got to admitting that she cheated on Dan. She emphasized that she chose him as my father, stressing birth, not conception. This gives me no great hope that he’s my biological father. But then again, I more than suspected that after this morning.

I right my chair and plunk down on it. I blow out a long breath.

The other thing she did was shut me down completely. She flipped the switch and made it about Tata. Talking about his illness, about how I should appreciate every moment I have with him, about how he won’t live forever.

I sit up straight as I read between the lines of that statement. Is he *dying*?

I fall back into the chair. God, no. I can't believe that, I can't. I need him. He's my father, not that low-life sperm donor. And knowing how badly I love him, how much I worry about his health, she reminded me of my duty to protect him.

Protect him from what?

From the truth, of course.

Her message was simple.

Shut your mouth, Crina.

For your father's sake.

And it worked, damn her. Because he is my true father, and I will do anything to honor and protect him.

Including burying the truth.

CHAPTER 11

MARKU



What in the ever-loving God am I looking at?

I stare straight ahead for one long moment, then glance at Lucian beside me and see the same look of shock and horror on his face.

“What the fuck is happening?” he mutters out loud, mirroring my own thoughts. Although mine are much darker and more violent than his because it’s not his *wife* flittering about on the street like she isn’t breaking a cardinal rule: Females do not wander around the city by themselves.

Lucian and I were going about our business picking up payments from the people we protect along St. Marks Street and the Bowery, in the East Village. We walk out of Mamoud’s Falafel when who do we come across but Crina and Star traipsing down the street without a care in the world.

I know exactly who was behind this little expedition, and it sure as hell wasn’t Star. She’s too much of a good girl to come up with something like this. No, this was Crina all the way.

Unbelievable.

After what happened to her yesterday, she had the recklessness to convince or manipulate Star to come along on this rebellious escapade. Impotent rage erupts across my chest like a prickly rash. If she refuses to take care of herself, well, then I’m going to have to take things in hand.

Lucian is about to step off the curb and cross the street when I grab his arm and pull him back. The girls stop in front of the entrance of this huge building across the street. I don't remember the name of it, but it's a college of some sort.

Star and Crina turn to face each other. They converse intensely, standing stock still and paying no attention to the abrupt flood of students pouring out the front doors and around them.

“What the fuck are they doing?”

I shake my head, holding Lucian back as I watch them intently. “I have no idea...”

But something's happening. Crina's face turns pale and drawn as she listens to Star. Star talks rapidly, gesturing with her hands. Then, Crina drops her gaze to the pavement, looking dejected.

I glance up at the building. It's old, from the 1800's or earlier. The ornate brownstone building takes up the entire block with heavy, round arched windows and other fancy decorations.

I turn my attention back to Crina. And then it hits me. Crina's keeping a secret and it has to do with this school.

I should've expected as much from her, but I'm hard pressed to imagine what it can be and what it has to do with this place.

“But I'll get to the bottom of it,” I mutter to myself when Star happens to look across the street and notice us, her eyes blowing out with fear.

Damn straight she should be scared.

She says something hurriedly as she flutters her hands and Crina's head snaps in our direction. Crina replies to Star, turns fully in my direction, and hunches her shoulders forward as if preparing for battle. Flicking her thick auburn hair over her shoulder, her voice is hard when she yells, “Are you following us?”

Another surge of fury sweeps over me.

“What the fuck are you two doing here?” I shout over the Fourth Avenue traffic.

“None of your business, you imbecile!”

Oh, I’m going to paddle her ass. I almost say as much, but why bother warning her ahead of time. As much as I love a good hunt, I’m not about to run after her in this traffic-heavy area. Knowing her luck, she’d run off and get hit by a car. Instead, I step into the street. A taxi blazes past me with a long blare of its horn. Cursing, I wait for a break in the stream of fast-moving vehicles. At the first lull in traffic, I sprint across the street.

“Like hell it isn’t.” I stalk up to Crina. “Does your mother know you’re here? ’Cause I bet you lied to her. No way she’d be down with this.”

“Fuck. You,” she screams, shoving her face in mine. “Don’t you dare bring up my mother.”

“Oh boy,” Star mumbles beside her as Lucian strides up to her.

Oh boy is right.

Lucian has had a hard-on for that girl since I can remember. She’s his tutor now, of all things, but if she thinks she’s going to get away with this because she’s not a Popescu, she’s about to get a surprise. Popescu or not, Lucian is mad enough to get his hands dirty with her. If only to teach her a lesson.

“I’ll bring up your mother any time I want,” I snap. Spreading my arms wide, I ask, “Why are you here? You’re nowhere near school or home. What could you possibly want in this area? It’s dangerous, and after what happened yesterday, I expected better from you. Seriously, do you have any sense?”

“Listen, you prick, I don’t need your permission to walk around this or any other neighborhood.”

Blowing out a long exhale, I try to regain my composure and ask calmly, “What are you doing here, Crina?”

She stubbornly edges her chin up and sniffs. “We were going for a cappuccino.”

Another wave of anger crashes into me at her bold lie. “For Christ’s sake, don’t play me for a fool. You didn’t have to come to this neighborhood for a cappuccino. You can get one at Adrian’s Bakery or any Starbucks in our neighborhood. Where it’s safe.”

Crina crosses her arms over her chest. “We could have but we didn’t want to. We wanted to drink one here. It’s not a crime.”

She turns her nose up at me.

Dear God, she’s begging for my hand on her ass. Repeatedly. And this would be nothing gentle to arouse her. No, I would make sure this was a punishment.

“I bet you did, and knowing you, you spearheaded this whole thing,”

Her eyes slit in anger. “It wasn’t me. It was Star.”

“Yeah, right. I wasn’t born yesterday, Crina. You can try that on someone else but I know you and this is just the kind of scheme you’d come up with.”

I yank her to me, a little rougher than I’d planned. She bumps into my chest.

“Get the hell off me.”

“I will. The moment you start acting like a sensible adult.”

She starts beating my chest with her fists, which only makes me hold onto her tighter.

“Let me go. Let me go!”

“I’ll let you go if you calm down and stop acting like an impulsive child.”

She's in a real tizzy now. "Go to hell, Marku. I'm so sick of you."

"Calm down," I roar, but of course, that only makes her struggle harder. This isn't the time or the place to give her free rein to lash out at me till she's exhausted herself, yet I'm too wound up to handle her the way she needs. I usually control myself better, but the shock of seeing my wife in the middle of this grungy neighborhood has taken me aback.

"What are you even doing here? You followed me, didn't you? God, you're unbelievable."

"Of course I didn't follow you. I'm working. Lucian and I were taking care of business down here when, lo and behold, I catch you roaming around the city."

Studying me carefully, she must believe me because she settles down a little. I clasp her closer and demand in return, "What are you doing here, and don't give me that song and dance about getting a cappuccino. I'm not an idiot."

What the hell is going on? A terrible thought crosses my mind. Alarm rises in my chest. "Are you meeting someone?"

She looks at me, startled. "What? Of course not."

"Don't take that tone with me. Scary scenarios are coming hard and fast, so you're better off telling me the truth."

She looks at me hard. "You think you can handle the truth with the way you're acting?"

I swallow. *Shit, what is it?*

"Yeah, just tell me."

She side-eyes me doubtfully, but there's an air of longing, of pleading underlying her expression. "I-I...I mean, we wanted to come down and do something different, ya know?"

I arch an eyebrow at her.

"Seriously, that's all it is," she finishes in exasperation.

I take a deep breath to settle the roiling emotions in my gut. I get it, I do. Women of Crina and Star's age are watched carefully. For their own good, of course. But as a man who got his first kill at thirteen, I can only imagine how stifling that is. Someone like Crina would chafe against those constraints more than most *mafie* girls.

"Sure," I answer, trying my hardest to remain patient.

"Well, we wanted to do something different and..." She trails off again, and swear to God, I clench my jaws to keep from shouting at her to get on with it. It's not like she's the shy wallflower type. What's making her hem and haw like this?

"It's the knishes," she blurts out. "We wanted to try the knishes at the Bowery Poetry Club." She sags into my arms, her anger deflating. "I knew you wouldn't believe me."

Okay, call me dumb, but I do believe her. My shoulders slump in relief and I loosen my hold on her. They were exploring. It also has to do with poetry. I can see how she might have seen some stupid Yelp review about this Bowery poetry place or maybe some TikTok vid about the best knishes in New York and got an itch to try it herself.

Realizing that I believe her, a tiny smile cracks her features as she confesses, "Yeah, I tried them at the open mic and they were amazing. When Star wanted to have a little adventure, it's the first thing that popped into my head. I've always wanted to share my finds with someone else."

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Did I hear her correctly?

"Wait, hold up." She looks at me curiously. "Open mic?"

Her face flashes distress as she realizes her slip.

"Open mics are at night. Usually late at night."

She cringes away from me, proving herself guilty.

I'm not sure what makes me madder, that she went and put herself at risk or that she didn't ask me to escort her when she knew I would've dropped everything to accompany her.

I explode again. “Fucking hell, Crina! How long has this been going on?” I drop my voice. “How long has my *wife* been galivanting around in the middle of the night across this goddamn city?” I point a finger at her. “Don’t open your mouth and say something asinine like ‘the Bowery is safe at night.’ That’s unacceptable. Especially for a lone female. Especially for my goddamn wife.”

She shoves me hard. “Wife or not, I’ll go where I want. You don’t own me, and you can’t lock me down, so go ahead, try stopping me.”

She pivots on her heel and stalks away, so furious she doesn’t look where she’s going. I run after her, catching her arm just before she steps into oncoming traffic.

“That’s it. I’m done,” I say as I swoop her up. She squirms in my arms and bats at my shoulders and chest, but I don’t care.

I hear Star shout, “Hey, get off me,” and glance over my shoulder to find that Lucian has the same idea because Star is solidly encased in his arms.

Lucian calls out to me, “You take the car, you’re gonna need it. I’ll take the subway with her.”

I nod in thanks and step off the sidewalk, striding across to the other side before cars run us over.

Crina struggles to get out of my hold, but I squeeze her closer. “Stop it already. If I drop you, swear to God, you’ll be in trouble.”

She shares a look with Star and then says to me, “I’ll scream bloody murder...”

“And risk the police?” I lift my chin in the direction of a cop standing by the black cube sculpture in the middle of Astor Place. I remember as a kid when my brother and I followed our father while he did his rounds, we’d stop at the Cube and spin it around a few times.

Her face turns pallid. Her fists tighten around the front of my shirt.

Yeah, I thought so...

Crina's a smart girl, and if there's one thing she won't do, it's violate the *mafie* golden rule. When you've grown up in a society like ours, it's bred into you to trust no one outside of your clan. But the police are the worst. They're not seen as protectors in our community. Beneath that veneer of respectability, they're known to be as corrupt as the *mafie*. If her parents didn't tell her about their personal horror in Romania, then the times her father was roughed up by the police definitely did it.

She lets out a little cry of frustration and settles back into my hold. Crossing her arms over her chest, she lets out one last huff of protest. "I'm against this, I'm just telling you now."

"Your dissent is noted."

Her eyes flash to me. "Don't patronize me."

The corner of my mouth twitches. "I would never."

"Ugh."

With that, I make my way to my parked car, click the doors, and set her on her feet. Opening the back door, I gesture for her to enter. If she doesn't do it of her own volition, I'll be more than happy to take care of it for her. Her choice.

She peeks up at me, sees my face, and slides inside. I enter behind her and slam the door shut.

She turns abruptly. "I didn't do anything wrong this afternoon. You're just super bossy and controlling."

"First off, yes, I'm bossy and controlling. Don't know why you expect anything less from me. But second, and more importantly, fuck! Just, fuck me. Did you learn nothing from yesterday?" I grab the hair on my head in frustration. "Kidnapping, remember? Does that ring a bell?"

Fuming, she flexes all ten fingers as if she wants to strangle me. “If he wants me, he can nab me anywhere. He can snatch me from my bed in the middle of the night. So no, I’m not too worried about going off-grid for a couple of hours to get a cappuccino or a knish in the middle of the day with my best friend.”

I always knew Crina was a risk-taker and a rule breaker, but she’s my wife now. Fear rips through me. How as I possibly going to keep her safe? I break into a sweat and ball my hands so tightly together that my knuckles turn white. “You don’t have to make it easy for him though. And at night? You’ve gone to an open mic at night? I mean, that’s just taunting a man like him.”

“That was before. I did that before.”

“And would it have stopped you last night?” She turns her face from me, giving me the answer. “I thought so.”

I sweep a shaky hand over the sweat beading along my hairline. “See, this is the impulsiveness I’m talking about. How can I help you if you refuse to help yourself?”

She lowers her head ever so slightly as she sits silently, for once.

“You’re entitled to get upset. Your mother drives you crazy and you want revenge. Or the strict rules clans have for women aren’t fair. These are the things you think, am I right?”

She nods once.

“And you’re not wrong. Life is unfair. I know that better than anyone.”

Her lips turn downward at my oblique reference to my brother. She lifts her face toward me, and now that I have her attention, I go for the jugular.

“But you’re being selfish. This isn’t about your mother or our society. This is about your safety. How do you think your father will feel if he hears that you’ve been taken? Do you

think he can handle that? Do you think he has the energy to fight to get you back given what he's dealing with?"

I'd heard about her father's new seizures through my mother.

She flings herself away from me in shame.

"No, he doesn't," I continue relentlessly. "That's the real reason he agreed to this marriage. Because he can't fight for you and he knows I will. And what about me? If you care about me, if you've ever cared about me..." I swallow. "I can't lose you, Crina. I've already lost one..."

My chest tightens with emotion. I drop my gaze to my fists. I slowly release one, then the other. Staring intently at my hands, I confess, "I can't. I just can't."

Her hand covers mine. "Look at me."

I glance at her. Her eyes are rimmed in red. Her nostrils flaring. She may not be crying but she's close, and I hate that. I hate bringing her to this state, but she's got to start taking this seriously.

"You're right. For once in your life, you're right, okay?"

I gulp around the hard knot in my throat.

"I'll be more careful."

"You say he can take you whenever he wants. That might technically be true, but if you do this kind of stuff, you're letting him think we don't take care of our own. One day, he will grab you, simply because he thinks he can take care of you better."

"I get it..."

For once, she's chastened, but I need to drive in the stake. "If I catch you again, I'll go to your father myself and tell him what needs to be done."

She gasps.

“Grounding will look like a walk in the park compared to the lockdown I’ll implement myself. Believe me, I don’t want to do that, but you’ve got to work with me. We’ve got to work together.”

Her eyes are rimmed in red and she looks so innocent at this moment. She may be a hellion, but she’s my hellion, and I don’t want to crush her spirit. I like her feisty. Hell, I like her combative.

But I like her alive best.

“What do you mean?”

“If you get an itch to leave the ’hood, you call me. Promise me that when you go to school, you’ll either call me to drive you or you can keep riding the subway with Star and Gabby. The only reason I’m allowing the second option is because I don’t want to change your habits. He thinks that you’ve kept him a secret and I don’t want to tip him off that anyone knows about him. Otherwise, all hell would’ve broken loose and we’d be in a full-scale war. He bet on the fact that you wouldn’t want that on your head.”

She cants her head to the side. “Why haven’t you told anyone, Marku? It makes you complicit in this.”

“For the same reason you haven’t.”

A couple of Lupu made men assassinated the former Bratva boss, with their *şef’s* permission. I can’t even catch one man—one—but they somehow managed to kill a boss. Life isn’t fair. War is surely coming, but why catapult us into it before we’re ready? The clans need time to trust each other and to prepare more. Our truce was only a few months ago. And speaking of truces...

“We need to have a truce on this.”

She barks out a laugh. “A truce?”

I wrap my hand over hers and hold her gaze until her laughter trails off. “Yes, a truce. If you want to go anywhere, and I mean anywhere, I’ll escort you. No questions. No

judgements. Text me the time and place and I'll be there. You can do whatever you want, and I can make sure you're safe. What do you think?"

She purses her lips, moving them left and right as she ponders my suggestion, then lifts a shoulder. "I guess I could do that."

Tension leaks from my body, my shoulders loosening. I take a cleansing breath. "It's settled then."

Cracking a wide smile, I push her back into the seat and croon, "Let me take care of you for being such a good girl."

Looking back, I shouldn't have been so quick to reward her.

CHAPTER 12

CRINA



I never intended to hold up my side of the truce.

It's not that I didn't want to, but how can I when I've got to wheatpaste half the neighborhood in the middle of the night?

I'm on social media, sure, but I want to do something that reaches my people directly, and my people are right here in Little Bucharest. And anyway, posting on TikTok is not nearly as fun or daring as plastering guerrilla art in public spaces. I can't tell you the pride I felt when I waited for the light to change on the way to school with my friends and Gabby leaned on a street pole covered in *my* words.

I stuff the latest pile of large flyers I printed out into my messenger bag. I already transferred the buckets of wheatpaste that I store on the roof to the side of the house after my parents settled in for the evening. After I wheatpaste these babies, I'm going to treat myself by checking out open mic night at the Bowery Poetry Club.

I swing the messenger bag over my shoulder and prop myself up on the sill of my open bedroom window, white curtains fluttering in the breeze.

My last conversation with Marku echoes in my mind. He threatened me and shamed me. He played on my heartstrings, on my loyalty to my clan, and on my worry over my father. He should know better. Mama's the expert in both those skills. If I can defy her, then I'll have no problem defying him. And as

for the fear of God Marku tried to instill in me over good-for-nothing Sperm Donor? It didn't work. Kotov is going to do what he's going to do. Like I told Marku, if he wants to grab me, he will. I'm not going to stop my life for a danger I can't protect myself from.

You're letting him think we can't take care of our own.

That accusation reverberates in my head.

The clans need time to trust each other and prepare...

I shake off his words.

Marku sees danger everywhere. It's the way of made men. That doesn't make it reality. It's not my reality, in any case. I make that the last thought I devote to this annoying and useless ruminating of mine and swing my leg over the windowsill. I grasp the large branch outside my window. This is not the first time I've gone wheatpasting and I've never caught sight of him or any of his thugs when I've sneaked out at night to plaster the 'hood with my poetry. There's no way I'm going to stop because of the stupid Sperm Donor. The rough bark of the tree scrapes the inside of my thigh as I clasp the thick branch tighter.

I've got this.

I shimmy my way across the branch to the trunk. Once there, I gingerly make my way to standing and give the tree a hug. I always hug the tree as a thank you for being my escape route out of the house. Without the tree, I'd be as trapped as Rapunzel in her tower. I toss the messenger bag down, painstakingly make my way down the linden tree and take a final jump. Crash into the bushes, I roll myself onto the ground.

Springing to my feet, I wipe off leaves and rub at the smudge of dried mud on my left knee. Feeling a prickling on my nape, I jerk my head up and quickly scan the street. Nothing out of the ordinary. A car curves around the corner of my street and I plaster myself against the building, hoping the shadows cover me in case it's someone who might know me.

The car rolls past without stopping and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I lower the rim of my black baseball cap over my face, swing the messenger bag back on, and grab my wheatpaste bucket and another bag of utensils. I check both ways one last time before making my way down the street, praying no one notices me.

Halfway down the street, the hair on the back of my neck pricks up *again*. I glance over my shoulder. A shadow moves farther down the street, but it's so quick I'm not sure whether I'd imagined it or not.

I pass by Marku's home and instinctually look down the side of the house at his bedroom window. The lights are on. Of course they are. The guy never sleeps. Anytime I pass by in the dead of night, the lights of his bedroom glow like a beacon in the dark. I feel a twinge of regret in my chest, but I shove it away. My hands were tied. I couldn't tell him about this. If he freaked out about going to the Village in the middle of the day, he'd go ballistic if he ever found out about this.

I finish plastering my posters across several streets when I feel that odd sensation again. The skin on my arms tingle with awareness. I scan my surroundings carefully and this time I see someone. The silhouette of a man in a dark suit. I pick up my pace. I've got a good idea who it is and I want to get off the street as soon as I can. The Uber I ordered should have hopefully arrived. I just have to get to the end of the street and whip around the corner, and I'll be safe.

I've just caught sight of the Uber when a hand shoots out from a dark corner and snatches my arm. I let out a shrill scream. A rough hand covers my mouth. *How did the creeper get here?* I drop the bucket and bag and put up a struggle, throwing my elbow into a set of ribs.

I hear a grunt and then, "Fuck, Crina, stop already."

I freeze in place. The fight drains from my limbs. The clasp around my mouth loosens and I turn my head to meet a

pair of furious eyes. I mean, the deep black flames in his irises could scorch down the entire block.

Out of the frying pan into the fire.

“Fuck.”

“Fuck is right. What the hell? We just talked about this. You agreed to a *truce*. You agreed to text me before you go out.”

His enraged gaze ticks down my frame, clocking the fact that I’m wearing all black, not my usual look even if I wanted to blend in with the other poets at the club. “You’re dressed like a ninja ready to melt into the brickwork.”

I open my mouth to speak, but he snaps, “Don’t you dare spew out lies right now. I swear, I can’t take it.”

“What the hell are you even doing here? It’s super disturbing to see you sneaking around like some pedo.”

His face turns stormier if that’s possible. “Don’t you try turning this on me. I have insomnia. I usually take a walk around the block when it’s quiet out. But look who I stumbled upon tonight.” His knuckles wisp down the side of my cheek. His voice is soft, but his tone deadly when he says, “Little Red Riding Hood, out for a merry little jaunt in the woods all by her lonesome.”

And there’s no doubt he’s the scary predator lying in wait in this story.

I discreetly glance around and the other guy has vanished. Marku is a deadly predator, but he’s one I know.

And trust.

Not gonna lie, I’m not fighting to get out of Marku’s hold. I might even sag a little against his broad chest as relief rushes through my veins. I’d planned to go out, no matter what, but his words and worries had messed with my head, putting me on edge. And then I caught sight of what could have been a perfectly normal man, but felt like a creeper. I can handle an

angry Marku over a shadowy, encroaching threat any day of the week.

I'm almost grateful when he looks down quizzically at the bucket and bag of paint brushes. "Where are you going?"

Thinking on my feet, I lie, "I need to drop these off at Gabby's house. I'm helping her with the stage for the theatre club." Gabby's deep in with the theatre club and those kids are obsessive, building the stage sets from scratch for every play they put on.

"In the middle of the night?"

My eyes dart to his before skittering away. "You said 'no judgments.'"

"You said you'd text me," he retorts.

I send him a reproachful glare. "You manipulated me into agreeing to that truce."

"Bullshit," he shot back. "You can't play the weak little *mafie* girl with me. I've never succeeded in manipulating you into doing anything. I was merely stating the facts, and being a smart, intelligent woman, you acknowledged those facts and agreed to my terms. You could've haggled me down, but you didn't even try because you had no intention of keeping your end of the bargain."

The Uber gives a little honk and I startle, instinctually shaking my head for it to shut up.

"Fuck, no, you do not have an Uber waiting. Where the hell were you planning on going after you dropped this stuff off?"

He may have bought my story about Gabby without blinking an eye, but I've been caught red handed. Damn that Uber driver.

"This is beyond reckless."

It doesn't look good, even to me, and after the creeper tonight, I'll think twice before sneaking out at night again.

“It was either that or take the subway at night. Since I can’t fly,” I reply sarcastically, “how would you have preferred me to get there?”

“By texting me,” he roars in my face. Releasing me suddenly, he points and says, “Stay here or for the love of God, I will tan your hide.” He stalks over to the Uber driver, talks to him for a moment, and pulls out a money clip. He peels off a hundred-dollar bill, thrusts it through the driver’s window, and juts his thumb at the driver as if to say *scram*.

The driver doesn’t miss a beat.

I watch morosely as he tears away from the street with a squeal of tires.

Marku swerves around, stomps back to me, and catches my arm as if afraid that I’m going to run. The game is up, even I know that. I wouldn’t blame him if he sat my parents down and told them everything. I mean, I got caught. It’s not even the punishment that bothers me so much. I gulp, thinking of my father and the look of utter disappointment, resignation, and fatigue on his face when he hears of what I’ve done.

“So where are we going?” Marku asks, looking at me with an expression that’s a notch below total exasperation.

I blink up at him. “Whaaa?”

He takes in a deep breath, as if pulling in his last reserve of patience. Picking up the bucket in one hand and the bag of brushes in the other, he asks, “Where to, Crina? Where are we going after we drop this off?”

Is he serious?

“Uummm...”

He gestures coaxingly with his hands. “Come on, I promise not to judge.”

I’m flummoxed, really I am. I’d expected him to drag me to my house and ring the doorbell, not let it go and accompany me to my destination. First, he broke through the impenetrable barrier protecting my heart when he told me his reason for

pushing me away all those years ago. And now he's letting go of my blatant disregard of our agreement. There's a fluttery feeling in my belly like a kaleidoscope of butterflies are flitting around inside there. I lick my lips as my mind tries to catch up.

His eyes drop to my lips and he says, "Don't do that. Not now." He puts his index finger and thumb close together in front of my face. "I'm this close to dragging you up to my room and fucking you into oblivion, so if you have any sense of self-preservation, you'll tell me where we're going so we can get on with the night."

That got my attention. My head snaps back into place. I already had one close call with him the other week. I'm not about to tempt fate again. "The Bowery Poetry Club. It's Open Mic Night."

"Of course. I should've guessed," he replies as he hands me one of the bags and pulls car keys from the front pocket of his dark jeans. Dragging me to him, he continues, "Lucky for you, I also ride around when I have insomnia so we don't have to go back into my house for these."

We drop off my wheatpasting stuff near the side door of Gabby's house. I intend to get back there tomorrow morning before anyone is the wiser. Especially Soren. He's like a bloodhound, that one. If he finds this, he knows enough about theatre to know that something shifty is going on. Once that's done, we walk to Marku's silver Porche 911. He pops his cell phone into the holder and pokes at it until he's pulled up the directions to the club and we peel out onto the street.

We don't speak as we travel through the empty streets, and there's tension in that silence. At the light just before hitting the Queensboro Bridge, Marku lowers the roof of his convertible. He guns the accelerator and we fly across the bridge. Hugging my jacket, I'm grateful for the rushing wind because it eliminates the chance that he'll try to interrogate me any further.

The sky is dark and the river is inky black. In contrast, Manhattan sparkles like a magical fairy city rising out of the mist. I instantly recognize the Citicorp building, shining like a white beacon with its 45-degree angled top. That building has been around since before I was born. Only now, it's dwarfed by One Vanderbilt, which rises high above every other skyscraper in Midtown. The Vanderbilt tower tapers off, ending in a pinnacle that seems to merge into the cloudy sky shrouding the top of the sparkling lights.

The bridge slopes downhill and we drive off onto Fifty-ninth Street. At this late hour, even the streets of busy Midtown are free of traffic, and soon we're racing down FDR Drive along the East River. I love the FDR Drive. I have fond memories of being in the back seat, eyes riveted on the scenery of Randall Island in the middle of the river, followed by the big neon Pepsi sign in Long Island City, and then much farther down, the silhouettes of the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges.

Marku turns off at the Twenty-third Street exit and rolls to a stop at a red light. "So...Open Mic Night, huh?"

I give him a suspicious side glance. "Yup."

I keep my response short, hoping to discourage any conversation. Now that I'm shackled with him, I just want to get there so I can lose myself in the performances.

"How many of these have you been to?"

I can hear Marku's brain ticking away with his own agenda as he prods me for information.

"Only once..." I mischievously let that hang for a moment before continuing, "But I've been to their slam poetry a bunch of times." I watch as his jaws clench and the little vein at his temple pop and start pulsing a mile a minute.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I sit back smugly into the dark gray leather seat. He'd turned the heat on the seats and it's nice and toasty. I give my butt a little wiggle. His eyes

dart to the side, catching me, but they return to the road when the light changes.

“What’s slam poetry?” he asks as he guns the car down an empty stretch of streets.

I’m startled by his question. I got into poetry after the breakup of our friendship and our mutual obsession with soccer. I didn’t expect him to be interested in poetry, of all things. And certainly not enough to ask me any questions.

At the next light, I reply, “It’s spoken word in a competitive setting.”

“Spoken word?”

“Kind of what it sounds like.”

“Which is…”

“Poetry spoken out loud.” I shake my head. “But it’s more performance than poetry.” It’s kind of hard to explain the exhilaration of spoken word poetry or slam poetry. He’ll experience it soon enough.

“I can tell you like it by the tone of your voice.”

My brows jump at his comment. I hadn’t said much, answering his questions somewhat curtly, but then again, even with four years of distance, he knows me better than anyone.

“You like it so much that you’re willing to risk your mother’s wrath to slip out of the house at midnight,” he muses.

The light changes and we’re off again.

At our next stop, I offer an explanation. “I love it because it’s exciting. The energy. There’s nothing like it. It’s not just poetry. It’s rhythmic. It’s loud. It’s passionate. The audience gets involved. Especially during a slam. The audience is judge and jury and how they react determines who wins the contest. It gets intense.”

“Sounds like a rap battle. I look forward to seeing a poetry slam,” he says, misspeaking the words. It’s slam poetry, but his mistake is adorable and I don’t bother correcting him. He’s

almost pensive in the way he says it, as if the idea just came to him.

I already know he'll love it. It fits Marku's competitive personality. The warrior, the made man in him. He may be seen as the jokester of his crew, but he started killing at a young age. They age fast, those *mafie* men. An image of Marku flutters to the forefront of my brain, of him in the center of a crowd, spewing words in a flash of staccato rhythm. Not just any words. My words. It's a strikingly beautiful image, a tantalizing fantasy that makes my heart hurt.

I thrust it away brutally. I don't need Marku in my space. The last time we shared something together, I never touched another soccer ball again. I may take him to his first slam, but that's where the buck stops. Poetry is mine.

A pang of guilt pierces me. Slam is about being expansive, about free expression, and about community. If he wants it, I have no right to keep him from it.

"Well, let's see what you think about this open mic," I comment blithely. "You might think it's pretentious and ridiculous. You might make fun of it."

He shoots me a look. "You like it."

"I do."

"Then I won't make fun of it." He leans closer, close enough for me to feel the whisper of his breath caress my cheek. "No matter how badly I want to."

I move away and roll my eyes. "There you go with the jokes again."

"Jokes are good."

"Except you sometimes use jokes to deflect."

He nods slowly. "Perceptive of you to notice."

I've always noticed when it came to him, even when I didn't want to. But the fury over the locker room incident has dissipated, and now he's being more than accommodating.

He's curious about this part of my life, a part he knew nothing about until recently. And he's interested because it matters to me. We shared many common interests in the past, but that was when we were kids. I can't deny that watching him being curious over something I introduced him to is flattering.

His eyes grow serious. "I don't joke the way I used to..."

That old drive to comfort him surges forth. Had it ever died completely? I somehow doubt it because I can tap into it so quickly. "I suppose I can tolerate it a little then," I say with a wink, in hopes of chasing the shadows from his eyes. "But not about the poetry." I shake a reprimanding finger at him. "Never poetry."

He makes as if to bite my index finger and I quickly yank it away. "Not about poetry. Got it."

A car horn blasts behind us. The light had changed without either of us noticing. Marku lifts his hand in the air as if to say, *forget about it*, and then we're off again. He makes a turn westward and we drive through the hopping streets of the East Village until we reach the club.

CHAPTER 13

MARKU



We're back in the Bowery.

Despite my best intentions, I can't seem to stay away from this place. If this neighborhood seems gentrified during the day, it looks hella dangerous at midnight. We've leave the trendy Village bars and nightclubs behind us and the Bowery stretches out in front of us, a long, dark, and desolate avenue. I park near the café. The only signs of life are splashes of light coming from the corner bar and a blast of noise whenever the Bowery Poetry Café door opens.

I glance at my car and say goodbye just in case I don't find it upon my return. Crina takes my hand and confidently leads toward the narrow, dark sage-colored storefront of the café. Can't say I'm impressed. It looks like any other seedy hole-in-the-wall downtown club. People mill outside, talking loudly, vaping, or toking on spliffs. I give the crowd a dubious look as I pass by. With as many edibles as we sell, it's surprising people still smoke the old-fashioned way.

Taking Crina's elbow, I sweep her to my other side, sidestepping a dude nodding off on the curb of the sidewalk.

And Crina came here alone?

Jesus Christ.

I feel a migraine coming on.

I pull the door open, grateful to get her off the street, even if it's inside a dump like this. Of course, the first thing I see

when I walk in is a bar on my left. Is this more bar than café? Is this just a place to drink, or are they serious about this poetry thing?

The place is basic, not clean, and crowded. To the right of the bar is a flight of steep black stairs that leads up to a black door. Each step is painted with a verse from a Pablo Neruda poem. How do I know? Because his name is written on the bottom step. Otherwise, the name sure as hell wouldn't ring a bell. I'm guessing he's a famous poet.

Crina bounces on the balls of her feet and drags me through the throng of people hugging the bar into a larger space. Small round tables are tightly packed together, hitting the edge of the small stage. The tables are covered with white linen tablecloths topped with little votive candles in the center.

Hanging from the ceiling is a chandelier that feels out of place and yet just right. At the far wall a tiny stage is dwarfed by a huge gray and white mural of a rococo Parisian apartment. It's like a bunch of styles were slapped together at random. Down-and-dirty downtown bar, jazz club, and antique Parisian apartment. I take it all in, marveling at the oddness of it. It's not like anything I've ever seen before.

Crina points to the far corner at the last empty table. "Oh, oh, there's a table!" She yanks me through the crowd, unrepentant and unstoppable.

That's my girl.

We reach the table a fraction of a second before another couple. Crina snatches a chair and glides right into it. Linking her fingers over the table proprietarily, she blinks up at them innocently, her mouth in a surprised O as if she hadn't just beat them to the table. With a smug grin, I sit beside her and we stare the other couple down until they move on. The moment they turn away in defeat, she grabs the sleeve of my shirt and explodes into giggles.

"Oh my God, we're awful," she exclaims once she comes back up for air.

“No, we got here first. Were we just supposed to give it up for no reason? They should’ve been faster. Foreigners,” I retort indignantly.

“Um, I’m pretty sure they’re American.”

“I meant they were no New Yorkers. This is New York City. If you don’t know how to hustle for a seat in a bar or on the subway, then you don’t deserve it. Keep standing, motherfucker,” I grumble at the backs of the offending couple.

Crina shakes her head at me. “And they say you’re the easygoing one.” She leans toward me. “You’re a savage.”

I shoot her a mock-bland stare, dropping my eyelids so my eyes are hooded. My chest tightens at seeing the old Chuckie back with her quick banter. She was so much fun, back in the day. We used to get into all kinds of scrapes. It feels so good to know that some things haven’t changed between us. “Not a savage. Just a New Yorker. We have a reputation of being rude, but we’re not rude. We just know what we want and we go after it.”

A smile lingers on her lips as she dismisses the underlying message of my comment and replies carefully, “We make a pretty good team.”

“That was never our problem, Crina.”

She laughs. “I don’t know about that...”

“If you’re talking of the soccer try-outs, you would’ve made it on the team if we’d been united in our goal.” I gulp. “But I was out of it.”

Her eyes grow sad, glints of green and blue overtaking the chestnut brown as it always does when she gets emotional. I can tell, even in the mood lighting of the club.

“I never played soccer again.”

“Perhaps not, but you found this.” I sweep my hand open and make a point of looking around. “And this ... is amazing. You would’ve never found it otherwise.”

She follows my gaze as I take in the laughing, festive crowd. Each table is packed with as many people as can fit. Waiters and waitresses zip around and between tables like manic bees, joking with their customers and one another. I might not have thought highly of the beat-up storefront or the dive bar right at the entrance, but no one could deny the buzz and energy of this place.

“And you found it on your own,” I go on. “A high school girl, coming here alone. You weren’t intimidated by the crowds, by the people, by the fact that it’s in the dead of night.” I turn my gaze back on her. “That’s impressive.” I pause, a fierce pride spreading through my chest. “You’re fearless, Crina. You always were.”

“I thought you called it impulsive.”

“It’s the flip side of the same quality. There’s a virtue and a flaw for every trait, but this is definitely a positive.”

Her brows jump at the compliment.

A waitress flitters over to us, greeting Crina warmly, and we order a couple of drinks. After she leaves, Crina turns to me and says, “Thank you for coming here with an open mind. I was prepared for you to see this place as nothing but a run-down, dingy dive bar. A dangerous one, at that. And for you to be angry.”

“If I get angry, it’s only because I don’t want anything to happen to you.” I lean over and confess softly in her ear, “I do think it’s all those things. It’s definitely edgy, but there’s no denying the magic of the place. It reminds me of old New York when graffiti and CBGBs ruled the Bowery, not high-end designer bag stores.”

She takes my hand in hers and clasps it tightly, her irises almost engulfed in a swirl of green, blue, and gold. The waitress plunks down two drinks on our table, breaking the spell.

The lights flash momentarily and the crowd’s noise level falls to a hush. A woman, dressed in black and wearing a beret

that tilts dramatically to one side—very tongue-in-cheek—introduces Open Night Mic. The next hour and a half is a parade of the brilliant, the bad, and the ugly of Lower East Side poetry. There’s the repetition of the same sound in different words or the recurrence of a vowel or the recycling of a consonant throughout a poem. There’s clever play on words. There are shouts and shrill screams. There’s singing and rapping. There are poets talking about their traumas, their identity, their pride.

It’s nothing short of thrilling.

Afterward, when the lights blink on and the crowd starts to thin out, I’m awestruck. “Is this what you do?”

She laughs, and that beautiful sound settles right into my soul.

“Spoken word, no. Not yet, anyway.” She gazes down, almost bashful, which has got to be the first time I’ve ever witnessed that expression on her. I’m riveted by it. “But I write similar stuff, yeah.”

“Well, fuck...”

My wife has left me speechless. A woman with the heart of a poet. I would’ve never guessed that there was so much power and creativity behind that hard, stubborn exterior. She’s given me a precious gift indeed, in sharing this part of herself. It’s a privilege I’ll never take for granted.

I cup her face in my hands, obliging her to make eye contact. Then I plant a kiss on her lips. It’s a sweet one and I release her before she has the chance to pull away.

“My wife’s a poet,” I say loudly, ready to beat my chest with pride.

Maybe I’m so impressed because I love words, too. I was known as the easy one, the relaxed, fun-loving, sociable one—the big talker, the people person, the extrovert, the schmoozer. That was, until my world went into a tailspin.

After Cristian's death, I pushed Crina away out of grief and shame, but also because I was gripped with this irrational fear that I couldn't keep her safe. I couldn't save him so I would surely fail her. See, they were so alike, those two. Both headstrong, impulsive, and brilliant. And now, I find out that she has the soul of an artist. Just like Cristian.

That old, familiar spike of terror hits me, flooding my bloodstream with adrenaline. My heart races, pounding uncontrollably. I can't seem to get enough air inside my lungs. I breathe fast, then faster, but my throat cinches up as if a rope's been looped around it. My gut heaves.

Startled, Crina jumps up and crouches at my side. I shake my head to tell her it's nothing, that I'm nothing. I'm not worthy of her. I'm not worthy of anything. But I can't get out a word. My throat has closed up completely. I claw at my neck. My stomach cramps and bile rises up my esophagus.

My vision turns black at the edges, narrowing like a tunnel until the tables and the stage and the chandelier vanish. The space transforms into a cold, dark alley on the wrong side of Koreatown.

A fist comes at me out of nowhere.

I duck it in the nick of time. Only, someone's shoved me from behind in the fray of boys brawling with fists and brass knuckles. I crash forward and barely save myself from colliding against the dirty pavement, littered with trash and recycling from a nearby restaurant.

I grab the ankle of the Russian I'm fighting and flip him onto the ground. He goes down with a thud. I jump to my feet and tear off the grasping hands clamped around my calf. By chance, I glance across the sea of fighting boys and lock in on Cristian. A burly thug has his hands wrapped around his throat. Roaring, I charge through the roiling crowd, trying to get to him. Lucian and Anton toss their opponents away to join me, but by the time we tear through the brawl, it's too late.

“Marku. Marku! MARKU!”

I flick my head at the sound of my name, at the voice. Why is Crina here? Panic surges through me. *Get her out of here!* I shoot to my feet, wobbling as the back-alley spins around me.

“Come back to me, baby, come back.”

I hear Crina. The distress in her voice. The pleading. The tears.

“I can’t,” I beseech. I can’t leave him here to die. I must get to him. I must save him.

“Leave them and come back to me.” Her voice is firm.

The tall building with the billowing steam from the sweatshops follows her siren voice and wavers in my vision. *No, no!*

“You can and you will,” she demands in that no-nonsense tone she’s used with me since she learned how to speak.

Voom.

I hear laughing, the clinking of glasses, the scraping of chairs. The rococo Parisian stage rises above me and the chandelier shimmers on the ceiling once again. Crina’s once multi-colored eyes are only blue, a cobalt blue. Her forehead is creased with worry.

I swallow over my parched throat and rasp, “I was back there.”

“I know. I saw. I saw everything.” Tears are gathering in the corners of her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Marku,” she sniffs.

I lift my index finger and trace the delicate line of her cheek. A tear falls on my knuckles. My chest squeezes. *Don’t be sorry*, I want to say, but I remain silent. How can I say those words to her when I can’t apply them to myself? I won’t be the hypocrite she’s accused me of being.

My heart feels like it’s been sliced to shreds, flayed open like the chest of a butchered animal. “I want to go back there. I want to see him again. I want to touch him.” My heart aches. “I almost touched him.”

She shakes her head sorrowfully, tears still falling. “I know you want to be there for him, I know you.” The corners of her full lips push up into a small mournful smile. “You can’t save him.”

That’s Crina, always getting to the heart of the matter, but I reply petulantly, “I know that. I only want to touch him one last time.”

“Then you’ll want to stay there forever. You won’t come back to me. And deny it all you want, but you will attempt to save him. You can’t bring him back, and I need you here with me.”

“Let me go back,” I beg, my voice cracking. She shakes her head, refusing my plea. I’m begging, for fuck’s sake. “Figure out a way and get me back there.” I don’t know how she’d do it, but she has skills, powers from the Old Country. Desperation wraps around me with grasping fingers. I’ve had anxiety attacks before, but never with the chance of seeing him again. In my dreams he comes to me, but only as a voice. I never see him. I’d do anything to see him one more time. To be near him. To touch him. To beg for his forgiveness. And, most importantly, to beg him to take me with him.

She squeezes my hand hard. “I’m sorry...I can’t.”

“For the love of God, why,” I shout. “Why do you insist on keeping me from him?”

“Because I love you.”

My spine hits the back of my chair as if I’d been catapulted across the room and slammed against the brick wall. I hear a roar in my ears and shake my head as if to loosen the pressure inside.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

My hands tremble and I clench them into fists, hoping to control them. “Umm, I’m not sure I did.”

She nods sadly at me. “You did.”

She swats me on the chest and I grasp her hand in my quivering one, placing it against my heart. “I love you.”

“I know,” she replies matter-of-factly. “You don’t have to say it just because I said it. I already knew it. Since forever.”

I bring her hand to my mouth and drop kisses on her palm.

“I’m taking it,” she says.

My mouth pauses before pressing against her soft skin again. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m taking that night with me.”

Anger catapults through me. It’s bad enough she’s witnessed my greatest shame, and only the fact that she loves me allows her to get away with that. But taking it from me? I shake my head vigorously. “You can’t. I won’t allow it.”

She lifts her chin high, anticipating a fight. “You can’t stop me.”

“Hey,” I warn. “I will strip your ass red if you take it. That’s not your burden to take. Just because you have the power to see and feel things doesn’t give you the right to butt in. It’s not your business.”

“*It is my business*, as you always say,” she insists. “I can help relieve your burden. Now that I see what you’re carrying, I can help. I *want* to help. It’s my job to help.”

“Like hell it is. Your job is to love me and to let me protect you.” *If I can*. “Don’t pick up more on my behalf. I won’t have you doing that.”

“But I can help...”

“I know, baby, and I love you for it. I love your big ole heart. I love that you want to save me, but this is *my* shame. He was *my* brother. I wouldn’t be the man I am if I shifted an ounce of the agonizing burden onto you. And I don’t deserve anything less than what I carry. I will *never* relinquish it.”

She grips my wrist, her fingers tightening around it. Alarm is etched on the lines of her face. “But the grief is killing you.

I saw big red welts spreading across your skin. I saw your heart hemorrhaging blood. You'll kill yourself if you keep going like this, and I can't sit by and let you bleed out right in front of my eyes. I can't save my father, but I can at least try to save you."

"I'm not your father. I'm tough enough to take it. And I'm your fucking husband. It's my job to take care of you, not the other way around."

"It goes both ways, Marku," she argues.

"No, it doesn't. We're not in an American soap opera here. We're *mafie*. I deserved to die for my failure that night. If I had been strong enough, I would've ended my own life already." She gasps. "But I was weak." *For you. I couldn't leave you.* "Don't weaken me further by trying to take any of what's left from me."

"Don't say that, Marku. Don't ever say something like that." She clasps my hand between her breasts. "Promise that you will never do anything crazy like that."

"The time to kill myself has passed. If I didn't do it then, I couldn't go through with it now. You're my wife. I can't leave you," I reply blithely.

"You say you want to be my husband, but what kind of husband can you be? I see inside you and your heart is dying. How can you be there for me if you're holding on to all of this...this...stuff? Especially when I can help you?"

Irritation bubbles up fast. She's trying to twist my words around to get what she wants, but there's no way I'm sharing this nightmare with her. I can barely handle it myself. Four years have passed and it still feels like yesterday. "No, I won't allow it. Dammit, stop pushing, woman."

She straightens up, looks me in the eye, and demands, "Then we're fucking tonight."

I do a double take. Why does it feel like whenever I talk about something serious with Crina, it's like being in a car crash. "Say what?"

“You heard me.”

“Yeah, I heard you, but what’s the change of heart? Two weeks ago you swore you’d never come to our marriage bed a virgin.”

“Tonight is what’s changed. You stubbornly refuse to let me help, but I can’t afford to let you push me away like you have before. My only other option is to bind myself to you completely. I certainly won’t abandon you like this, and once you’re stuck with me... Well, I’ll try to be patient and wait for you to come around, but if that doesn’t work, I’ll have to wear you down.”

“Humph, that’s the plan?” I eye her carefully and note the determination on her face. “You seem pretty sure of yourself.”

Crina slips off her seat, pushes my thighs apart, and sits on my lap. Tracing the collar of my long-sleeved Corneliani polo shirt, she says, “One day we’ll have children. Would you dare show up half a man for them like you would for me?”

I sputter at the insult. “Half a man? Oh, I see. This is part of your plan to wear me down”

“Yes, half a man. But I love you so I’m willing to wait for you to come to your senses.”

I huff out a laugh. “Wow, that’s harsh.”

I should be more insulted than I am, but it’s hard to keep hold of my anger when Crina’s snuggling like a cat in my arms. I should question her motive for consummating our marriage. Witnessing my darkest moment, my ugliest secret, my deepest vulnerability changed her mind. That shouldn’t be a good thing. It should make me feel weak, but I guess I don’t have much pride or ego left with Crina. I’ll let her believe there’s hope, but I will never unload this pain on her. She’ll have her own burden soon with her father. No way will I add to it.

And there’s a deeper part that’s impossible to explain to someone who hasn’t experienced grief, especially grief intertwined with self-blame. If I release that burden, then I

release Cristian, and I can never do that. It's how I keep him alive...

So she can tease me about being half a man and try to manipulate me into doing things her way. It doesn't mean I'm crazy enough to reject the gift she's dropped in my lap. I wrap my arms around her, loving the feel of her, aching for more of it. It's a rare moment when Crina Lupu is soft, warm, and dare I say, cuddly.

The lights flash on and off above us, signaling that it's time to leave. I flip my wrist and check my Patek Philippe watch. It's almost two in the morning. The chairs have been flipped upside down and set on top of the tables. The floor has been swept and mopped, streaks of moisture on the black and white tiles. The waiters and waitresses are hanging out by the bar, watching us as they relax with a drink before heading home.

"Come on," I say as I haul myself up with Crina in my arms.

She gives a little yelp and smacks me lightly on the shoulder. "Put me down."

I give her a little bounce. She wheezes with surprise. Then I carefully place her on her feet. I wrap my jacket over her shoulders and with a firm hand on her lower back, I escort her toward the exit, nodding my thanks to the employees as we pass by.

We step out into the cool, crisp spring night. Or early morning. The heroin addict has moved from his spot by the curb to lie down along the wall, his arms crossed over his chest and one foot looped over the other.

My head pops up and I catch sight of my car.

Still there.

I click the doors open with my fob and help Crina inside. I guess this place grows on you, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't grateful to see her once more encased in my Porche.

I jump into my seat and turn on the engine. “We can come here again.”

“Mmm-hmm,” she replies, her distracted comment giving me a hint of where her thoughts are.

They’re on our next stop.

My bedroom.

CHAPTER 14

CRINA



Looking back, it was silly of me to deny what's between Marku and me. I've always known I'd end up in his bed.

It was written in the stars, or in my case, in my dreams. Sleeping dreams, waking dreams, even the vision I had on our wedding day. I could've fought him longer on this, but seeing him wield his nunchucks over his head as he leapt into the fray to save his brother broke my will like a dry, brittle reed. In the face of death and grief and guilt, spats and grudges like the ones I've nursed for Marku melt away like snow in bright afternoon sunlight.

Marku brings me down a few steps to the side entrance of his house. He kicks off his shoes by the door inside the finished basement. I follow. He picks up my shoes and takes them with him. It's ridiculous to hide my presence when his mother was at our wedding, but whatever. I get it. He doesn't want to spook her if she comes downstairs first thing in the morning.

Speaking of his mother, Aunt Natalia redecorated since the last time I was here. While we celebrate holidays at each other's homes, I never dared venture past the common areas. The *piece de resistance* of the now-larger family room is a striking white marble wall with a long modern horizontal gas fireplace. She's contrasted the aesthetic white space with a smart choice of a couch and a couple of comfy, over-sized leather seats that are a deep gray.

I pause to absorb the aura of the room. After a moment, Marku tugs my hand and leads me farther back to an area that used to be a playroom for us when we were kids.

It's now Marku's bedroom.

His mother decorated it with him in mind because although the black and white accent wall fits the rest of the basement, the room is extra masculine and bold. I scan the paintings on the wall and instantly drop my gaze.

I can't even.

Looking around his room, I'm reminded of my mother's scolding that Marku and I would make the messiest couple. It basically looks like mine would, if my mother didn't get involved. There are a bunch of wicked-looking katana swords and bo staffs gracing the wall above his bed. I guess this is where his anime obsession from middle school inevitably led.

After another quick glance at his walls, I drop my eyes again. This time, I purposely avoid looking too far up again.

Those paintings...

If I can barely look at them, then how can he live with them?

Marku leaves my shoes near the entryway and closes the door, locking it behind him. I fall back onto his bed, letting myself bounce a little. It's late, probably past three o'clock in the morning, and there's no light coming from the two frosted casement windows along the far wall.

Marku saunters toward me, boldly pushes my knees apart to accommodate his bulk, and towers over me. The bulge of his jeans fists forward, but he doesn't make any suggestive moves. In fact, he looks more pensive than anything. He lifts my chin with nothing but the tip of his finger and inspects me carefully, as if memorizing my features.

My nerves start jangling. "What is it?"

He draws in a sharp breath and stops it abruptly. "You're so fucking beautiful that I have to remind myself to breathe

when I'm around you."

"Stop it." I tilt my head to the side coquettishly and bat my lashes at him. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

He chuffs out a winded laugh. "And so fucking witty. Intelligent." His voice drops. "With the heart of an artist."

He said it in the Bowery Poetry Café, and he says it again now. This time, the reason is plastered all over his walls.

Cristian's oil paintings.

They're dark, conceptual things. The largest piece covers most of the wall I'm facing. It's huge and depicts an insurmountable rock face of blue slate that one must overcome but never can. A diptych of his paintings exhibits the inside of caverns with deep, endless lagoons one can never fully cross. Then there are the cliff paintings—saturated midnight blue cliffs that fall off into a void with a backdrop of an exploding sky.

Emotional. Angry. Pained. Those are the words I've used to describe them, and that was when Cristian was alive.

The heart of an artist, Marku said. *Like his brother* is what was left unsaid. I sealed my fate by bringing Marku to that Poetry Open Mic. He's conflated me with Cristian in his mind, I'm sure. But what can I do? I'm like a spider caught in his web, a web threaded from tangled filaments of death, agony, and regret. They're forged with a material as strong as titanium. There's no severing them. Not without killing him in the process.

Should I be scared that I'm attached to this tortured man forever? No end in sight? Freedom—fresh, beautiful, sweet-smelling freedom—that I've never even gotten a good taste of is gone forever. Thinking of what I'm losing, I have the impulse to pick up my sword and fight for it again—but not tonight. Not after the vision. Not after witnessing the tragedy of Cristian's death, of Marku's despair. Not while being surrounded by these paintings in this tomb-like bedroom.

Tonight, I lay down my blade and open my arms to my soon-to-be-lover, to my love.

Marku grazes his finger up my cheek, bringing me back to him. He traces my cheekbone once, twice. The tip of his finger falls to my bottom lip and swipes back and forth. There's something so erotic about that slow, repetitive movement.

My head falls back and I let out a soft moan. He presses his finger between my lips, slips it out, and repeats the motion until it's nice and wet. He pushes in once more, and this time I suck hard, making his breath stutter. There's no missing it in the silence of the room where every inhalation and exhalation erupts like bright flares on a moonless night.

"Fuck, you're the sexiest woman I've ever laid eyes on."

"And you've certainly fucked enough to know the difference," I tease.

His eyes grow sad and I shake my head, saying, "Nuh-uh. No more sadness. Not tonight. I don't care who you've been with in the past. We were in a feud. I didn't want to fuck you then, remember."

The sorrow in his eyes remains. "Can't say I felt the same."

"Well, no one was chasing me."

He huffs. "That's because I would've killed any boy or man who got within in a ten-mile radius of you."

Huh, that explains a lot. I'd chalked it up to my personality, obviously. "Are you saying you've threatened boys who would've flirted with me?"

"There was no need for overt threats. Everyone knew who you belonged to."

Tucking my tongue in my cheek, I ask, "Even when we weren't talking whatsoever?"

"*Especially* when we weren't talking."

He sits down beside me and settles me on his lap, straddling his thick thighs. He caresses my legs. His crushed pine fragrance fills the air. My breath catches. I'm about to lose my virginity to this man. To my husband. Seems strange that this is the least impulsive thing I've ever done. I'd always expected to lose my virginity without any foresight or planning. A sense of rightness settles over me. Even my mother would be proud. This was meant to be.

I scoot closer to him, rub against the ridge of his jeans, and moan into his mouth. It feels good so I do it again, seeking more friction. He grabs my waist to push me away a little, and I whine. Thankfully, he pulls me close again. Sparks fly each time I grind against him. I take his face in my hands and part his lips with my tongue. In the past, I've always turned my face away, making him work for it before giving in to him. For the first time, tonight, I initiate a kiss.

I pull back a little, beckoning him to take over, and he does. His tongue surges in, one unrelenting stroke after another. I coast my fingers down his arms, feeling the coarse, bristly hair, and it me spurs on. He grasps my butt possessively, and my thighs flex around his hips. My skin tingles with sensitivity, prickling with goose bumps.

A moment later, he flips us around. With me underneath, he scoots us up the bed until the top of my head hits the edge of a pillow. He scoops my head up and slips the pillow underneath it.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” Ravenous, I grab his nape to bring his mouth back to me. I taste the remnants of the drink he finished hours ago. He tastes like an old-growth forest after a summer storm. I wrap my legs around him, lifting my pelvis in search of that elusive pressure again. Suddenly, the fabric of the tight, long-sleeved nylon and spandex shirt I'm wearing feels suffocating. I break our kiss, push him off me, and yank it right off my torso.

“Baby,” he breathes out.

I remind him with a giggle, “It’s not like you haven’t seen this before.”

Eyes dragging down the length of me, he replies, “I’ve seen parts, here and there. But I can’t describe the anticipation of seeing you, all of you, for the first time. The idea that I get to just stare at my beautiful wife at my leisure is unparalleled.”

He helps me with my bra and then my leggings and socks, until I’m left in a skimpy pair of black lace boy-cut panties. I hadn’t done the laundry in a while and was down to my least-used undies, a sexy pair I once bought on a whim.

“Fuuuck.”

He reverently takes one breast and then the other in his big hands, weighing them as if they’re precious. He gets on his knees, licks one, then the other and then goes back to loving on the first one. He takes turns, lapping at each of my tits, getting more excited with each pass. A second later, my nipple disappears between his lips and gets sucked inside. Hard. My hips fly off the mattress and I claw at the mattress to keep myself grounded.

Staring up at me, he rakes my nipple between his teeth. A shot of pain whips through the pleasure and my head spins. I start writhing beneath him, grasping his shirt, yanking at it, trying to get him to take it off so I can feel him, touch him, skin to skin.

“Fight me,” he taunts. “I know you want to.”

I turn into a wildcat, raking my nails down his cheek. Four red slashes flame across his skin. His eyes blaze with dark flames. My eyelids flicker as I stare, horrified at what I did. I didn’t think he’d let me go through with it. I’d assumed he’d catch my hand and pin me down but he made no move to stop me.

It dawns on me that he wants me to hurt him, to really hurt him. And that sours the mood. Sure, we’ve played this game before, but he’s never allowed me to inflict pain on him. The past was games, but not tonight. Tonight, he’s dead serious.

And he confirms my suspicion with his next demand, “More, Crina.”

Pain pummels through me as I grab his hair and yank him toward me until we’re eyeball to eyeball. “Why?”

His eyes sear mine, but his lips remain stubbornly sealed.

I joggle his head impatiently. “Come on...”

There’s a long pause as we silently glare at each other in a battle of wills.

Finally, he gives a little sigh of defeat and answers, “You know why.”

An avalanche of agony rips through me. My eyes burn and my throat constricts with emotion, but I swallow through the pain. “No. Just no.”

“Yes,” he hisses, tossing his head as if to prompt me to fight him again.

I feel like bawling, but I won’t. I’ve fought for a helluva lot less than this. I’ll be damned if I let this nonsense continue. “No,” I repeat. “You wanna know why, you idiot?”

“You’ve never had a problem before, so yeah, tell me why now,” he retorts with a glint of challenge in his eyes.

“We were playing a game before.” I trace one long red slash. “*This* is not a game.” I get to the heart of the matter. “Whatever you think you’ve done, you don’t deserve this. You deserve to be loved, to be cherished, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“No I don’t,” he growls. “I deserve the pain. I can’t even manage to catch my brother’s killer, so if you love me, you’ll give it to me.”

My heart howls. Mind racing and heart pounding, I get a tight grip on my emotions and force myself to stop and think.

Oh, my broken, tatted man, as much as you think you need to be punished, you need the opposite.

I've known Marku my entire life. I know his scent, his voice, his touch from my earliest memories. I know him as well as I know myself. No, better than I know myself. And I know exactly what will help him, what will truly cure him of this disease of shame and self-blame. And it's what I need from him as well.

I don't need to fight him. I need him to take control.

That's the only thing that will soothe his jagged, bleeding edges.

But seeing the stubborn furrow in his brow, he'll dig in if I contradict him. Instead, I hook a finger on the V of his polo shirt and tug him until his lips almost touch mine. I part my lips and let us breathe a moment like that, suspended in time, letting the tension between us build. I flick out my tongue and say, "I could do that, but you know how I like it. The only way I'll come is if you're the rough one."

His eyes flare with desire. His breathing quickens against my moist lips.

"Son of a bitch," he replies gruffly.

Gotcha.

Marku whips off his polo shirt, displaying his hard abs, every ridge of his six-pack perfectly defined. His entire torso is an intricate mosaic of tats. I reverently glide my fingers over the swirls of color. He has so many. A large Popescu eagle across his chest. Asian-inspired dragons, demons, and animals skate up his shoulders and down his arms, halting at the wrists. Along his ribs on his left side is a poem in cursive. I lean in to read it and jerk in shock.

Anguish is for the strong, for only the strong can find the sweet in agony.

That's one of my lines, from my street art. It came after one particularly hard day when I found my father on the floor, spasming with seizures. I burned the printer out from the hundreds of copies I'd run off. And then I spent the entire

night plastering it around the neighborhood, even spilling over into Astoria.

Pride swells in my chest. My words. They spoke to him.

Panting, I peer closer because the lines don't look like they've been inked on. The color is light and more textured than a tattoo normally is.

They look like they were *branded* onto his skin.

A scarification tattoo.

I squeeze my eyes shut, inhaling a sharp, distressed breath. Scarification is about pain, that much I know, and it looks like the phrase was seared in his skin. It's as if his skin is nothing more than a canvas for his pain. And he used my words to do it. My pride shrivels up.

My eyes bounce from ink tat to scarification tat. I touch them, my fingers tingling as if trying to tell me something. I *see* ink tats, but I *feel* more than just smooth skin. I squint down as my fingers ride over bumpy, damaged skin.

What a minute...

I twist him around, skating my fingertips across his back. The overhead light shines down more harshly on his back, illuminating ...

“What the hell!”

I feel the uneven raised skin of scarifications over every tattoo covering his back. Right underneath the ink. He thought to hide it from everyone. Recognizing that the small scarification of the quote on his ribs misled anyone who saw it to think this was it. No, it was the tip of the iceberg.

I'd felt it before during our crazy hookups, but our time together was so fast and furious that I didn't register them then. My body knew, though. The skin of my fingertips recognized them, dragging me toward that revelation.

I stare at his bowed back, grazing my fingertips up and down and across the panorama of his entire back. Burned.

Scarred. A crisscross of artistic scars—hidden underneath the multitude of color. I want to choke as fury burns through me.

He'd started getting tattoos the year of his brother's death. They say the first year of grief is the worst, and if his tats and scarifications are any indication, I'd say he'd gone through hell and back.

And he'd hidden it from me.

How many times had he sat beside me in class, his skin inflamed and irritated by the clothing he was wearing? I may not know much about scarification tattoos, but I do know they're not for those with a low threshold of pain. Why? Because it's all about the pain!

Jesus, I could slap myself for my stupidity. I would've never pushed him with my silly dreams of getting on the soccer team if I'd known the extent of his suffering. I had known he was grieving, of course, but I didn't understand the depth of what he'd been going through. And he's still going through it. He's never going to move forward until he kills the man who took Cristian from him.

And that's why he wants me to fight him. He could overpower me at any moment, but he wants me to participate in this campaign of pain.

My eyes and nose burn. I bite my lip to stop it from trembling.

I won't do it.

Marku glances over his shoulder and must see the raw agony on my face.

"No, no, no," he rushes out, twisting back around and moving his hands frantically as if he doesn't know where to place them. "No crying. You're not going to cry over me."

Facing the enormity of my realization, tears cascade down my face.

"Too late," I retort, waving at his chest. "Do you even like it? Or did you do it only to hurt yourself?"

He caresses my hair. “I like that you like it. That my tats turn you on.”

Oh, my God. That only makes me feel worse. I’d unwittingly participated in this by being turned on by his tattoos. Made men traditionally carry their clan tat and no other. Even with ink becoming the rage, it didn’t affect the clans. One tattoo and one alone. Marku was a unicorn in that way.

Sweeping aside my own guilt, I return to the question he’d purposely left unanswered. Or rather, he answered it by not answering. Of course, he felt the pain. Of course, he did it for the pain.

Eyeing his ink in a new light, I ask, “Did you get addicted to it or something?”

He sucks his teeth. “No, I’m not a glutton for punishment.”

“I beg to differ. You do this,” I gesture up and down his torso, “and then on top of it, you want me to smack you.”

His eyes get hard. “Because I deserve it.”

I want to shriek at the top of my lungs and tear my hair out. I shove him off me and scoot back until my spine is up against the headboard. He shuffles toward me on his knees and puts his hands on my thighs to keep our connection.

“We need to talk about this, Marku. You should have let me in, really let me know how much you were suffering. Months after his death, I could see that you were grieving, but I thought you’d turned a corner. You clearly had not, and you hid it from me. Then you pushed me away, and I fell for it, but you’d conned me. You deceived me the entire time.”

I shake my head in dismay, guilt bearing down on me from all directions. “I should’ve been there for you, no matter what. I should’ve forced my way in like I’ve always done.” I fling out a hand and gesture to his chest. “Look what’s happened. I failed you and worst of all, you used my words against me.”

His brows gather in confusion, but his jaw tightens. “Never let me hear you spew such nonsense again. You couldn’t have been there for me. I wouldn’t let you. Any time you brought up his death, I’d shut you down, remember? I forced you away in the locker room. I let those boys throw things at you, and then they ran after you for more. Even if I didn’t realize what was going on with that last part, I’d triggered the chain of events. I did that, not you. I’m at fault, not you.”

Fighting tears, I shake my finger at him. “Don’t remind me how gullible I was to fall for that. I should’ve done better...” I trail off into a moment of silence before adding, “In so many ways.”

He cups my cheek. “Don’t ‘should’ yourself. You did exactly right. I was an asshole to you and rejected me just like you should have. I’m the sorry one. I humiliated you in public and pushed you away. I didn’t deserve you. Truth is, I don’t deserve you now. You should divorce me. Teach me a lesson for how I’ve treated you.”

“Shut the hell up,” I snap. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” he replies gently.

“Turn on yourself. I’ve just come to realize how I’ve failed you. If you know anything about Romanian women, you know we have our pride, so don’t dismiss me and what I’ve said. It’s only going to make me angrier than I already am.”

A sad smile twists up one side of his lips. “Okay, Chuckie.”

“Better.”

He pauses, as if remembering something. “What did you mean, I used your words against you?”

I wince. He’s referring to what I’d blurted out in anger. I trace the scarred words and ask, “Where did you find this quote?”

His eyes turn wistful and he smiles gently. “There were these posters plastered all over the neighbor”—he breaks off

and realization spreads over his face—“hood.” His expression turns dark, and yet fierce. “You didn’t.”

I grimace. “I did.”

His face slackens with shock. “I’ve seen those posters in every urine-stained corner of the ’hood, even in the tunnel under the bridge. You went there in the deep of night? Alone?”

I scowl at Marku and then the offending scarification. “Can you look past that aspect of it and return to the part where you were so inspired by my poetry that you burned it into your skin?”

He sits back on his haunches, gazes down at my words on his body, and sighs. “I was walking to get a Turkish coffee at The Dacia Café when I saw it plastered on a wall nearby. Some phrase caught my eye. I paused to read it. That poem hit me in the solar plexus. I took a pic of it with my phone and had it seared on my ribs by the end of the week. Hurt like a bitch.”

“You got your entire back burned up, too,” I commented.

He gives me a lopsided grin. “Yeaah, but the ribs...” He shakes his head in awe, his gaze darting up to Cristian’s enormous painting above his bed for an instant before returning to me. “Like I said earlier, you have the heart of an artist. Just like him.”

“You humble me by having my words etched on your body.”

“Baby, you humble me with everything you do,” he replies.

“So...you’re not mad?”

“I’m mad, but you clearly won’t stop. You may be the creative one, but I’m sure as hell not a slacker.” He taps his temple. “I just have to be one step ahead of you. And baby?”

I lift my brows in a question.

“I love the chase. Don’t worry, I’ll run you to ground, but we’re going to set that aside for the moment. I’ve got bigger fish to fry tonight. Returning to our earlier discussion, we’re going to do something a little different tonight.” His eyes grow soft. “We’re going to make love.”

I pull a face.

He laughs, and that clear, crisp sound dispels my anxiety over his discovery of my street art and makes the center of my chest feel squirrelly.

A smile still tugging at the corner of his mouth, he tells me, “Don’t give me that look.”

“Fine,” I grumble. “You know what I prefer, but I suppose, just this once”—I push him onto his back with a dramatic sigh—“we can make *looove*.” I give him a stern look. “But don’t get used to it.”

On that note, I crawl on top and over him, dip my head, and lick along the raised lines of my poem.

CHAPTER 15

MARKU



*S*blink down at Crina's head as she laves the raised, dead skin of the words carved along my ribs with her tongue. She thinks I'm a glutton for punishment, and while scarification is used to prove pain endurance, she doesn't know the euphoria you experience as your body releases endorphins to counteract the pain.

But I'll explain it another time. Right now, I let the waves of deep love and endless yearning for this woman crash over me and wash me out to sea.

She drifts farther down, using her tongue to trace a snake tat coiling down my abs. My belly clenches in anticipation, and I stop her, gripping her by the arms and dragging her up to me. "Tell me you were not about to suck my dick right now."

Having been caught in her nefarious plan to make me putty in her hands, her bright eyes crinkle with mischief. "Busted."

I place her so that she's straddling me. As she sways above me, I capture one of her bouncing breasts and suckle her nipple hard, the way she likes it. "Fuck, your tits are a goddamn revelation." I massage the plump flesh in my hand. "I see men drool over them. Pisses me off to no end."

Kissing me, she unbuckles my belt and tears the zipper down. I strip out of my jeans and boxer briefs. She peels off her panties and returns to her position back on top. The moment our bare bodies touch, we groan in unison. I'm hard as a rock and she's drenched.

I'm going to eventually need to give it to her a little rough, I know, but I want to savor this tender moment between us. Suspended above me, her wet pussy spreads open on the underside of my rigid cock.

Crina rubs herself up and down my shaft. Things quickly unravel from there.

I lift her up and stare at her tight cunt hovering about the crown of my cock. Slowly, I let her drop and it parts like butter. She takes one inch, wiggles her hips, and takes another inch.

We instantly freeze.

Her gaze locks on mine, fingernails digging into my shoulders. She's feeling the pain, but the grimace morphs into an expression of pure determination.

Oh no, I see what she's about to do.

I open my mouth to stop her, but before I can make a sound, she plunges down, tearing through and impaling herself on my cock. Her spine bows. She throws her head back and lets out a gargled scream.

I surge up, holding her close. "Fuck, baby, you went too fast."

Curving into me, she pants against my neck. Her fingernails skate down my back. "Y-you're b-big."

I snuffle a laugh into her hair, my chest wheezing. "Yeah, I coulda told you that."

"I've seen it. You're cock, I mean. I've had it in my mouth but it didn't prepare me for this. It's a lot. A lot more than I thought."

I shake with laughter. I'm not laughing at her expense, but only a tough Crina would slam down on a cock my size and think she could handle it easily. Especially her first time. "Baby..."

"No, you can laugh." She sniffs. "I deserve it."

I gaze into her eyes. “No, baby girl, you deserve only the best.”

She stares back, so much helplessness swirling in those big eyes of hers. “I’ve got that.” She swallows. “The best, I mean.”

I start shaking my head, but she hushes me. Talking has calmed her. Her panting has subsided and her breathing is now slow and deep. She twitches her hips slightly. I bite my bottom lip as I watch her adjust to my size. So fearless, this woman. She squeezes and releases her tight flesh around my shaft, making me wheeze with each onslaught of pleasure.

Fuck, I’m not going to last long.

I drop my fingers to her clit, knowing I need to get her there fast. I swirl my finger around her wet little pearl. “I felt that cherry pop right here. Look how pretty your cunt looks, spread around my cock like that.”

Her eyes grow hooded and her hips twirl into a wider loop. “Oh, yeah...”

“Fuck yeah, there’s nothing like feeling your tight little pussy tear open for me.” I bounce her up and down a little, each bounce slides her up and down my engorged flesh, making her shudder. I grasp her left ass cheek and wiggle it in my hard grip. “You ready to dance for me, Chuckie?”

She nods.

“Come on then.” I lift her up one handed and bring her down, setting a nice, easy pace. When she gets the hang of it, I bring her down harder, pushing her to take more. “That’s right, baby you take that cock like a good girl.”

I thrust upward as she comes down. “There you go, fucking that cock. Is this how you like to fuck? Show me, baby. Show me how it’s done.”

Her jaw drops on that one. She likes that and rises to the challenge by upping her speed.

“Yeah, you already know how to fuck your man. Made to fit me. A sexy body made to sin, made to get railed. Even on your first time.”

Her eyes glaze over at my dirty words. I roll my hips upward and she whimpers.

“Like that, huh? You want to get fucked good and hard. Like a good little slut. Hot and horny, working for this cock.”

I grind into her and feel a flood of warm liquid gush around the base of my cock. She whimpers into my mouth and I slam her up and down. “Work it good, baby girl.”

My breathing stutters as pleasure zaps up and down my spine. I shake from intense need, I’m so close. She’s almost there, but not quite, so I wrap my fingers around her throat and squeeze. Her eyes snap to attention. Riveted on me, she moans with pleasure as she watches my expression for guidance.

“Markuuu, harder,” she begs, rocking faster and faster, doing a lap dance on my dick.

I do as she asks and give my own command in return. “Ride me rough, Crina. Rough.”

And ride me, she does. I squeeze her waist tightly, helping her as she goes for broke. Her ass smacks my lap with each bounce. My fingers torture her clit. Seconds later, her inner muscles ripple around my shaft and I finally let go, plunging into a spiral of ecstasy like nothing I’ve ever felt before.

It’s euphoria, but not like the scarification euphoria. This is an *ah-ha*, angel-comes-down-and-touches-you-from-heaven rapture. This is *I can die now* elation. This is everything. I swoop and swirl in the air like a falcon in flight, otherworldly. At the same time, I’m hyperaware of every movement Crina makes above me. The undulations of her hips, the gripping of her pussy milking me. Shudders racking her form. Her heaving chest. Her panting breaths. Every aspect is crystal clear, even as I swim in a muffled, cotton-ball bubble suspended above the world.

Her movements turn sluggish, her breathing slows down, and eventually, I float back to earth and the bubble breaks with a soft *pop*. My vision clears and it's suffused with the glow of the most magnificent woman in the world. She's a goddamn siren. A mermaid. My wife. *Mine*.

I pull out, and like a kitten, Crina instantly curls up to my side. I gently wrap my arms around her. She's warm and soft; her earthy, spicy scent of cinnamon, cloves, and crushed orange peels rolls over me. She snuggles into my chest.

There's no talking, which is unusual for us. I like to make jokes and Crina's a chatterbox, but there's no need for words. There's this elemental feeling of completeness, of wholeness. No words can describe what we've just experienced.

Her dark eyelashes cast a shadow on her cheeks, still carrying the marks of her tears. This is the most tender I've ever seen her. I lay on my back and drag her over me, craving the feel of her weight on me. I catch the corner of the bedsheet and draw it up to wrap us in a cocoon of warmth. It's late spring, but there's still a nip in the air this late at night.

I caress the long strands of her auburn locks, twirling one silky curl with my finger. The light catches in the fine strands, reflecting a bright reddish gleam.

"So red," I note with a sigh of reverence.

"My great-grandmother was German. You know, a *Swab* from Banat. A redhead."

I nod, taking my time to admire my wife's beautiful locks. She drowsily lifts her head to watch me watch her for a moment before lowering her head back down and wiggling around until she's found the most comfortable position. Then she falls asleep right on me.

Her weight feels so good. My cock might have gone limp after emptying inside her, but a honeyed sense of contentment settles inside me, nice and warm. I like knowing that her blood is drying in streaks down my cock, that my seed is seeping out of her newly broken-in cunt, and most importantly that she's

fallen asleep after coming on my cock. Nothing tells me that she's gratified more than her falling asleep on my chest after giving me her cherry.

My cocoon of serenity is momentarily pierced by the thought of how fleeting this moment might be. I'll keep her for as long as I live, however long that will be. I will do everything in my power not to fail her like I did Cristian, but there's no guarantee that I'll be around for long. I'm still gunning for Cristian's murderer.

I tighten my arms around Crina, drawing her even closer within our temporary cocoon. And if I should die, at least we got past her virginity. With her father as sick as he is, tonight ensures that she will be considered a Popescu, and my brothers will take care of her. I trust them more than anyone in the world, definitely more than I do her clan, no disrespect to her parents.

That thought comforts me.

If I die, my wife will have the protection of my clan. I've already spoken to Lucian and Anton about it, and tomorrow I'm going to make sure to let Cristo that she's mine in every way that counts.

My eyes droop and I force them back open. Sleep is coming. Insomnia usually rules my nights, but the one time I want to stay up so I can cherish my time with Crina, sleep waltzes in and tries to snatch it away. I'm tempted to resist, but I'm also content enough not to fight tonight. My eyelids sink down and sweet darkness overtakes me.

I will join my wife in her dreams.

Not mine, but hers.

CHAPTER 16

CRINA



*M*y eyes feel like they're glued together. I should open them, but my body is begging me to retreat to sleep. I feel a cold draft in my front so I yank the sheet closer and snuggle deeper into the wall of heat at my back. My knuckles graze bare skin. I frown and repeat the gesture. The back of my fingers again caresses uncovered skin.

Hold on... Where are my pj's?

The whole night comes rushing back and I wake up with a startled gasp.

Marku surges up from behind me in protective mode.

“What? What is it?” His head snaps back and forth, searching for the threat. His hair is a tousled mess. He shakes his head, clearing the sleep. Four stark red gouges disfigure his cheek. Guilt surges through me.

Ugh, I did that last night.

I crash back down into his soft mattress and expel my breath.

Fuck.

Fucked, more like it.

We've definitely fucked.

“Yeah, we have,” he confirms, replying to the comment in my head. I'm sure it was easy enough to figure out what I was thinking by the expression on my face.

I lift the sheet and peer down. Yup, definitely naked. I squint. Annd I see dried blood on not one, but two thighs. I drop the sheet and let out a sigh.

“Told you.”

I roll my eyes at him.

“You mad?”

I touch the scratches on his cheek in apology. He takes my fingers and kisses the tips. I wiggle my butt a little as I consider his question. There’s a twinge between my legs, but then I notice my nipples have hardened, showing themselves off proudly. I snatch my hand back and cross my arms over them.

His hand falls to my thigh, caressing me gently. “No need to hide those beauties. I always enjoy the show.”

My face goes red, and I turn away from him, groaning. I didn’t think I’d feel so bashful the morning after. I’m not usually self-conscious about anything, much less my body. “Not helpful.”

He squeezes my thigh to get my attention. I turn back to him to face him. His expression is serious. “How are you feeling? Does it hurt? Are you regretting it?” Marku smirks. “Should I brace for a fight this morning?”

So many words out of his mouth so early in the morning. How does he wake up and come to without a sip of coffee crossing his lips first?

“Not a morning person.”

You can say that again.

He looks at me, his face grave. “Say something, Crina.”

I clear my throat. “It’s not you. I’m not a morning person.”

Satisfied with my answer, he drops down beside me on the bed and gently tugs at the bedsheet. I grip it tighter against my chest. “What are you doing?”

“Shoot me, but I want to see you again.”

I let out an irritated huff even though I'm preening inside. My hair's a hot mess. My face must look awful from crying last night and then waking up from the sleep of the dead. “Your mother could walk in at any moment...”

“She knows about my insomnia. She never comes downstairs on a weekend morning.” He tugs again. “Plus, I locked the door.”

Satisfied, I reluctantly release the sheet. He gives it a little yank and then whips it off me. I loosen my arms, letting my tits peek out. He cups one breast and begins to distractedly play with my nipple as his attention skates lower down. I fight a moan.

Smoothly, casually, he pushes my thighs apart.

“Hmmm...”

That's all he says.

Not sure what that means, but he rolls off the bed and stands up. I drink in the sight of his glorious body. It's not the first time I've seen it, of course, but it's the first time I've seen his morning wood, standing tall and proud. It's the first time I've seen it painted in my blood. He turns, giving me an eyeful of the dragon spanning his back. My gaze drops to his firm buttocks as he walks into the bathroom. Damn, my husband is sexy.

Moments later, he's back on the bed, sliding between my thighs, bending my knees, and pushing them apart, staring intently as he gingerly washes me with a warm, moist washcloth.

I'm not sure what I'd expected first thing in the morning, but this was definitely not it. I didn't expect him to take care of me this intimately. I'm taken off guard enough that I don't resist him. Plus, it's the morning, dammit.

I hiss as he presses the cloth deeper.

His head tips up. “Sorry, baby, I promise to kiss it better soon.”

That brings another wave of heat to my cheeks.

“Shy.” His lip twitches. “Not what I expected.”

I try to snap my legs closed, but he anticipates my move and props them open, leisurely continuing his task.

“I’m not shy,” I grumble. A lie, but whatever. What can I say? This kind of attention throws me off kilter, but I’m not about to admit to it aloud.

Shy is probably a good description of what I feel, actually. I feel a lot of things. Surprisingly, I don’t feel regret, which I’m guessing from his expression was his biggest fear. Even though I’d sworn never to go to his bed, the truth is that I’d only ever imagined giving myself to Marku. I had only said that out of spite and anger.

“And there’s no regret,” I clarify because he deserves to know that.

He flashes me a boyish grin. My chest tightens at the old innocence in that look. After one last swipe with the washcloth, he waltzes over to the bathroom, giving me another front row seat to his sculpted body. Even his legs look good, thick with hard thigh muscles. I know exactly what his thigh feels like, rubbing between my legs. Great, now I’m aroused. I snap my thighs together before he notices.

There’s not much mystery left the morning after now that light is shining brightly from the two wide casement windows. I may not regret it, but I can’t deny that nerves are setting in.

How does this change our relationship? Annulment was possible before. Not so much now. I’m not even sure I want that. I’m not sure I don’t. I don’t know what I want. Everything feels topsy-turvy, and it’s too damn early to be thinking so hard!

Marku returns, slides in beside me, and wraps me in his arms. I puff out a breath of relief. *That’s better.* Warmth at my

back again and his inquisitive, all too knowing eyes off me. Enveloped in his scent and his warmth, I wish we stay like this forever. His nose softly nuzzles my hair. My entire body hums in the most delicious way.

It's strange to lie in bed with him, just feeling each other, sinking into each other's presence, but after a while, my body relaxes and I let go completely. My skin prickles with hyperawareness. His hand slowly glides down my side, sliding into the dip of my waist and then up my hips. He grasps an ass cheek, jiggling it provocatively. I'm happy to just let him play, curious about what he's planning to do. His hand leisurely coasts down between my legs.

"I knew it," he says arrogantly when he finds my center. I push my ass into his groin and squeeze my thighs, clamping around his hand.

He chuckles into the side of my neck. "I like you in the morning. Soft and relaxed, and letting me have my way with you." He licks up the side of my throat and drops a kiss behind my ear. "You have no idea how good you taste. Like *masala ceai*. Creamy, yet spicy."

I giggle. "That has to be the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"Mm-hmm..." he murmurs in agreement, unrepentant.

Marku slips out from behind me and swoops in between my spread legs, scooching down until his shoulders are bumping against the inside of my knees. He arches his back as he presses his hard cock into the mattress—it's been hard since the instant I woke up. His glute muscles flex and bulge and my pussy clenches in response to the erotic vista spread before me.

Then I feel the first lick. I press my head into the pillow and close my eyes. It's not the first time he's gone down on me, but the first time on the rooftop in broad daylight was fast and furious; I only had flashes of sensations and then my orgasm. I was so angry at him for making me come that I

didn't let myself enjoy it to the fullest. This time, I want to take the time to feel every second of it.

"Fuck, yeah," he groans.

I cover my mouth to muffle a moan, but he pulls my hand down firmly. "Nah, I want to hear every sound you make. I'm going to lick this pussy until I'm dripping with your juices." *Jesus*. "When you've come down, I'm going to carry you into the shower and fuck you against the wall." *Dear God*. "Not gonna lie, it's gonna hurt after last night." He lifts his head with a glint in his eyes. "Pleasure. Pain. Then pleasure again. Think you can handle that for a pre-breakfast snack?"

My mouth goes dry. Last night was about making love, but this was going to be a hard fuck. As pretty as last night was, I can't wait for this. I nod my head jaggedly.

He drops his head and enthusiastically gets to work, licking between my wet folds. I'm still tender from last night, and the feel of his thick, smooth tongue is sublime. My chest heaves with a big gasp of air. *And this is just the beginning*. He has me writhing under the ministrations of his mouth, not letting up until I'm yanking at his hair. He teases my clit relentlessly. Sensations come at me from all directions.

I grind into his lips, riding his mouth, his chin, his jaw, wherever I can get friction. Finally, he thrusts a thick finger inside me, pumping inside and giving me just what I need.

It's muffled, but I hear his praise loud and clear. "That's it, baby. Fuck my mouth. Take what you need."

"Marku. Marku. *Marku*," I babble, distantly hearing my tone getting higher and higher as my climax hits. My vision narrows. My torso jerks upward as I come. Fingernails claw his shoulders, his back. He goes on and on, his hands firmly holding my ass cheeks, until he's wrung every last sound out of me.

He rears up, juices dripping off his chin, and places a hand on the center of my chest to push me back down. Then he's

back, feasting on me as if I'd rudely interrupted him during his favorite meal.

After a few moments, I shove his head away. "Too sensitive."

He chuckles into my swollen flesh and relents, pushing himself up above me, his hard cock dragging through my wet folds. He pumps the underside of his shaft gently. Before I have a chance to wrap my arms and legs around him, he bounds off the bed, dragging me up with him.

"It's too early to leave the bed," I complain, my body barely keeping up with his demands. I wobble on my feet and he sweeps me off the floor and carries me into the bathroom.

The bathroom mimics the pristine white marble that graced one wall of the family room outside, glistening bright with the light streaming in from a window. Everything is white on white. He places me on the edge of a soaking tub.

"Really?" I asked, tipping my head toward the tub. "Never thought of you as a soaking tub kind of guy."

"The bathroom wasn't originally made for me. I moved in once it was done because I couldn't get any sleep upstairs," he replies as he opens the door of the huge shower and turns the knob on. There's a loud screech as hot water comes through the pipes. The glass wall immediately starts steaming up. There's a marble bench inside, a mosaic in the center of the wall made of marble pieces in the shape of a coral reef, white with hints of pink, and four different knobs stacked one on top of the other leading to the wide chrome showerhead.

CHAPTER 17

CRINA



“And you sleep better here?” I ask incredulously, considering that his bedroom down here doubles as a gallery for his brother’s paintings.

He gives a sullen grimace. “I sleep more, yes.”

Not better, though. I bet his sleep is plagued with nightmares.

Taking my hand, he guides me into the shower. The water is scorching hot, but Marku turns his back to it, curving his huge body to protect me as he adjusts the temperature. I can only imagine what that heat is doing to his scars. Maybe he doesn’t feel any of it anymore. Scabbed over and dead, his flesh may be less sensitive to the searing heat. Meanwhile, the tats on his chest shimmer in front of me, the Popescu eagle’s eyes sharp and vicious, staring at me accusingly.

Yes, I reply with a nod at the raptor’s fierce expression, *I did fail him.*

I reach up to Marku’s head, look into his eyes, and pet his hair as an apology. Water sprays out from behind, rivulets snaking down his shoulders and chest. Whatever regret he sees in my face angers him. He stamps his mouth over mine and presses into me. My back hits the warm, slippery marble wall.

He turns me around so that my back is plastered to his front, his hard erection prodding my lower back. I slip a hand behind me and attempt to wrap my fingers around his cock, but he swats it away. Behind me, I hear the opening of a bottle.

A moment later, Marku places his foamy hands on me. They feel like silk as he glides them up and down my body, washing and caressing every inch of me. My head falls forward, my forehead lightly bumping the slick wall as his hand meanders down and settles between my legs. I whine when a thick finger enters. Despite prepping me with his tongue, despite practically squirting for him, I feel the intrusion.

His other hand automatically cups my breast, and he starts rolling my nipple between his fingers. “None of that.” He tsks. “You have to learn to take my cock.”

“It’s too soon. It’s going to hurt,” I whine, although I’m secretly begging for it.

Hot, humid air swirls around us. He lifts his hand, spearing his fingers into my wet hair, pulling my head back gently. “I know how to fix that quick.”

I feel the rush of air before I hear and then feel his hard swat on my ass.

“Ouch,” I cry out, squirming and twisting like an oiled eel.

But he has a good grip on me. Too good a grip, and I’m quickly plastered against the wall, his huge bulk pressing into me.

Raising his arm, he swats me again and a burst of arousal tunnels through me.

Still, I scream, “Stop that.”

My protest only prompts him to rain down a series of harsher smacks, and I bite my bottom lip to stifle my moan and give myself away. I like to fight, and I’m not about ready for this to end. I put up a struggle, attempting to squeeze out from under him.

My head gets yanked back again. A bite on my earlobe, and then a harsh exhale. “Can’t just be a good girl. Always gotta fight me. Fight all you want, but you’re getting this fucking now.”

His grip relents just a little, and I rush to grab the handle of the shower. I jerk it open only to have the glass door slammed closed a second later. A wisp of fear snakes through me. Adrenaline pours into my bloodstream and my lizard brain takes over.

I fall to the ground, knees scraping the marble tiles. He descends on me, like the eagle painted on his chest. I collapse forward and slap my palms to the floor to break my fall. My knees are kicked open from behind. I feel the swipe of the crown of his cock between my pussy lips.

“Thought so.”

I hear the smug grin in his voice. I have half a second to clench my ass and bow my back as I brace for the plunge. His cock pierces me in one forceful thrust. I feel the stretch, the harsh burn of that demanding invasion as he slices through my tender flesh. He keeps going until he bottoms out.

“Sit up,” he warns before pulling me up by the hair. I slip down farther onto his shaft, the back of my shoulders hitting the curvature of his hard chest. He curls his hand around my throat, keeping me pinned to him.

My spine arches, moving me off his cock. That movement isn't too bad. If anything, I'm wet as ever. The adrenaline spiraling through my body helps amplify my arousal. His shaft is thick and intrusive, but there's something about him forcing his big cock inside me, forcing me to accommodate his girth, that makes my cunt pulse in anticipation. He bites down on the crook of my neck, licking up my throat as if he wants to taste every inch of me.

“Say you like it. Beg me to fuck you hard.”

I may be unable to move, but that doesn't affect my mouth. “No, I hate it, you demanding bastard.”

He grunts, shoves me back down, and with his hard grip around my throat, drives in deep.

“Oh, I am demanding.” Another hard thrust. “I'll be demanding this from you every fucking morning.” His fingers

smack down on my pussy. I scream. “A good, hard fuck to keep you quiet and content for the rest of day.” Another smack. Another pounding. Between his rough thrusts and rougher words, I’m spiraling fast. “And if you give me any shit, I’ll pull up your skirt and fuck you right where you stand.” He drives in deep, as if to make a point. “Don’t care who watches.”

I sink down, fingers furious on my clit as he lets go of my throat and grasps a slippery hold on my hips to charge forward.

“And if you still give me problems, I have this...”

His hand slips between my ass cheeks, thumbing my dark hole.

“No,” I rasp, although I’m skating on the edge of my orgasm. And the instant he plunges past my resistance, I come with a shriek. It’s a sound the likes of which I’ve never made. So much pleasure, spurred on hard by touches of pain. I pitch forward, laying my cheek on the slick white floor, water pelting the side of my face from above.

Witnessing my surrender goads him on. He pummels my limp form from behind as I shudder through my ongoing climax. Marku thrusts a few more times before flooding my core, jerking above me as he comes.

Our ragged breaths bounce off the marble, loud enough to hear over the rush of water. I lick my wet lips, sucking on the moisture, and look across the expanse of white-on-white marble in my vision. With a sigh of satisfaction, I melt into the shower floor.

Marku pulls out of me and lifts me up slowly. He settles down on the bench and drags me over his lap, caressing my hair and cooing at me. And the instant he senses that I’ve recovered, he kneels in front of me, spreads my legs open, and spears my swollen pussy with his tongue.

“Are you trying to kill me with orgasms?”

“Not kill.” He winks at me. “Just subdue.”

Little does he know, he doesn't have to resort to anything.

I will never be subdued, but there's no denying that I *am* smitten with my husband.

CHAPTER 18

MARKU



I slap the blood-stained scrap that I carved out of my bed sheet onto my *şef*'s desk. He may not technically be the reigning *şef* since his father, Nelu, hasn't officially retired, but he's the one we recognize as our leader. In a clan, respect matters more than titles ever could.

Lucian, Anton, and I showed up at the downstairs office of his family home unannounced. For as long as I can remember, and that's going as far back as hanging on to my father's coattails at the age of three, the office has been dominated by two heavy oak desks facing each other. One for Nelu and one for Cristo.

Nelu is nowhere to be found. Another clue that he'll retire soon and Cristo will take over full time. Lucian has been working hard to prove himself as the next *consilier*, and the way he waltzed in, with Anton behind him, is a sign of his confidence. It seems he and Cristo have ironed out their issues. Lucian must have raised his grades high enough to graduate since Star started tutoring him—a point of contention with Cristo. Lucian and Anton settle on the ornate, ruby-colored velvet couch at the far wall, silently supportive in their presence.

Cristo arches an eyebrow at the cloth I dropped in front of him. "And this is..."

"Crina's virginity."

Cristo smirks at me and leans back against the chair, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “So the deed is finally done. Wondered how long it would take you to get that wildcat under control.”

He flicks his wrist to check his grandfather’s watch, a Vostok Amphibian. The story goes that his grandfather won it in a bet for killing a Russian in the ring while working the boxing circuit in Moldova. “Fifteen days since your wedding day. Not the fastest time to date. Traditionally, it’s the night of.”

The muscles in my jaw flex. He’s bustin’ my balls. It took the time it took. It’s not like Crina and I had the prince-charming romance or the picture-perfect wedding, the kind of wedding a woman like her deserves.

He nods for me to take the proof back, which I do straight away, slipping it back into my pocket for safekeeping. There’s an old tradition with my people of waving the sheet the morning after, but Crina and the Lupu clan view that custom as barbaric. She’d have my head if she knew what I’d done. She’d most likely go for my eyes first. I smile internally, thinking of our early morning marathon fucking. I’d relish the opportunity to take control and punish her.

Snapping out of my reverie, I reply, “It’s done. That’s the only thing that matters.” I look him in the eye. “No matter what happens to me, she’s clan property. You protect her with your life, if necessary.”

Cristo inclines his head in agreement. I dart a glance at my clan brothers and get a solemn nod from each of them as well. Anton looks especially grave. He’s notorious for taking oaths regarding women the most seriously. It’s no wonder after what happened to his mother.

I may not live long, certainly not a whole life’s worth. I don’t deserve that. But I do need to stay alive long enough to avenge Cristian’s death and make sure any immediate threat toward Crina is neutralized. It’s the most I can expect out of life.

We've been playing hide and seek for years, me and my nemesis. I was onto him so many times. I was so close to discovering his identity, but each time I was on the cusp of catching him, he'd slip between my fingers again. For the past four years, every April 25th—the Feast of St. Mark—I've prayed all day and all night to my patron saint. To remember the fucker's face, just once. If I'd been focused enough on him that fateful night, my task would've been a helluva lot easier.

But I don't deserve easy.

There was a new moon the night of Cristian's murder. It was pitch-dark in that alley, and anyway, all those Russians look alike. He wasn't a kid, like the rest of us. He was a full-grown adult. That brawl was set up for *us*, Romanian and Russian initiates, to get our kills. What was a grown made man doing among us? Why did he intervene? And why, for fuck's sake, did he kill my brother?

My normal prayer goes something like *Please give me the guidance to find him and let me live long enough to kill him*. This year's Feast Day was a bit different. I prayed for Crina instead. I prayed that I'd burst through her hymen and show proof to my *șef* before I died. And now that it's come to pass, I pray that He hasn't forgotten my older prayers.

“So have you found anything on the other front?” asks Cristo, speaking of my never-ending quest.

My head drops, eyes burning with fury. I shake my head in frustration, rubbing the soft cotton in my pocket to calm down.

“I have,” says Cristo.

My head snaps up. Every muscle in my body tightens simultaneously, primed for the hunt. “What do you know? What have you found?”

“You're not going to like it.”

I growl. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Hey,” he snaps. “Watch your tone.”

I jam my fists into my pockets, reining in the urge to snarl again. Popescus are not uptight like those Lupu *mafie* bastards. We scream. We curse. We fight. But still—power is power. Respect is respect. I can't let my endless frustration get the best of me, and, now more than ever, I need to know whatever the hell he found out.

A horrible thought makes me pause. I grip the back of the chair in front of me and blurt out, "Is he already dead?"

"No..." he replies slowly, his eyes softening slightly. I can't stand the pity; it must be real bad if he pities me. But a man with the kind of vendetta I'm carrying doesn't need pity. I need nothing more than information. I'll take care of the rest.

"Don't worry about me, boss," I joke. "Even if he's the president of the United States, I'll still figure out a way to kill him. Go on, tell me what you know."

"The Chechens have produced some interesting intel," he begins. "And it has to do with your mission."

The Chechens are the moles he's sent to infiltrate the Bratva. The Bratva are not made of clan or family members like other mafia groups. No, they are a brotherhood of thieves, bred in the prisons and gulags of Siberia. I'm sure they've tried their best to infiltrate us, but the difference is that we're family. They can't hire strangers to con their way into our clans. They'd have to flip someone who's already on the inside.

My grip on the brown leather chair tightens. "What is it?"

"You're not gonna like it..."

Cristo never hesitates. This must be really bad. But I don't care. I'll deal with whatever comes. "Fuck, Cristo, out with it already."

Lucian shoots to his feet and stands beside me in solidarity.

"Alexei Kotov."

Lucian furrows his brow and asks, "What's the new Bratva boss got to do with Marku's brother?"

Cristo turns to me and answers, “He’s your brother’s killer.”

Whoosh. The room spins for a moment, my vision swirling on the intricate paisleys of the silk handwoven rug beneath my feet. I stumble back like I’ve been punched in the gut and grab the back of the chair for support. “W-what?”

“You heard me.”

So many emotions rush through me. Elation at finally knowing who it is, who I must kill. A sense of completion, of satisfaction, knowing that I will do my duty. I want to shout at the top of my lungs, to beat my chest and cry victory.

And coming in right behind that is a rush of sorrow, as it does anytime I think of Cristian. He’s gone, no matter what I do to avenge his death.

That’s quickly followed by an ache of longing because I most likely won’t survive this murder. I’ll leave Crina behind. I clutch my chest, my heart cracking and gushing pain. Pain and remorse. She’ll feel betrayed again. She’ll be furious. She’ll be devastated. But what can I do? Let Cristian down instead? Pain builds in the back of my throat. No, betraying my brother is not an option.

Determination rears its head again, demanding that I complete my task no matter what. And just when I think I’ve controlled my panic over abandoning Crina, another bout of guilt pummels through me. My heart’s breaking. I want to roar out my fury at the injustice of it all. I finally win her love back and now I’m going to toss it away and hurt her in the process, hurt her like I’ve always feared.

Breaking into my spiraling thoughts, Lucian says, “Fuck, it’d be easier to assassinate the president than him.”

Anton stands up and joins us. “Truth, brother, truth. That man’s protection is insane. Since the last Bratva pig and his brigadier went up in smoke, the new one has been cagey. His compound on Manhattan Beach is built like a fortress. That’s

the heart of Little Odessa, of all the Bratva in Brooklyn. It's impenetrable."

"But if we can kill him, that would be a feather in our cap," muses Lucian. "Luca and Nicu Lupu bombed the last Bratva boss and they've been holding it over our heads ever since, as if they're the best *mafie* clan around. We can prove that we do what they do. Fuck, we can do it better."

"And if we do it, it will be a notable start to my reign as *șef*," adds Cristo.

My heart races, the bloodlust of the hunt flowing through me. My head snaps to attention. "I'll do it. It doesn't matter if I have to stake out his house twenty-four seven and follow him everywhere he goes. I will succeed. It's my destiny."

"I trust you, Marku," Cristo says, his voice slowing in hesitation. He pauses, giving me a sharp look, scrutinizing my face for something. "But he is her father." He arches his brows in speculation. "You know that, right? You sure you want to be the one to put a bullet through his head?"

A jolt of realization shoots through me. In my excitement at finding the fucker, I'd forgotten that the Russian boss is Crina's biological father.

Fuck.

"You don't have to be the one to pull the trigger," Lucian replies. "A father's a father, even when it comes to low-life scum. Save your marriage, Marku. There's no coming back from killing her *tata*."

"I'll gladly do it," Anton chimes in.

I throw up my hand to put a stop to their rambling. "No one's going to kill him but me." I cut a look at Lucian, then Anton. "Don't cross me on this. I don't care if I have to go through the Virgin Mary herself. I will be the one to kill him."

"I'd take my chances with the Virgin over your wife," mutters Anton under his breath. "*Fecioara Maria* is more forgiving."

He's right. If I were married to a Popescu girl, that would be one thing, but those Lupu are sticklers for rules and respect. He's her father, and hell, she may even hate him (he is Bratva, after all), but she'll hate me more for killing him.

Even if Crina has the generosity of heart to forgive me, her mother would never tolerate it. Not only because she may have feelings for that thug, but because he gave her the baby her own husband failed to.

And Dan will never forgive me. I'll have proven myself unworthy of Crina by putting my needs, and the demands of my clan, first. Proven that I do not have her best interests at heart. And they wouldn't be wrong. It's bad enough that I pushed her away in my grief, keeping us separated for years, or that I colluded with our clans to force her to marry me. We're not the most flexible personalities and we got over those hurdles.

But this?

This asking too much. There's only so much a person can take.

And like Anton said, Crina isn't known for her forgiving and yielding personality. Then again, I don't blame her. I'm sure as hell not the forgiving type, either. These past four years have been dedicated to finding my brother's killer. Not exactly forgiving. Sure, some might admire my dedication, but I doubt Crina and her family would see this as anything less than a deep lack of dedication to her.

And they would be right. I'm a selfish bastard for doing this. It's her biological father after all. If I could live with myself any other way, I'd do it. But I've waited four long years for this moment and I can't let Cristian down. I already have once before and nearly killed myself over it. I can't let this chance slip away.

"It's not going to be easy," noted Cristo. "You say you'll track him down, but the man is impossible to get close to.

Before he leaves his house, he has his men do a bomb check not only on his car but any other cars in the vicinity.”

With a sinister smile curving my lips, I reply, “I’ll be his fucking stalker, don’t worry. Even if I have to strap a bomb around my waist and kill myself in the process.”

“Assuming you get close enough for a detonating bomb to get him, too,” Cristo replies, rubbing his chin contemplatively.

“Damn, that’s cold, boss,” I reply with a chortle. “So quick to get rid of me?”

He was just following the train of thought I set up for him, but there’s no doubt he’s a coldhearted man. I pity the woman who falls for him. Looking over him carefully, I shake my head. *Nah, never gonna happen.*

He cracks a smile. “Just thinking out loud.” He rises to his feet, walks around his desk, and claps me on the shoulder. “You know I’ll miss you, Marku. Always knew you’d turn out to be one of my best men, and with high school wrapping up soon, you’d be working for the clan full time. Good men are hard to find.”

I grunt, mildly appeased by the compliment.

“Keep me updated, boys,” Cristo continues. “War is coming and killing the Bratva boss will give us an undeniable advantage. I’d love to bring his head as a trophy to a meeting with Alex. Let that Lupu prick try getting sarcastic with me then.” He narrows his eyes. “Peace and reconciliation notwithstanding, I still hate that fucker.”

Looking him straight in the eye, I promise, “You can count on me, *șef*.”

“And us,” chimes in Lucian, gesturing to himself and Anton.

With that vow, I’ve effectively put a stake through the heart of my marriage.

CHAPTER 19

CRINA



Creeping back home through the front door is terrifying at best. After leaving Marku, I quickly grabbed my buckets of wheatpaste from Gabby's house and dropped them at the side of the house. I gave my favorite tree a forlorn look because there was no way I'd get away with sneaking back up there in broad daylight.

Yes, I may be married and, yes, I may have sneaked out before, but sneaking out and staying out are two very different propositions. It's still early enough in the morning that my mother, who's about as good at waking up as I am, might just be dragging herself out of bed. Cross my fingers.

Skulking up the stoop of my house as quietly as I can, I'm grateful I haven't drawn any of the neighbors' attention. I press my ear to the thick wooden door. Not hearing anything, I slip the key into the keyhole and turn the key. I cautiously push the door open an inch, holding my breath and praying that I didn't give myself away. I pop my head inside and hear clattering in the kitchen.

Clenching my chattering teeth, I tiptoe inside, lock the door behind me, and slip up the stairs as fast as I can. I pass the guest room without a hitch, reach my bedroom, and just as I place my hand on the doorknob, the door to my parents' bedroom swings open.

Out steps my father.

Dammit.

He halts in his step, his gaze sweeping over me critically. He knows I've been up to no good and the guilt on my face isn't helping my case. Panicking, I scramble to think of excuses, but my brain freezes.

I am so busted.

Humiliated, I drop my gaze, trying valiantly to cover the panic rushing through me. If this were my mother, I'd have a string of lies ready on the tip of my tongue. I'd be galvanized by the desire to one-up her. But this is my father. My good, kind, humble father. Facing him, I wrap my arms around myself.

He pats my shoulder awkwardly. "Marku texted me." My eyes dart to his. He doesn't *look* angry. He leans over and places a kiss on my forehead. "Congratulations, you are now a Popescu."

My face flushes with embarrassment and shame. "You hate the Popescus."

"I *hated* the Popescus. But we're at peace now." I snort lightly. *Since when did a peace treaty change anyone's feelings about a rival clan?* "The most important thing," he goes on, "is that my daughter has the protection of a strong man with an influential position in a powerful clan."

"The Lupu clan is better," I huff, offended.

"That is true, but do not underestimate Marku's clan. They are clever and ruthless. It's quite a combination. And more importantly, he's a good, strong man and he loves you. He'll do anything for you, and he has a mighty clan to back him up."

I flush red again. "He doesn't *love* me."

"Of course, he does," he intones solemnly. "He texted me last night to let me know you were with him."

OMG, can this get any more embarrassing? But at the same time, my chest warms with pride that he showed my father the respect he deserves.

“He didn’t want me to worry, in case I discovered that you were missing. He promised to take care of you and he even suggested I pretend I don’t know anything about it to avoid embarrassing you. He knows you so well. And I would’ve taken his advice,” he pauses theatrically with an arched brow. “If you hadn’t bumped up the stairs with about as much grace as an elephant.”

I roll my eyes. “Ugh, I was so graceful. And stealthy.” I pull on my leggings. “I even dressed like a ninja.”

He laughs. “Hmm, if you’d tried to pull it off, I would’ve let you, but you looked so guilty...”

“Good to know for next time,” I reply wryly.

“I’m not suggesting you make this a pattern,” he warns. “You two are married. You’re not doing anything wrong. But your mother...your friends... It’s best for everyone involved to wait until you have a public wedding. Then you can traipse around doing what you want whenever you want.”

I grab him around the waist and lean into him, breathing in his familiar, warm scent. My heart thumps in my chest when I feel his ribs protruding through his cotton pajama top and flannel robe. I lift on my toes and kiss his cheek. “Yes, *Tata*. You’re right, *Tata*.”

He chuckles indulgently, squeezes my shoulder, and pushes me toward my room. “Get in there and change before your mother notices. I’m not in the mood to start the weekend with World War Three.”

Nodding, I enter my bedroom and swiftly close the door behind me and lean back against it. My shoulders droop and I drop my head in relief. The cream flower-patterned voile curtains flutter as a light breeze floats over me from the open window. Heaving myself away from the door, I unclip my black belt bag from around my waist and drop it on the chest of drawers. I languidly walk across the room, sink onto my bed, and pull off my black ballet slippers, kicking them underneath the bed with my heel.

Who knew a forced arranged marriage—and a secret one at that—would mend our broken relationship? Not only were we able to hash out problems that had festered for years, but I came to realize just how much he'd suffered. Not just over his brother's death, although that was bad enough. But over his guilt and how his feelings of worthlessness was behind what happened in that boys' locker room. I'm not known to be a forgiving person but with those realizations, my grudge evaporated like steam rising from a pot of boiling water.

I close the shades, throw on a nightie, and jump into bed. Propped up against the headboard, I pull open the drawer of my night table. Nestled inside is the silk square pocket handkerchief that he handed me to fix my lipstick after we were pronounced married. I had refused to wipe my mouth, crushing the delicate silk in my hand and twisting it into knots for the half hour it took to get out of the church and back home. I threw it in here with the engagement and wedding rings that I'd struggled to take off.

For the first time, I voluntarily touch the delicate Cartier diamond solitaire Marku offered me during the worse marriage proposal ever. I'd instantly admired it, even if I'd pretended to be disgusted by it.

Diamonds are my birthstone and Marku had chosen a ring that celebrates diamonds. It's an enormous round brilliant-cut diamond, circled by a ring of small diamonds, on a platinum band paved with diamonds. It's diamonds upon diamonds. This is the ring they're talking about when they say diamonds are a girl's best friend. The matching wedding band is also plastered in diamonds. The combo is a diamond extravaganza.

I slip them on and raise my hand, admiring their brilliance even in the dusky light of the room. It hits me right then and there. I know my mission. It goes beyond the step of forgiveness. I will fix him. I will pour my energy into loving him and helping him heal. Everything will be how it was before Cristian died. No, it will be better.

I grab my phone, cradling it for a moment as I admire the rings on my finger, and shoot him a silly text. No answer. I wait a bit longer, shifting my butt into my pillows. Still nothing. I frown down at the text I sent. It remains unread. I left his house less than an hour ago. Where could he have gone?

My phone chimes.

I break into an expectant smile as I check my messages.

My face falls.

It's Star.

Figures. She's an early riser.

I click it open with a sigh and read it.

She wants to go back to Manhattan, along with Gabby, to finish what we started. We'd begin in Soho, where there were still dozens of galleries squeezed in between trendy restaurants and luxury boutiques and then make our way to Noho. From there, we'd meander down the Bowery, stop at the poet's café I'd just gone to with Marku last night, and finish off with pierogies from one of the Ukrainian restaurants in the East Village.

I fire back an emphatic *yes*.

She sends me a shocked emoji face followed by *I didn't expect an answer for hours*.

Ha ha, yeah, I get it. She's making fun of me for being awake, but I don't care. I may not be able to tell them about my marriage, but I'm not above talking to them about losing my virginity. The irony is that a normal *mafie* girl would have the opposite reaction. I shrug. I was never one of those.

I figured you'd be tutoring Lucian today, I tease back, knowing how much she resents any time she has to spend on him.

An hour later, I turn the corner onto Queens Boulevard to find Star, Gabby, and... Soren? I should've guessed he'd be

here. He's been unusually protective of his sister lately. "What the hell is he doing here?"

Gabby huffs and shoots him a dirty look. "Someone grabbed my phone and read my *personal* texts when I refused to tell him where I was going because I knew he wouldn't leave me alone." She throws up her hands. "Now here we *all* are."

"Twins shouldn't have secrets," he replies with a bland smile.

"Says the twin with the most secrets," Gabby shouts back. "I want to do one thing on my own." She holds up her index finger. "One thing. But *nooo*, Mr. Annoying Busybody here won't let me go into the city alone. He even threatened to call Anton, as if that was some kind of threat."

She sweeps her hand out dramatically and warns him, "Go ahead. Call him. See if he comes running. You're under some delusion that he knows I exist, but I can assure you with absolute certainty that he doesn't." The corners of Gabby's mouth turn down into a theatrical frown.

He taps his finger on his chin. "And yet I'm here without having to call him. How is that?"

She clenches her fists and lets out a little shriek. "Oh my God, just because he's your new best friend doesn't mean he knows I'm your sister."

"Mm-hmm," Soren replies as he leisurely crosses his arms over his chest like he can't wait to hear her reasoning. "We're twins. How would anyone not know that we're at least siblings?"

"We don't look that much alike," she counters with a flutter of her hand. "But I refuse to allow you to embarrass me any further. I may not have a lot of it, but even I have a touch of Lupu pride. I'm not about to let you call him and completely humiliate me when you realize *he doesn't even know who you're talking about!*"

Tears of frustration gather in Gabby's eyes and I rush over to her, tuck her into my side, and whip around to attack Soren. "For fuck's sake, Soren, why do you have to be such an ass? Can't you leave her alone already? Isn't it enough that you're always torturing her?"

He pushes off the wall of the apartment building at the corner, his brows scrunched together in a severe expression. "I take issue with that accusation. I am not *always* torturing her. I'm looking out for her." His deep furrow turns smooth. "She's my little sister."

Gabby tears out of my embrace, charges up to him with two of her fingers sticking up in a V, and screams, "Two minutes! I'm two minutes younger than you. That does not make you my older brother. We're twins. That's literally the definition of twins. Born at the *same* time."

"But you pushed out two minutes later so it's technically not the same time, is it? It's later. Two minutes later," he replies, wagging two fingers in her face. "Little sis."

Now, I'm starting to get heated. He's Gabby's brother and generally a good enough guy, but he's acting like a little bitch right now.

Gabby balls her hands into fists and raises them at his face. His eyelids drop to half-mast, totally unfazed by the sight of her fury. With a sound of distress, she shrieks, "Get me away from him, I swear, get me away before I do something I'll regret."

Star and I pounce on her, dragging her back as she fights us to get to him while he pulls out his phone and makes a show of scrolling through it indifferently.

We drag her out of his reach, talking in hushed voices for her to calm down, when he saunters over to us and drawls, "Can we get going already? This is going to take all day, as it is."

"So don't come with us," Gabby spits at him.

He rolls his eyes. "As if I'd let anything happen to you."

With that, he turns around and walks a good distance ahead of us. Linking arms on either side of her, we console her as she grumbles about Soren ruining her life.

“Look, he’s keeping his distance,” Star remarks.

“Only because he’s too good for us. He probably thinks we’re talking about stupid girl stuff like makeup and boys. The idiot has no idea what we’re capable of.”

“Let him think what he wants,” I reply. “Little does he know that we’re plotting to get away from here once we graduate.” I feel a twinge of guilt because I don’t know what I’m going to do if I get into a college. I won’t leave Marku now, but I have no idea if he’ll accept the idea of me going.

Wait a minute... Did I just consider letting my dreams fall to the wayside because Marku may not agree? I shake my head at the momentary lapse of sanity. I doubt he would stand in my way on this. I can make him understand, and if not, then I’ll force him to compromise. And the irony, of course, if that he should come *with* me, not simply be a supportive partner. He’s one of the smartest people I know. Unlike me, who’s focused on writing and poetry, he’s good at everything he studies. He’s the quintessential Renaissance man. The poster boy for a liberal arts education.

“Especially you,” Star remarks to Gabby. “You’re the one with an acceptance letter in hand.” She tilts her chin in his direction and lifts her brow knowingly. “Let him think whatever he wants. Let him think you’re weak and helpless. The less he suspects, the better.”

“You know, anyone listening to our conversation would think we’re crazy,” Gabby says. “We think he’s ruined our day, but the Mamas and prissy girls would coo over him and say how precious he is for being so suffocating,” she coughs derisively, “I mean, so protective over his sister and her friends.”

I snort. “Then let him marry one of their daughters.”

Star makes a gagging sound and we all laugh.

“That’s why I love you both, you know,” Gabby says, her eyes getting misty. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Don’t you dare assume that we’ll be separated forever,” Star exclaims.

Guilt floods me for keeping this marriage from them, but I have no choice and I didn’t think I’d stay married for long. Certainly not past our graduation. But now, things have changed in ways that I can’t keep up with. I check my phone again. No text from Marku. Worry niggles at me, but I resolutely put my worries aside. I’ll figure out a way to make it work.

I always do

“Don’t let him ruin our day, because we’re going *all* day,” I interject. “Let him try to keep up with us. If he thinks this is going to take a couple hours, he’s got another think coming. Once we’re in Manhattan, there’s no way he can fight us to finish early. It will be three against one.”

Gabby’s eyes brighten. “Yeah, let’s punish him by dragging this out as long as possible. He’ll have wasted his entire day following us around like a bodyguard. He’ll be so pissed off.” She smiles malevolently. “That will teach him a lesson.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you had such a mean streak,” says Star, glancing at Gabby with surprise.

Gabby narrows her eyes. “Only with him and his *friend*.”

“Who, Anton?”

Her expression turns stormy. I glance at Star over Gabby’s head and tell her to quit it with an imperceptible shake of my head.

“Yeah, him,” Gabby responds grimly.

I look upward and thank my lucky stars. *By the grace of God, there go I.*

Grateful that I'm no longer carrying the burden of hating Marku, I clasp Gabby's arm tighter and suggest, "Forget about him." Feeling generous, I gesture toward her brother. "Don't let them get the best of you. We're in charge of our own destiny and today, we're going to have fun and get into as much mischief as possible."

Smiling gratefully, Gabby replies, "Absolutely. Let's do it."

CHAPTER 20

MARKU



Five days.

Five hellish days of avoiding Crina. Five days of circling Alexei and trying to figure out a way to get to him. Don't know which pisses me off more, shunning Crina or stalking her father.

Twirling my stylus pen, I hunch down in the back row of Math class, tuning out Mr. Florescu's monotonous lecture and glaring blindingly at the back of the student in front of me.

Five days and I'm at my wit's end. I've stalked Alexei day and night. Anton was right; his house is a fortress. To make matters worse, he's recently blocked off the entire street. No one can enter the cul de sac without getting their cars inspected. His neighbors are prisoners to his so-called "protection." I bet they're already being pressured to sell their houses to his officers. It's only a matter of time before the entire block becomes impenetrable.

After being denied entry, I circled the block relentlessly. The closest building I could access was over three blocks away. I stalked him from the rooftop with a telescope, switching it out for my night vision model under the cover of darkness.

Since there was no way to infiltrate his residence, I switched tactics and proceeded to watch his movements. Also a hopeless task. He doesn't leave his compound without his team. He rarely drives without a companion car following him.

I focus back on the equation the teacher wrote on the board. This is one of the few classes I do not have with Crina. One would think I'd be happy for the break in avoiding her, but it's the opposite. At least when I'm huddled in my seat like a coward, I can gaze upon her in between the bodies of other students. Watch her profile when she glances around the classroom. Follow the flick of her hair when it gets in her way.

But the way she looks at me...

I shudder at the longing and hurt and bruised pride on her face before she glances away.

Fuck, thinking about her makes the ache even more poignant, more painful.

She sent a text almost immediately after she'd left me on the morning we made love. I didn't respond. She tried again. And again. I sent her a short reply saying I'm busy with clan business. At Nelu's retirement party, I was in a constant state of torment. It was an endless battle to stop myself from approaching her.

After Cristo was named the new boss, Lucian was named Cristo's *consilier*, and Lucian announced his engagement to Star. There's always been a strange push and pull between those two, but I've been too wrapped up in my own problems to notice what had developed between them. Lucian must be serious about it because he's been slated to marry Roxie for as long as I can remember. I wonder how she's taking it? If it took me by surprise, I have no doubt she was in the dark as well. She's protective of Star and no great fan of Lucian.

Not gonna lie, it hurt to watch my best friend publicly claim his woman when I'm already married to mine and forced to keep it a secret. Or what about the fact that I've chosen to break the heart of the woman I love and destroy our recently healed relationship?

The bell rings, and I slump back in relief before springing out of my chair. I rush into the hall, hoping to catch a glimpse of Crina at her locker and then stalk her as she takes the

subway home with Gabby. One day into their engagement and Lucian has already forbidden Star from joining in their traditional subway ride home. Obviously, I can't impose such a rule on Crina, so I skulk behind her, hiding from sight and trailing her like a lovesick pup.

I sweep through the crowded hallway in search of Crina, but I've missed her. Furious with myself, I prowl toward the stairway to try to catch up with her.

The math teacher steps into my path. "A moment, Marku, if I may."

I halt in my tracks, making sure to wipe the impatience and frustration off my face. "Yes, Mr. Florescu?"

"You seemed distracted the past week. Is something going on?"

My shoulders slump. As if I could explain that I'm avoiding the woman I love because I must kill her father.

"No," I mutter. "Sorry, my mind has been busy with other things."

"This is an AP class, Marku, and you're a bright student. You have to keep your head in the game if you intend to maintain an A in my class."

Tell me about it. Figuring out a way to kill Alexei seems hopeless so excuse me if I've been slipping in Math.

"I know you have other responsibilities. I see it every year, the attention span slips as we get closer to graduation. No college for you, I assume."

I nod in agreement, my eyes glued to the floor. I'm a proud Popescu, but I wish we had just a bit of the educational ambition that the Lupu clan has. I'm ready to start working for my clan full time once I graduate, but I can't help but feel I could be more useful to my clan if I went to college.

"Then this is your last chance to challenge your mind with academics. May seem pointless, I know, but you're not just any student. If you were a Lupu, I'd be confident that you

would graduate with a post doc in mathematics. You've got that kind of brain."

He claps me on my shoulder. "I don't get involved in clans and their standards, but I'd hate to see that bright mind go to waste."

"I'll do better, Mr. Florescu. I promise."

"That's what I want to hear," he replies with a kind smile. Gripping my shoulder in a fatherly way, he lets go and nods for me to exit.

I turn toward the stairs and a second later, my phone blows up with texts. I check my texts, but before I can process the flurry of messages, the phone rings.

"Fuck, man, answer your texts," gripes Anton.

Increasing my pace as I go down the steps, I ask, "What's going on?"

"Lucian can't find Star. He thinks she's in danger. She left to take the subway with Crina and Gabby. He ran to catch them."

Star's older brother, Tatum, had masterminded the bombing of the last Bratva boss and brigadier. The *mafie* clans have known this for a while, but the Russians must have recently figured it out. Since Tatum has disappeared, they must have gone after Star in retaliation.

"Fuck."

"And if anything happens to her," Anton replies grimly. "Then you know Gabby and Crina are in danger. Either of them would run through bullets for her."

His words dump ice into my bloodstream. "I'll check the geolocator on Crina's phone and send you the coordinates. Meet me outside with your car."

I hang up, click on the app, and find Crina at the Eighty-sixth Street subway station. I check the MTA for the train schedule. A train is about to pull into the station any minute.

Once she goes underground, it'll be a crapshoot to find her again.

I storm down the stairs, shoving people out of my way, and book it down the street. Spotting Anton, I jump into his car and we speed toward Park Avenue, the fastest route to the next subway station. We race down Park Avenue while I track the dot on the map moving downtown. The women have boarded a train.

No idea what's going on or whether Lucian has caught up to them, we race to intercept the women at the next subway stop. Anton weaves through traffic like a madman. We abandon the car on the corner of Sixty-eighth Street, tear down a flight of stairs, and jump the turnstiles. The station master runs out of the booth shouting us down, but we're long gone before she can catch up.

Anton and I sprint down the platform. He yanks on my sleeve. "Make sure they're on the subway car before you jump on. They usually sit in the middle. If we stand over there," he says as he points to a specific spot, "we might catch a glimpse of them."

My thoughts are racing a mile a minute, and I would've jumped on the instant the train stopped. How he knows so much about their habits is beyond me, but his plan makes a lot of sense.

We settle in halfway down the platform, about five feet apart, to get a better chance of catching sight of them. My heart pounds like a jackhammer inside my chest. My entire body is on high alert, my muscles tense and ready to pounce. The fists at my sides clench and unclench, clench and unclench. I compulsively check my app and see the dot moving through the tunnel, nearing the station.

"They're coming."

We wait in anticipation, me staring intently down at my phone, riveted on the moving dot. The grip around my phone gets slippery with sweat. I have this fear that if I blink an eye,

I'll miss her or she'll disappear. It's irrational, but then again, I've already failed Cristian. That night, I saw the threat and couldn't reach him in time. And here I am, in the same situation. Trying to cope with the same agonizing sense of powerlessness. And while this is supposedly a threat to Star, Alexei has shown no great love for Crina. What if he's the one behind this or if this is a ruse to hurt Crina? The same man who slaughtered my brother bare-handed might be after my wife. My breathing stops, caught in my chest. Cold sweat trickles down my spine.

The rumble of the incoming train shudders through the station, getting louder by the second. The train roars through and blasts past us. Squinting my eyes, I glare through the blur of cars as they stream past.

Eventually, the train slows down. Riders crowd around us. Anton and I push through the throng, striving to get to the middle car because our calculations were off. Peering in through the grimy windows, I wave Anton past me to search the next car.

A moment later, I hear him shout, "They're in here!"

I break into a run, catching up to him as he jogs alongside the car, keeping pace with it to be the first in front of the doors when it stops. I follow, elbowing people left and right, and happen to be at the doors as they slide open with a familiar chime.

A Russian is sprawled on the floor of the subway, bleeding from a direct gunshot wound to the head. Crina is lying near him on the dirty ground. Terror grips me by the throat.

I surge forward. She rolls over onto her back and throws her arms at her sides, unharmed. I clutch the side of the sliding doors, eating her up with my eyes. No blood. No wounds. She probably fell to the ground when she heard the gunshot, smart girl. Lucian is holding Star in his arms, who's bleeding from a nasty slash across her chest. Anton moves swiftly past me and grabs Gabby, scooping her up without a word.

I jam my shoulder against the door to keep it open. Contradicting emotions swam me. Relief that the women are alive and uninjured, for the most part. Fury at Lucian for not keeping that low-life scum alive for me to torture until kingdom come. Agony that my baby had a brush with death, that I had been powerless to protect her. I'd never have survived her death. Fuck, I want to punch a wall or tear something apart.

Instead, I maintain an air of calm, cracking my signature smirk to reassure her that everything's okay. Unable to move from my spot, I crook my finger at her.

She blinks up at me in stunned silence. "How did you know?"

With my eyes I respond, *Baby girl, for as long as I'm alive, I'll always know where you are.* With my mouth, I say, "The tracking device on your phone. Now come here, you pain in my ass."

She clambers to her feet and jumps into my arms. I crush her to me, burying my face in her hair, greedily dragging in the sweet, spicy scent of her. She squeezes me back with desperation. And then, my strong girl bursts into tears.

Lucian moves past me with Star, murmuring a soft thanks.

A woman shrieks, "Oh, my God!" as she catches sight of the dead Russian. Anton stomps out of the subway car and I gently move with Crina in my arms, finally letting the doors shut behind me.

People throng around us in all directions. A unit of cops fans out onto the station platform and the crowd surges in response to their presence. I need to get her out fast. I wave Anton on and we split up in different directions. Half Covering Crina's head with my hand, I shelter her from the panicking horde as we plunge into the melee to blend in and hide from the onslaught of policemen.

We move as one unit as I guide us away from the track and toward the wall, letting the crush of people collide against one

another. Hugging the wall, we inch our way toward the nearest exit and up to the street. Policemen are swarming around Anton's abandoned car. Turning Crina away from them, I maneuver us down the street to Third Avenue, where I wave down the first yellow cab I see.

The taxi screeches to a halt by my feet. I swing the door open and Crina tumbles into the back seat. I jump in behind her, slam the door closed, and give the cabbie directions. With so much police activity, the traffic has slowed to a standstill, but I'm fine waiting them out in the cab. At least we're sealed off from the madness of the subway station. The police will check the surveillance cameras. Even if there aren't any in the subway car, there will be footage from the two stations. By the time they come looking for us, we'll be safely surrounded by our clans with lawyers ready to intercede.

Unable to stop myself, I pull Crina close to me, caressing her hair with one hand, her thigh with the other. Tears have left wet tracks down her cheeks and my heart squeezes in pain.

"He said, 'Not today, princess. Today you live.' What about a knife to my best friend's throat?" Crina rambles. It takes me a moment to follow along. "I was trying to distract him while Gabby crept toward the emergency brake to stop the train. He knew me," she says between her chattering teeth.

Her eyes are wide, showing the whites around the irises. Adrenaline continues to rush through her system.

"That asshole had instructions. Kill Star and any other meddling bystanders but leave me alive, for today at least." She shudders. "Those kinds of instructions could only have come from one person."

I watch the pain twisting her features. "Your father."

"That's right." Her eyes flash with rage. "If I didn't hate him before, I sure as hell do now."

A whooshing sound floods my eardrums. My head jerks slightly. *Did I hear right?* "Come again."

She tosses me an impatient look and snaps, “Keep up, will you, Marku? God, you can be so infuriating sometimes.”

“But—” I shake my head. “Did you say you hate your father?”

“Duh, what did you think? That I’d love him just because he happened to impregnate my mother. He was nothing but a sperm donor. But after today, I hate him with every cell in my body.”

She drops her gaze down to her fingers, which are squeezing the air like it’s his imaginary throat.

“I want to rip him to shreds. He was going to slaughter my best friend right in front of me but keep me alive, for the time being. That Russian acted like he was doing me a favor when he had a gun to Star’s head.” She whips her head toward me. “I’m going to kill him.”

I drop my hands around her shoulders. “Whoa, whoa, baby, relax. Just relax.”

She shrugs off my hands and jabs a finger in my face. “Don’t you dare *baby* me right now. I’m mad at you.” Tears spring from the corners of her eyes. She clenches her fists and waves them in front of my face. “You’ve been ignoring me. You fucked me and then dumped me like I was nothing to you. *Nothing!*”

“No,” I roar. “You mean everything to me. Everything. But I have to kill that fucker and I thought you cared for him. How could I face you, knowing that I was going to kill him?”

“Wait, what?” She frowns at me, her button nose scrunched up in the most adorable way. “Who are you killing?”

The taxi jerks forward and starts moving. “You’re biological father, Alexei.”

“He just tried to have my best friend butchered in front of me. I begged that man to let her go. I said I’d do anything he wanted. Anything. The bastard responded that I’d have to wait

for another chance to prove my usefulness since I'm married. For now, he was to leave me alone, but he'd been warned that I had a soft heart and not to negotiate for Star's life. I couldn't do anything to save her."

Crina buries her face in her hands and collapses into tears again. Her grief pounds inside the taxi like an enormous heartbeat, overtaking every ounce of air. I wrap my arms around her, breathing in her pain, praying that I can draw it out of her and carry it for her.

At the same time, relief rushes through me. She doesn't hate me for what I'm going to do. I'm so thankful that I attempt to drag her onto my lap, but Crina's not having any of it. She fights me. Hitting me in the chest and arms. Clawing at my face. I let her take out her anger on me even though I want to grab her hands and reverently kiss them. Kiss them and then kiss every inch of her.

But she needs to get her rage out. And I deserve it. I deserve her wrath. I distanced myself. I ignored her on purpose. I failed to protect her from what happened in the subway. It was only a lucky chance that her father chose not to target her.

Her small fists pelt my head and shoulders. I cover my head, but it's only for show. It doesn't hurt. I wish it did. I would relish the pain. I deserve it.

Eventually, her energy flags. Her fists relax and her punches graze me. Finally exhausted, she drops her balled fists, hangs her head, and pants softly. I gently wrap my arms around her, grateful that she's given me a chance to redeem myself. I bring her to me gently and cradle her in my lap, peppering her wet cheeks with kisses.

"Why did you leave me?" she asks in a small voice. The loss and pain in her tone guts me.

"I was a coward. I couldn't bear to see the hurt on your face when you realized I'd chosen Cristian over you. I thought it was between revenge for my brother or the love of a father."

“He is not my father,” she sneers.

“Alexei was right about one thing. You are softhearted. Beneath your tough exterior, you love so hard. How could you not hold a bit of love for him? Even if you told me you didn’t care about him. Life is long. What if you changed your mind and wanted to get to know him at some point? I would have been the one who’d taken him from you. Your husband. I’m supposed to protect you, not kill your father and bring you grief.”

“It’s a moot point now,” she says with a pout, relaxing into me little by little. My heart sings at the way she settles into me, showing me a level of trust I don’t deserve. “He was always creepy and scary, but now I feel nothing but hatred.” She tilts her head and glares at me. “He’s kidnapped me once. He attacked Star. God knows what he’ll do next. He needs to be put down like the rabid dog he is.”

I glance out the taxi window over the East River as we cross over the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge. I let out a discouraged sigh. “Am I’m meant to fail in everything I attempt to do?”

She looks at me sharply. “What do you mean?”

Gazing over the deep flowing water, I explain, “I’ve spent the last five days tracking him. He’s untouchable. He’s surrounded by guards every second of every day. A stranger, much less an enemy like me, could never get close enough to kill him.”

She purses her lips, her eyes boring into the side of my face. I feel the heat of her scrutiny and turn my gaze toward her.

“Maybe not an enemy, but what about a daughter?”

CHAPTER 21

CRINA



I'd lashed out at Marku. Of course, he took it, probably relishing the pain. My shoulders slump, shame weighing them down. I might not have physically hurt him, but I shouldn't have done that. I was just so hurt. Hurt at the last five days. Hurt at the horror and powerlessness of the attack, orchestrated by the Sperm Donor. Almost losing Star gave me a tiny taste of what Marku had gone through with Cristian.

And that tiny taste was too much for me.

In the subway car, I was trying to keep that thug from hurting Star when a gunshot rang out. I saw her crumple beneath the gangster and thought she'd died. I screeched at the top of my lungs and crashed to the ground, expecting bullets to ricochet off the metal walls of the train.

Seconds later, Lucian was there, pulling a living Star off the ground. I almost fainted with relief. It was while I was on the ground, catching my breath, that the doors slid open and Marku appeared like an avenging angel. I didn't know how he'd done it, but he'd come for me.

Here in the cab, I'd struck out at Marku until my energy flagged. Exhausted and weary to my bones, I simply place my cheek on his chest and gratefully nod off.

The taxi stops and I jerk awake. We've arrived. In a blur, I watch Marku pay the cabbie, leave the cab, and bend down to scoop me into his arms. I would normally fight him, but I

don't have the strength. By the time we reach his front door, I'm shivering. My thoughts are scattered. Each time I try to remember the subway, my memory gets whisked away on a great gust of fear and stress.

He carries me to his bedroom where I'd lost my virginity five days ago. I listlessly look around the familiar room. So much has happened since then.

Depositing me carefully on the bed, he kneels, and pulls off one shoe. Then the other. I simply watch him from above, numb and cold.

“Baby, we need to get you in the shower.”

I grind down on my chattering teeth. “S-stop c-calling me that.”

He glances up at me. “Baby?” He shoots me a disarming lopsided grin. Shaking his head, he says, “Nah, I'm gonna keep using that.”

“I-I'm n-not your b-baby.”

“Why don't we pick this back up once you're warm enough to talk without stammering?”

I narrow my eyes. God, I hate it when he acts so rational.

“I refuse to go into that b-bathroom with you. If I go in there, you're going to fuck me,” I grumble.

He concentrates on rolling down one sock and dragging it off my foot. “I may *want* to fuck you, but you're in shock. I'm not going to do anything but take care of you right now.”

I harrumph, not sure whether I'm a little disappointed by this sudden show of self-control. “We'll see about that,” I mutter under my breath.

Ignoring my comment, he takes off the other sock and gently tugs me to standing. He strips down nude and saunters into the bathroom, again subjecting me to a view of his broad shoulders and back, covered in ink. Oh, and his perfect ass. I roll my eyes toward the ceiling. How could I forget his ass? I

growl in irritation. People in my clan are not shy about their bodies, but he's purposely showing off, the jerk.

I cross my arms over my chest and glare at his back. I may have taken my rage out on him, but I'm still nursing a grudge.

The sound of water raining down in the shower drifts out to me. I hear him fiddling with the pressure or temperature and then he comes back out, nonchalantly uncrosses my arms, and starts pulling my clothing off. I'm about to fight him, I figure I *should* fight him, but in the end, I can't summon up enough energy to stop him.

Even standing in one position this long is a struggle. By the time he's undressed me, steam is enticingly pouring out of the doorway. He grabs my hand and gently tugs me toward the bathroom. *None of this means I've forgiven him.* Helping him kill my father absolutely does not mean I've forgiven him. And letting him help me also doesn't mean I've forgiven him. I'm simply taking the path of least resistance. There are days when even I succumb to that.

Marku helps me step into the huge glass shower. The air is thick with steam. Blessed, hot water rains down on my face as I walk under the showerhead. He turns one of the knobs below the showerhead and water sprays from two of the walls. I freeze in place, gasping at the unexpected direction of the water. Jets of water strike marble and glass, the drumming sound calming me.

I relax in the multi-directional shower, letting the heat and steam warm my skin and relax my muscles. A shudder works its way through me as I release the cold that roped itself around my core like a boa constrictor.

"You could've told me about these last time," I gripe, waving toward the walls of spraying water.

He steps in behind me and says, "It wouldn't do to show all the tricks I have up my sleeve."

His hard cock prods my lower back. He leans forward and I tense, but he was only reaching for the body wash. He lathers

up and then his hands are on me. So hot and smooth. So comforting. My shaky legs almost collapse; it feels so good to have him massaging my sore muscles.

He takes his time, touching, washing, caressing every inch of me. My head drops forward and my eyes flutter shut. I breathe in slowly. The steam makes it a little hard to breathe in, but I don't care. Everything feels so good compared to before.

As long as I don't think. Don't think about the subway. Don't think about Star, about Marku, about Alexei, about my father, about my mother, and on and on. Just let the steam and heat and Marku's hands work their magic.

I waver on my feet and he sits me on the marble bench. I slump back, letting my head drop, preparing it to thump against the wall. But it doesn't. Marku slipped his hand behind me as a buffer to absorb the impact against the hard, smooth marble. He sits beside me and massages my scalp. Water gently sprays my face and I close my eyes, reveling in his soothing touch.

He grabs his shampoo, squirts too much in his palm, and lathers my hair. Standing up, he takes down a detachable showerhead that I hadn't even noticed and shifts me on the bench so that he can get behind me and rinse my hair.

At this point, I'm as malleable as clay, but I still mumble a complaint about the lack of conditioner just to be difficult. Hey, it's the least I can do. He deserves far worse. He may have realized his mistake, he might be chastened, but I'm still pissed off. Fear of my reaction to him killing my father is not a good enough excuse to ignore me after taking my virginity.

We're in there so long that the skin of my hands starts to wrinkle. Marku shuts off the water and opens the glass door. I make a distressed sound at what feels like an arctic wind blowing over my skin in the dispersing steam.

Marku yanks a large towel from its hook and holds it open for me. Grumbling, I heave myself off the warm marble bench

and step toward him, letting him wrap me in the ginormous soft, fluffy towel.

Dripping on the floor, he grabs another towel and dries my hair as I tightly wrap the big towel around me. Once my hair is dried, although still damp, he finally takes a third towel and whips it around his waist.

I shuffle into the bedroom and stop in my tracks.

There's a tray with two covered plates of food and glasses of water and juice.

"What the hell is this?"

"My mother left it," he replies, avoiding my glare as he dries himself.

I gaze up at the ceiling, tears pricking the edges of my eyes.

He comes behind me again, wrapping his arms around me. "I had to tell her. She would've heard anyway. Everyone is on high alert. You need to hydrate. You need to eat."

"You could've just taken me home. My mother would've ___"

"No."

"No?"

"No, you need to be here with me, and I need to take care of you."

I glance over my shoulder at him. "You mean, you need to take care of me because you feel guilty."

"The guilt is there, yes," he admits. "But after what happened, I'd need to take care of you regardless."

Too tired to argue, I shrug out of his hug and plop on the bed. Picking up a glass of water, I down it in a few gulps.

"See," he says as if that somehow justified any of the choices he's made. It's not that his mother doesn't know about us. She was at the wedding. It's just that now I'll have to go

upstairs and thank her. Talk about awkward. I was hoping to slink away under the cover of darkness or early morning light. I can barely think at all, much less talk to anyone...except Marku, apparently.

He lifts the cover off a plate and the scent of roasted lamb and potatoes and carrots drifts up to me. On a side plate is *mamaliga*, or Romanian polenta. Suddenly, my mouth is watering. I scoot closer to the tray of food, tear off a piece of lamb, and pop it in. The flavors of rosemary and garlic and savory meat burst on my tongue. I take a spoonful of creamy *mamaliga* and stuff it in my mouth.

Marku sits beside me, staring at me with remorse in his eyes.

“It’s rude to watch people eat,” I say between bites of food. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

He shakes his head.

I take a forkful of food and press it to his lips. He opens his mouth and swipes it off the fork with his tongue. His eyes close as he slowly chews and savors the food.

“See, told you.” Meanwhile, I’ve scarfed down half a plate of food. “Your mother’s a way better cook than mine.”

He remains quiet, just watching me, and opening his mouth when I pause long enough to prepare a bite for him. He’s just appeasing me, but I can’t eat alone and he knows that.

Once I’m full, I drop the fork. It clatters on the porcelain dish and I jerk in reaction.

He covers my hand and says, “It’s okay,” as he passes me a glass of juice and takes care of the food, depositing it outside in the family room. Embarrassment flushes my cheeks as I think of his mother returning downstairs to pick up the tray and cleaning up after me.

He closes and locks the door, glances at me, and says, “It’s okay, baby. She’s your mother-in-law. Has been for a couple of

weeks now.”

“Married for weeks and yet you had no issues ignoring me for five days...”

He pulls the bed cover down and tilts his head for me to get in.

Too tired to argue, I glance around, and say, “I need a shirt or something.”

He lets out a beleaguered sigh. Yeah, yeah, he wants me naked, but I don’t usually sleep naked, and I’m not about to do it for him tonight.

He opens a chest of drawers and hands me a white T-shirt. Cold, I drop the towel long enough to throw the shirt on and then dive beneath the covers. He gets in beside me and I turn my back to him. Not to be deterred, he spoons me from behind.

Again, the only reason I don’t reject him is because he’s the main source of heat in this place. It may be April, but that’s not exactly summer yet, and I’m afraid the terrible cold will return to my limbs. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it. But there’s no denying the comfort I get from his arms wrapped around me. The sense of security. I don’t usually need it. I can provide that to myself, but I’m giving myself a pass today.

“I haven’t forgiven you, you know,” I declare to make sure I’ve thrown up some kind, any kind of emotional wall between us.

He curls into me, one arm loops over my waist. “I know.”

I shoot up, remembering something. “My parents.”

His arm tightens around me, dragging me back into the bed. “I’ve already texted your dad. He knows where you are.”

I relax back into him. “God, that’s embarrassing as hell. I’ve been acting like I’m not married so as not to give him any more useless hope after the night I stayed over. This is going to ruin all my hard work.”

“Maybe he deserves to have a little hope... At least for tonight.”

That’s an understatement. It’s hard to maintain the no-marriage stance when my father is so desperate to see me happy with Marku. It’s a tightrope act, and I haven’t successfully found the balance.

“Wanna watch a movie?” he asks.

I pause, considering his proposal. “Like what?”

He grabs the remote and clicks on the TV, going to the section on movies.

“Horror, of course.”

“Of course...”

Horror used to be our thing when we were kids. Cristian would occasionally join us, but we’d started watching as young as ten and got addicted to it. That’s where Marku’s nickname for me came from.

“Old school only,” I demand.

“Pfft. What else?”

He clicks on Poltergeist. “What about a classic?”

“Yeah, that’ll do,” I reply begrudgingly even if my heart is singing inside. That was definitely an old favorite of ours.

He starts the movie and a few moments later, the familiar soundtrack comes on. I settle deeper into him, wiggling my butt against his erection.

“Stop that,” he growls into my ear and my skin prickles with goose bumps.

“I’m mad at you, and in the morning, you better watch it, because I’m going to tear you into pieces for that bullshit you pulled.”

“I expect nothing less.”

Having said my piece, I snuggle back into his chest, letting his heat warm me like a furnace.

“And I have to go upstairs and say hello to your mother,” I mumble, my eyes drooping.

I hear the suppressed laughter in his “Mmm-hmm.”

A comforting scream rips through the room. Ah, the demons have arrived.

A moment later, I’m asleep.

CHAPTER 22

CRINA



I wake up to Marku's head between my thighs, gasping out an orgasm before I'm fully awake.

He pops his head up, licks his lips, and smirks. "That's how I should wake you up every morning."

I drop my head back onto the pillow as I take a long draught of air. "You're killing me."

"Good."

Gazing at the ceiling, I mumble, "If this is part of your plan to butter me up so I don't murder you, you'll be sorely disappointed."

"Didn't even consider it," he shoots back.

I lift my head. My blurry eyes come into focus on his face, his lower jaw wet with my slick. I shut my eyes. "I can't do this so early in the morning."

"It's ten o'clock."

"Exactly." My eyes snap open and I glance over at the clock on the nightstand. "I can't believe I've been asleep since six o'clock last night."

His eyes soften as he gazes up at me. "You were tired. You went through a lot."

"I missed the movie," I complain as I snatch up my phone, which Marku must have found and placed on the night table. I shoot off a text to Star.

“I checked in with Lucian. She’s doing okay.”

Star replies instantly, and we converse by text for a few minutes. Once I’m certain she’s feeling better, I drop the phone and slump back into the bed. “She’s okay,” I repeat, not able to come up with anything more inventive this early.

I follow his movements greedily as he settles beside me, buck naked. I bite my bottom lip as my gaze trails down his tatted and scarred chest and follows his happy trail down to his erection. One look and I almost gave up on my anger. I shake the lust clouding my head. Luckily, I managed to snatch the tail end of it and hang on for dear life.

Of course, he must have seen me eye-fucking him and rests his hand on my belly. “How are you doing?”

Stifling a yawn, I purse my lips and give him a side-eye glare filled with disapproval. “You mean besides my best friend almost dying on an order from my good-for-nothing Sperm Donor and my husband ghosting me right after I lost my virginity? You mean that?”

He reluctantly drags his hand away. I instantly miss the contact and snarl at him, even though my anger is now directed at myself. I’m already hooked on him to the point that if he withdraws his touch, I’m antsy. He clasps his hands together. “What do you want me to say that I haven’t already said? I’ve already acknowledged that I fucked up by assuming that you’d be upset.”

“Lesson one, don’t assume. Ask. Just ask. It’s called communication, a skill I thought you’d have by now.”

His mouth parts slightly. “Noted.” He breathes out a long breath. “I owe you an apology. Lesson two is to show you how sorry I am. I tried yesterday, but words are important.” He locks eyes with me. “I’m sorry for assuming to know how you’d react. I’m sorry for running and for hurting you. I’m sorry for everything.”

My heart slams against my rib cage. He’d expressed his regret in the way he took care of me, but he’s right, words are

important. I appreciate him saying them. It makes me feel seen after he ghosted me for so many days, making me feel as unseen as with my mother. But I still have something more to say. Marku may have apologized verbally, he may have taken care of me yesterday and eaten me out this morning, but that doesn't mean things are good between us. Not by a long shot.

“The thing is, Marku...this isn't the first time...”

His brows slam together. “The first time... What?”

“Pushed me away.”

He pulls back in surprise. “I didn't push you away, I avoided you.”

I give him a look that says *there's no difference*, but he insists, “There is, Chuckie. This was nothing like the other time. I must be addicted to you or something, especially after the other night, because it was torture being away from you.”

He takes hold of my hands. “Baby, I fucking love you. Do you think I've ever said that to someone before? No, I haven't. It's always been you. And just when we're finally together, I get slapped in the face with the choice between revenge for my brother's death or my wife's happiness. What kind of husband chooses anything over you? A fucked-up one, that's what.”

He looks away in dismay, focusing on the cliff painting. “And I couldn't protect you yesterday—”

A dull ache spreads through my body. I take his hands, squeezing tightly. “You're not a fucked-up husband, you're a *mafie* husband, something I've always known and accepted about you.”

He snaps his gaze back to me, his eyes bleeding sadness and remorse. “And what kind of *mafie* husband am I if I can't keep you safe? You can't answer that question so easily, can you now? I'm a selfish bastard is what I am. If I wasn't so selfish, I'd let you go. I *should* let you go. I don't deserve you.”

“Don’t you dare,” I shout, slapping him on the chest. “This is what I’m talking about. Since when are you so quick to give up?”

He throws up his hands. “It’s not about giving up. It’s about doing what’s best for you. I couldn’t save Cristian. I couldn’t save you yesterday. Before that, I fucked up with the Sperm Donor. What does that say about me? You deserve the best, Crina. Can you honestly say I’m the best there is?”

I clench my fists, holding back the torrent of frustration swirling inside me. “Oh, for God’s sake, Marku, don’t bring Cristian into everything. Don’t mix the two of us up in your mind.” I lower my tone, making sure I emphasize the words. “I’m not Cristian.

“What happened yesterday was horrible. I’m not going to deny how bad it was, but it’s part of being in a clan at war. This would’ve happened whether we were together or not, whether I was a Lupu or a Popescu. Horrible things happen. You can’t take the blame for every bad thing that happens in the world because of one night.”

Shaking his head, he whispers, “The faith you put in me is undeserved.”

“I call bullshit. You’re torturing yourself over your *fear* of not rising to the occasion. That alone is proof of how much you care about me. And I know you, Marku.” I claim his face with my hands, joggle his head a little. “You will always rise to the occasion.”

“Not always...”

“Look at me,” I demand. “You need to let it go. Cristian’s death was a tragedy, and you were, what, thirteen years old? Do you think it’s fair to blame yourself? Fair to me? Because it’s stopping you from loving me completely. That’s what upsets me the most. Ghosting me was rooted in your fear of disappointing me because of what happened to Cristian. Taking care of that is the first step to being fully present in our marriage, and if you truly love me, that’s what you’ll do.”

He huffs in frustration. “I don’t know how to let it go. I was the older brother. I should have saved him and I failed him. How can I get past that? Especially when his killer lives and breathes.” He turns to face me completely and stares deeply into my eyes. “I might be able to get past it once I avenge his death.”

I kiss his lips gently, and state, “I can help you do that.”

He shakes his head. “I refuse to entertain your idea.”

“I mentioned it yesterday in the cab, but instead of discussing it, you’re just going to shut me down?”

“After what happened yesterday, I can’t put you in a vulnerable position. That’s out of the question.”

On the razor’s edge of my temper, I challenge him, “Well, you’re going to have to make a concession if you want to be with me. Do you want to be with me?”

“Of course.”

“Do you want to fight for us?”

“You know I do.”

“Then consider this as part of your apology.”

He eyes me dubiously.

“I’m going to help you get close to Alexei. That may potentially put me in danger because everything about that man is awful.”

“Then, no,” he instantly replies.

I shove his shoulder. Desperate times call for desperate measures. “But if you don’t do it, he’ll come after me again. He’ll always be a threat.”

“He protected you yesterday.”

“Because he wants to use me. He’s plotting. But if I don’t do whatever he comes up with next, he won’t hesitate to dispose of me in a heartbeat.”

I tell Marku the full extent of his creepy stalking from the beginning. Everything that I withheld from my father. I even confess about the night we went to the Open Mic, how it was Alexei hiding in the shadows of my street, watching me. How scary it was to be stalked, how the threat of violence was ever present. I tell him about the shadows I saw in his eyes and in his heart when I sat in car with him. “There was no room for love in there. He doesn’t love me as a daughter, of that I’m certain.”

Marku looks up at the ceiling, his face contorted with his internal debate. “I don’t like the idea of you being close to him.” My heart lurches in sympathy for his struggle, but I have to stay strong and propel him forward.

“Complaint registered,” I quip. “But we can control this situation. We can minimize the potential danger. If we do nothing, he has free rein and we’ll never know when he’ll come for me.”

“This is a different tune you’re singing. Or have you forgotten that you tried to convince me that you shouldn’t worry about him because he could nab you at any time.”

“I said that about going to get a coffee and knish in the middle of the day, but there was something about catching sight of him outside my house in the middle of the night that frightened me. He could have ordered his men to keep tabs on me. Instead, a man who you’ve told me is so paranoid that he has his men sweep his car for bombs, leaves everything to stalk me in the dark. Alone. In an enemy neighborhood. Something’s very off about that...”

He grabs me by the waist and props me up on his lap. Our faces are so close that I can see the chocolate swirls in his irises. “If I let you help, then you’re going to do everything I say, you hear? If you’re in a moment’s danger, we abort the plan. Understand?”

I roll my eyes. I’d proven myself in the subway yesterday, shown some mettle, hadn’t I?

“Do. You. Understand?” he grinds out between clenched teeth, his eyes flashing.

“Yeah, yeah,” I reply. “I can take care of myself, you know.”

“But you shouldn’t have to.”

“Maybe, but don’t let your ego get in the way because I’m not an idiot.”

“I know you’re not an idiot,” he snaps. “Fine, this one time. After that, never again. Swear it.”

I raise my hand, sticking out my pinkie. “Pinkie promise?”

“Oh, God, you’re not taking this seriously at all. Even after yesterday.”

“I am,” I protest. “I’m making it official.”

“Fuck the pinkie, Crina. I won’t be distracted by your cute teasing. You’ll swear an oath.”

My heart does a pitter-patter at his compliment that my teasing is *cute*. My lips turn down in a pout.

“Go on,” he urges. “It’s the only way this is going to go forward. You have to compromise, too.”

Touché. He always was a good haggler.

“Ugh, fine. I swear that after we kill the Sperm Donor, I won’t purposely put myself in danger ever again, even to rid the world of an evil man and help our clans avoid a full-scale war.” I give him a saucy grin. “Satisfied?”

“Hardly,” he retorts.

“Hey, that was an honest-to-God oath.”

“But I suppose it’s a start,” he finishes.

Lifting my nose, I give him a disgruntled sniff. “And how did I get roped into talking you down from the ledge and making wildly unnecessary oaths when you should be the one begging for forgiveness on your knees?”

He releases me and kneels instantly. His cock thickens, holding the sheet from falling off him completely. “You want me on my knees? Why didn’t you say something earlier? You must know that’s my new favorite position.”

A flush of heat lashes through me. I feel every brush of the cotton shirt against my torso. My breasts suddenly feel heavy, my nipples poking out and tingling, aching for his touch. My pussy pulses and I squeeze my internal muscles in anticipation of another orgasm. Not to be ungracious, but I hadn’t had the chance to savor the last one, what with having to negotiate with him at this ungodly early hour.

He grabs the top of the sheet and drags it off me, his gaze zeroing in between my legs. In a tone of pure gravel, he says, “I’m going to lick every inch of your cunt.”

Need sparks faster between my thighs.

He curls his fingers into the hem of the shirt and slowly rolls it, his eyes glued to my tits. He yanks it off in one sweeping movement, leaving me naked under his intense gaze.

“So fucking pretty,” he mutters, falling on my breasts ravenously, licking and sucking them with great relish. “Such pretty tits, just for me. Only I ever get to see them.”

“Only you,” I breathe out, clutching the sides of his head as he devours them, whipping his mouth from one to the other. God, that’s so hot. He slides his hands underneath my butt and grabs my ass cheeks, massaging them.

He scoots down farther, but I stop him. “I need more than your tongue.”

His eyes blaze as they bore into me. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to let the beast out.”

Locking eyes with him, I demand, “I need the beast. Let him out.”

His demeanor changes instantly. His entire body relaxes as if I’d given him permission to be himself. He rolls his shoulders, expanding his chest as he breathes in. His voice is

transformed when he commands, “Then get on your hands and knees.”

He sits back, giving me space, and I scurry to do his bidding. I glance over my shoulder, bat my eyelashes, and wiggle my butt provocatively. Looking at my ass in a proprietary manner, he palms one cheek. “Gonna take this soon.”

A shudder works its way through my body. I love it when he looks at me like I belong to him, like I’m his toy to do with as he pleases, to use and play with to his heart’s content.

And play with me he does. Now that I’ve given him the green light, he settles into his role, his nature. He nonchalantly presses a finger inside my pussy, pushing in and out, in and out. I’m already slippery and wet. I spread my legs wider for him and arch my spine. He adds another two fingers and casually fucks me as if to say, you’re mine, and I can do what I want.

“Look at you, such a gorgeous little slut, pushing her cunt onto my fingers. How did I get so lucky?” My breath catches, but the only other sound in the room is the squelching of my pussy. “Needy little thing, isn’t it?”

I hear him move behind me. He takes his fingers out and I groan my distress. Reaching over me, he clamps his fingers around my mouth. “No lip coming from you. You do what I say. No complaints.” He pauses. “Unless you want my cock up your ass while I keep your pussy aching.”

It should be illegal what it does to me when he gets bossy. As if to test me, he coats his thumb in my slick and plunges into my back hole, pushing through the tight ring of muscles. I jerk in surprise, choking my yelp. I arch even more to relieve the pressure, but he follows my movement, shoving in nice and deep.

“That’s right. Should I take this hole now, I wonder?”

I freeze in place, holding my breath to see what he decides. Because I’m all in. Whatever he wants. He pulls his thick

thumb out and jams it back in, twisting it around while his other hand slips off my mouth and cups my throat, testing me. I groan, loving his hand around my neck.

After a few twists, he pulls out and goes to wipe his hand. He returns to the bed and settles beside my hip, giving my ass a few slaps and pinching my clit until my back is bowed again.

“Good girl.”

My arms and legs shake from the flush of hearing those two little words. I live for presenting myself to him, for pleasing him, for the praise. He crawls behind me and pulls my ass cheeks apart. I drop my head and moan as he watches my juices roll down my inner thighs. I feel his finger touch the trail and follow it up to my cunt. His fingers disappear and I hear a sucking sound behind me. He’s sucking on my juices.

A moment later, his body gives off heat right behind me. His crown nudges my entrance. I brace myself, knowing that no matter how wet I am, there’s no getting around the impact of his huge cock. He pushes in and the walls of my pussy burn as they stretch to take his girth. He waits for me to adjust before shoving the rest of his hard shaft deep inside. I lift my head on a gasp, the feeling of being full and taken overwhelmingly delicious.

“Look at that tight cunt swallowing me whole. Yeah, that’s right, my good girl knows how to take my big cock. My cock is the only one that will ever feel the paradise of your slick, tight pussy.”

There go those two words again, followed by his dirty talk. A preview orgasm shudders through me. I nod or shake my head, or both...I don’t know. My head is swiveling on my neck and I don’t quite know what’s happening in my delirium.

“I’m going to ride this pussy, because I own it,” he orders, my hair wound around his hand. He yanks hard once and my eyes roll back in their sockets. My heart rate spikes.

I position myself to do just as he says, and he begins to thrust hard, just as he’d promised. Pain and pleasure dance

inside me, dragging me along for the rough ride. I love it when he goes savage on me, when he loses his epic control. And lose it, he does. He fucks into me, driving deep, stamping his ownership inside me.

Without warning, Marku spanks me rapidly. The heat and pain spreads over my ass cheeks and up my lower back. “Drop down to the mattress and get those fingers on your clit.”

I collapse, but he catches me and guides me down gently until my chest touches the bed. I snake my hand down my torso, rubbing furiously on my sparking clit while rolling my hips to entice him to fuck me harder.

“Don’t think I forgot your oath.” He shoves his thumb back in my ass and I clench at the sudden intrusion. “Don’t you dare put yourself in danger.” He viciously pushes his thumb in and out. “Or you will get the punishment of your life, Crina. I swear it.”

His thrusts increase, plundering me to give me a taste of that punishment. Panting, I quiver from overstimulation. His hips smack against my buttocks. His big testicles slap against my fingers rubbing my clit. His hand rains down on my ass cheeks. His fingers twist my locks.

The combination intertwines, merges, and crashes over me in a crescendo of sensations. I scream in pleasure as I come, riding the wave of my climax. My inner muscles clamp down around his cock, milking him for dear life.

Marku stiffens above me, his hard rhythm breaks. He inadvertently yanks too hard on my hair as he loses control, and then he floods me with come. Ripples of pleasure undulate through my body while he’s pumping the last of his seed inside me.

Once he’s slowed down and released my hair with a murmured apology, he says, “You’re lucky you’re on protection. Otherwise, I’d be breeding you right now. I’ve got so much come stored up for you this past week.”

I crumple on the bed, every ounce of strain from yesterday's ordeal bleeding into the mattress. I'm limp from pleasure and relief... And a deep well of hope springs up inside me.

Marku has conceded. I will help him kill the Sperm Donor.

He's scared for me, which is what led him to fuck me like he owns me, but I have zero complaints.

I gave him my oath, but nothing will stop me from getting rid of that demon of a man. Not only because he's a looming threat to Star, to me, and to the clans, but because he killed Cristian. As for being my biological father, Alexei Kotov is already dead to me. I may be too blood-thirsty for my own good, but I can't wait to gaze down on him, lying lifeless at my feet, with Marku's bullet between his eyes.

CHAPTER 23

MARKU



A date has been set.

Or rather, Crina has. She reached out to his people, eventually got connected to him, and even had a conversion with him. During their call, she lied about how grateful she was that he'd spared her in the subway car. He grumbled about his dead soldier. She went on about how protecting her was proof that he really was her father, that he truly loved her.

The grimace on her face and the clenched fist at her side hinted at how painful it was for her to be deceptive. I covered her fist in mine, encouraging her with a nod. She told him that she wanted to meet him to thank him, and as a way of showing her gratitude, she had intel he'd find useful.

That last part is what hooked him in, the low-life bastard. The energy vibrating off him was palpable, even though the phone. And Crina was right. His energy was off. There was an edginess about him that I'm not used to sensing in bosses. They're usually calm, calculating, cold, or a combination of all three. Nothing else. After that call, I made another attempt to convince her to back off, but she insisted.

And now here we are, not far from the entrance to the meeting spot. Since Crina couldn't be seen going to his house, they're meeting in a neutral place, an Armenian restaurant in Queens.

I scrape my clammy hand through my hair. Looking deep into her eyes, I warn her yet again, "The most important thing

is your safety. If anything goes sideways, you get your ass out of there, you hear?”

She rolls her eyes. I take hold of her chin and give it a shake. Since Lucian, Anton, and Soren are in the car, I lean in close and whisper in her ear, “Otherwise, I will whip that ass while I punish-fuck you. You won’t sit right for a week, I guarantee you.”

She inhales sharply.

Patting her ass as a little reminder, I give her a searing kiss to remind her who she belongs to. I start the car and pull up to the entrance of the restaurant. Alexei’s men may recognize the car as belonging to the Lupu clan, but the windows are tinted. One last kiss and Crina sweeps out of the car. My heart lurches as I watch her walk away, her shoulders set with determination.

She enters the restaurant through the Armenian grocery store attached to it. The place looks full. Saturday morning is a busy market day, but she will be meeting him in the back of the restaurant before opening hours. I have a death grip on the steering wheel, and my stomach is shredding at the thought of her being alone with that fucker. An image of his face hovers in front of me. It galls me that I don’t remember him from that night, but God, do I want to kill him.

Focus.

I drive away and park a block away. Not too close, but close enough. I turn around and toss the keys to Soren. Soren may be a Lupu, but he’s become close to Anton. Don’t know where that came from, but it’s a new era between the Popescu and Lupu clans. Anton recommended him for the job of lookout and getaway driver, and he wouldn’t have taken that risk if he didn’t think Soren was worthy of the job.

I turn to Lucian and Anton and remind them, “Whatever happens, I get the kill.” I stare them down intently, one, then the other. “Even if I have to die to do it.”

Lucian huffs in irritation. “Marku, why you gotta be so dramatic? No one’s going to die besides Kotov.”

“I’m serious, Lucian, I want your word.”

“Jesus, why you gotta be a killjoy before the biggest hit of our lives.” He claps me on the shoulder. “This is going to be the best day of your life, not the last day of your life.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say as I get out of the car, checking my guns, extra clips, and knives. I figure if I can’t shoot him dead, I’ll gut him like a pig. In any case, that seems more fitting. The instant they join me, we jog lightly to the front door of the grocery. The place is packed with civilians, which helps us blend in. Alexei can’t have an army surrounding the place, and that gives us an entryway that would not normally be available. It also suggests that his guard is down.

One can only hope.

We enter the grocery store and casually browse the crowded aisles. Normally, young men would stick out, but there are a few older men shopping with their wives and the young-faced butcher in the back saves us from looking completely out of place.

We slip out one of the side doors leading into the reception area of the empty restaurant. My nerves are wound tight, but my senses are on high alert. Going on a hunt is a little like being high. Everything suddenly pops out at you in technicolor when daily life is black and white.

Stacks of halvah, wrapped in Saran wrap, are piled one on top of the other on the hostess’s wooden counter. I’m disgruntled to find that there isn’t a guard posted at the entrance to stop us. I’m itching to subdue or kill someone already. Alexei is being slack on security, which means he either sees Crina as helpless or he’s bought into her ruse that she’s here to connect with him.

We silently creep across the hardwood floor into the main reception area. It’s a huge, bare room filled with empty tables covered in crimson tablecloths and an overlay of folk,

embroidered table runners. Two walls of glass join in one corner, framed with sheer curtains that keep out most of the late morning sunlight. The décor, especially the tacky gold-plated track lighting on the ceiling, reminds me of restaurants in the old country.

I'm locked in, zeroed in on the hunt. My gaze sweeps the empty space several times until I catch a small movement in the terrace garden enclosed by a tall wooden fence. Crina and the Bratva boss are sitting at an outside table. Through the glass, I watch Crina bring a glass to her lips and sip delicately as she nods intently at something he's said.

I wipe my brow. Thank fuck, she's alive.

As one, Lucian, Anton, and I quietly sidle along the wall toward the terrace. The bare brick scrapes my back, catching on to my shirt. Everything is going to plan. We should get close enough to kill him before he even realizes what's happening. Suddenly, the door to the kitchen whips open.

A waiter waltzes out, holding a tray high in the air.

Behind him is one of Alexei's bodyguards.

Everything slows down. The bodyguard's eyebrows hit his forehead. His mouth opens to shout. I throw my hand up, clicking off the safety of my Glock, and aim at Alexei's head. Just as I'm about to pull the trigger, Crina leans forward attentively.

She's too close.

I shout at Crina to duck. The bodyguard shoves the waiter out of his way. The tray goes flying. Plates and food spin in the air and clatter to the floor. The bodyguard heaves forward, bellowing as he strives to reach us. Anton brings him down with a shot to the heart.

Hearing the commotion, Alexei seizes Crina by the hair. She takes hold of her hair, vainly fighting his grip. Without a moment's hesitation, he whips out his gun and shoves the muzzle between her eyes.

Fuck!

Everything freezes in time. In that moment of stillness, I feel everything. The light breeze coming from the open door to the terrace, teasing me with a trace of Crina's scent. The heavy rise and fall of my chest. The quivering of my arm muscles as I try to hold my gun steady. I have the indescribable sensation of the future colliding into me like a train. I stumble back into the brick wall as image after image assaults me. Lifting the veil off Crina's face as she smiles up at me with tender eyes. My hands cradling her big belly as I cuddle her from behind. Tossing a little girl in the air, red pigtails flying as she screams, "Higher, Daddy, higher!"

The future is in my hands.

Except that any moment, I might fuck this up and lose the person I love more than anyone on Earth. Bile surges up my throat. At this very instant, it dawns on me that I love her more than I love revenge.

My gaze burns into Crina, who's anxiously looking at me for guidance. I shake my head, telling her not to fight. To not do *anything*. Don't move an inch. I grab my knife from the sheath strapped to my ankle, assessing the comforting weight of it in my hand.

Time abruptly speeds up, crashing into me. Abruptly, Lucian, Anton, and I sprint to the terrace. Anton pauses long enough to kick the bodyguard and confirm that he's dead.

"I can take him," growls Lucian.

"*Lăsați-l,*" I warn him, warning them both. *Leave it.*

Leave it because nothing matters beyond Crina's safety. If anything happens to her, I'll kill myself. This time I won't hesitate. Those visions of the future are mine. Hers. Ours. I won't risk them for anyone, not even Cristian.

I'm certainly not risking them for this bastard. I should've never risked her at all. I was an idiot to put her in this danger. I felt it in my gut, in my bones. I didn't like it one bit but I let the lure of revenge sway me. Well, fuck me for thinking

anything mattered but her. This was a colossal mistake. Cristian's death was a tragedy I couldn't stop, but I had created this potential disaster in the making. Panic rips through me.

Anton takes a shot; it whizzes past Alexei's head. Another wave of sheer panic assaults me and I sway in place. Alexei yanks Crina by the hair, ripping her head back. With his gun leveled at her head, he backs away with her in tow, using her as a shield. She stumbles as he drags her along, his eyes flicker right and left as he considers his chance for an escape. "Don't fucking move an inch or she's dead."

We halt in our tracks.

"You wouldn't kill your own daughter," I shout to him. "She's your blood."

He pets her hair lovingly, his mouth a leering grin. "She is a beauty, is she not? I contemplated taking her for myself." Disgust convulses through Crina and she cringes away from him. He yanks her roughly by the hair. "Such a pretty toy." His hard eyes drill into me. "But toys don't last, do they?" He pets her again. "Some are meant to be broken."

He wrenches her head back at an unnatural angle and cocks the handgun at her temple. "Drop the guns."

Our guns clatter to the ground.

Alexei eyes my knife and growls, "Drop it."

"You fucking coward," I grind out. "Using a *girl* as a shield."

"You think I'd be in this position if it wasn't for this bitch." He rips her hair viciously. Anyone else would've cried out in pain, but not my Crina. My brave girl doesn't make a peep, refuses to give him the satisfaction of hearing her pain. "That and my lust, but I will never make the same mistake again."

In anger, he jams the muzzle of his gun beneath her jaw. Ice trickles down into my heart. My skin chills, frostbite

spreading in a crisscross pattern across my body. If he so much as twitches his finger, he'll blow her brains out.

We edge around him, ever so slowly fanning out. To distract Alexei, Lucian taunts him, "You're going down, Alexei. The girl can't save you. Today you die, like the mangy dog you are."

Alexei bares his teeth as he inches along the back of the fence, dragging Crina with him as he makes his way toward a gate. "I'll take my chances with tomorrow."

He reaches the gate and throws it open, hauling Crina along with him. She disappears from my sight and my stomach drops. At the last second, her fingers grasp the side of the fence. She fights against his pull, clinging on for dear life.

"No, Crina, no," I roar.

Alexei struggles with her. She lets out a desperate, high-pitched screech, clutching at the post of the fence. We sprint toward them. Anton steps on a wooden plank, emitting a loud creak. Realizing we're approaching, Alexei cuts his losses and throws Crina to the ground. Shouting in Russian, he breaks into a run. A black car drives up, wheels screeching to a stop. The passenger door flies open. Alexei dives inside.

Anton plunges into the alleyway, Lucian right behind him. Shots rip through the air. I fall on Crina, protecting her. There's a brief *rat-tat-tat* of gunfire and then the sound of squealing wheels.

In the echoing silence, I haul Crina to me, covering her with kisses, licking her tears. My hands coast down her body, checking for wounds even though I rationally know there are no bullet holes.

"Brave girl," I murmur gently. "So fearless. Thank fuck you fought back, baby. Thank God." I caress her hair and claim her mouth. Anything to taste her, feel her, breathe her in. Her mouth is tangy from the lemonade she was drinking at the table and I dive in, desperate to drink her flavor.

She's shaking in my arms.

“Chuckie, Chuckie, Chuckie,” I repeat as a mantra as I swoop her onto my lap, cradling her and covering her with my body again. Even though the danger’s passed, I’m desperate to protect her. She could’ve died. If she hadn’t fought him, hadn’t been a pain in his ass, like she is with mine, he would’ve dragged her into the car.

She wouldn’t have lasted the morning. I’d have discovered her broken, ravaged body on a street corner of Queens Boulevard, an example to anyone who dared fuck with him. And there was no doubt that she had betrayed him. For me.

Today, I learned a lesson I’ll never forget. I will never let her down again. I will always put her first. If I had lost her, nothing else would’ve mattered. Nothing.

“You didn’t kill him.” Crina glares up at me accusingly and says, “You had the chance. Why didn’t you take it?”

Despite the adrenaline and fear still rushing through my system, I laugh out loud.

She thumps me on the chest. “What’s so funny?”

“You, baby. Instead of being grateful that you’re alive, like I am, you’re mad because I didn’t kill him.”

She scrunches her forehead, perplexed. “Seriously, why didn’t you kill him? And why aren’t you mad?”

Sobering, I let out a long exhale. “I didn’t kill him because you were too close to him. It was too risky. There was too much of a chance of hurting you. Told you that already.”

“But I wasn’t—”

“You leaned in close to him, at one point. If it’s a choice between you and him, I’ll always choose you.” I hug her tightly to me, so grateful to feel her soft curves against me that I could almost cry. “I’m angry at myself for letting you get so close to him. God knows what would’ve happened to you if he’d taken you with him. The man is a sick bastard.”

She gags a little at the memory of Kotov’s lust. “But—”

“Never again, Crina. You hear me? I don’t care if he lives to a ripe old age and dies in his bed at ninety. Revenge for Cristian’s death pales in comparison to keeping you alive. If you die, I die. Simple as that.”

Anton and Lucian stomp back onto the terrace. Lucian slams the gate roughly. “Gone.” He gives it a savage kick for good measure. “He’s gone.”

I scowl at Anton. “You swore you wouldn’t shoot him.”

Startled, Anton shakes his head. “Nah, man, that was Lucian. He swore. Not me.”

I give him a stern, angry glare. “Your silence was as good as an oath.”

“Was it?” He looks thoughtful for a second. “Huh, I didn’t catch that.” He shrugs. “Sorry, bro. Next time.”

“Jesus, Anton, she could’ve gotten hurt.”

He lets out a disgusted sigh. “I would’ve never hurt a woman. Ever. The shot got nowhere near her. Hell, it got nowhere close to him either.”

Crina glares at me viciously. “Don’t you go blaming yourself.”

“I’m furious with myself,” I acknowledge.

Her shoulders slump. “At having lost your chance to kill Alexei, I know.”

“No, baby girl, at almost losing you.”

Her eyes grow soft. She lays a hand on my heart and I clasp it, crushing it to my chest. The weight and heat of her hand grounds me.

The kitchen staff peer out from the open door of the restaurant, step out cautiously, and seeing that we wouldn’t attack them, inch closer. Their gazes swing right and left as they survey the damage.

Placing a kiss on her lips, I say, “Come on. Let’s get the hell out of here.” I rise to my feet, bringing Crina up with me.

“Cristo is not going to be happy,” Lucian grumbles.

“I don’t give a shit,” I retort. “Let him fall for a woman one day and go through what I just went through. What if Star had been in this position?”

“Hell, no,” he rumbles. He checks his phone and turns his back to me, muttering, “I’d never put Star in a position like that.”

“Crina will never be again,” I promise, pulling her closer to me.

Before I can go further and tear into him for his remark, he looks over his shoulder at Crina.

His face is stark. “Crina, check your messages, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER 24

CRINA



Startled by Lucian's tone, I grab my phone. Marku looks over my shoulder as I open it. I have over a dozen missed calls.

Dread snakes through me. I switch to my text messages. My stomach drops. "It's my father."

Marku shouts, "Get Soren to meet us up front."

He sweeps through the restaurant and out the front entrance, where Soren is already waiting. Marku deposits me in the back seat, runs around to the other side of the car, and settles in beside me. I'm already calling my mother.

Lucian and Anton wave for us to go on ahead, and Soren tears out into the street.

My mom answers and I rush to ask, "What's happened?"

I put her on speakerphone and my mother's anguished voice reverberates in the confined space of the car. "It's your father. He collapsed in the shower. I called the ambulance. They took him to Mount Sinai."

Hearing the name of the hospital, Soren takes a hard left on the next street and speeds toward the Long Island Expressway.

I take my mother off speakerphone. "What happened?"

"I don't know," she wails.

I've never heard my mother express panic. Judgment, often. Anger yes, but never this kind of emotion. "He was in the shower but he was in there for so long." She lets out a gust of air. "Too long. I called him from downstairs and didn't get a response. I went upstairs. Checked the bedroom. He wasn't there. I tapped on the bathroom door. Called out several times but there was no response. I finally opened the door and he was collapsed in the bathtub, wrapped in the shower curtain."

Marku grabs my trembling hand and holds it tight. I squeeze his hand back, holding on like my life depends on it. He pulls me close and I gratefully lean into him for support.

"Go on..."

"He was breathing, but unconscious. He's had seizures, but he's never blacked out before. I was terrified and called the ambulance."

I let out a shaky breath. "Breathing?"

"But unconscious," she repeats. "I called you..."

"I had my ringer off," I gulp out.

I couldn't exactly tell her that I was on a mission to kill her former lover.

"It doesn't matter. The paramedics came. They let me ride in the ambulance, although they put me in the front. They must have given him something because he came to in the back. Natalia met me at the hospital. We're here waiting while they look him over."

Numbness is creeping in the more she talks. "How long ago did you arrive?"

"At least an hour."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Okay."

She's about to hang up when I lick my dry lips and whisper, "Mama?"

“*Da?*” She naturally switched to Romanian without thinking.

“Did he say anything? Did you speak to him?”

I want to know because those could have been his last words. I don’t want to, but I can’t help but expect the worst. I squeeze my eyes tightly shut waiting for her answer.

“He couldn’t speak. I immediately went to him as they were taking him into the hospital. He tried to speak and reach out to me, but they told him to stay calm. It was so fast, Crin —” She breaks off, too emotional to speak.

Natalia’s voice in the background tells her to stay calm in Romanian. I wait, giving her a moment. She clears her throat. “He looked pale. He has a huge bruise on the side of his face. I’m sure he has a concussion, but that’s the least of it.”

I draw my knees up to my chest and hold on tightly to the phone, dread icing over my insides. “Yeah, I know.”

My father’s been battling lupus for decades. His body has been at war with itself for too many years. At a certain point, it’s too much. I burst into tears. He’s done every treatment imaginable, from antimalarial drugs, to cortisone, to drugs that suppress his immune system. He was likely infertile from one of the experimental treatments he had. He’s fought this for so long. It’s flared up and then receded, but good God, I don’t want this to be the end. It can’t be the end. I can’t live without him. I refuse to.

Through blurry vision, I promise, “I’ll be there soon, Mama.”

Hanging up, I turn and bury my face in Marku’s chest. He embraces me, keeping me steady as he drops kisses on my head and face.

“How much longer?” he asks Soren.

“No more than ten minutes.”

My mind races through every possible scenario. It might be a lupus flare-up or it might be something else entirely. In an

effort to protect me, my father doesn't tell me every detail of his health. It's complicated, that much I know. He's off one drug, then on another. I can tell when he's having a couple of bad days or weeks. There've been more and more of those lately. More bad than good. After all, this dramatic decline in his health was his main motivation for agreeing with my mother to force me to marry Marku.

At the hospital, I jump out of the car and fly up the steps to the main entrance. Marku is hot on my heels. We take twists and turns through the hospital and then up an elevator. When we get off on the right floor, I see my mother and Natalia huddled near a closed door. I rush up to her and hug her. She hugs me back tightly, sniffing into the crook of my neck.

“Have you heard anything?”

She nods, her trembling lips pinched together to stop herself from sobbing.

“What is it?”

She shakes her head, unable to speak.

Natalia wraps her arm around my mother and answers, “He's had what they're calling a rupture. It's bleeding inside his brain. It seems he has ITP. I don't know what it stands for exactly—”

A doctor that I hadn't noticed steps forward and says, “Idiopathic Thrombocytopenic Purpura. Your father is a sick man and, as is common with lupus, has a variety of issues. ITP is a platelet disorder. That means that his body is attacking and destroying the platelets in his blood. One of the more dangerous potential effects of ITP is that his body can't make enough platelets to close up a wound.”

“What are platelets again?”

“Platelets are tiny blood cells. When you get injured, they bind together to form a seal that plugs up your wound. When you have a low platelet count, you can't stop bleeding. Your father has a wound inside his brain that won't stop bleeding on

its own. We've given him a transfusion of platelets, which should staunch the bleeding for now.

"He was taking various medications but had to get off them because they compromised his health in other ways. We've discussed removing his spleen, but with the issues in his liver and kidneys, that will leave him vulnerable to infection."

My mind races to keep up. *Spleen? Liver? Kidneys?*

My mother says plainly, "He's going to die. If he hurts his head, there aren't enough platelets to stop the bleeding and it will kill him. If that doesn't do it, then his kidneys and liver will fail because of the lupus."

I turn toward the doctor. "How much time does he have?"

The doctor pulls his tie, tugs his collar, and I know, I just know it's bad. "How long?" I repeat in a no-nonsense tone.

"It's hard to say, but not long. If he doesn't bleed out because of an injury or wound that can't get treated in time, his internal organs will eventually fail. Transplants are a possibility, but they're difficult to get. And more than one transplant is an even more distant possibility."

I pull back in shock, my eyes flicking over to my mother who looks on stoically. *Oh, so she knows.* I turn back to the doctor. "You've spoken to him about a transplant."

"Yes, and he's aware that he is not an ideal candidate. It's not certain that he'd survive the operation with the combined complications from both lupus and ITP. And then there's the fact that he's not sure he wants to get a transplant."

My gaze darts to my mother. Her eyes spill over with tears and she turns away from me. "He's not certain? What does that even mean?"

"It means that when someone like your father has been fighting for so long, they sometimes get tired. They want to rest. They want to enjoy the rest of their life for as long as they can. It's a question of quality over quantity."

“Quality?” I repeat in a monotone. “But he won’t be here,” I whisper. “Why wouldn’t he want to be here with me?”

Natalia rushes up to me, hugging me tightly. “Dear child, of course he wants to be here. He wants to be with you and your mother more than anything in the world, but sometimes, people no longer have the strength to fight against a tidal wave. They want peace.” She lifts my chin. “Don’t you want him to be at peace?”

“Of course,” I mutter, my brain stunned from the onslaught of information. It’s too much to process. I knew my dad was sick, but I pushed the truth away for as long as I could. My lips tremble. I don’t want him to die. I love him more than anything. He’s always been my champion, and even when he pushed for the marriage, I can now see that he only did it to protect me. Finally, I see his reasoning more clearly. He didn’t want me to be alone with my mother, without him. And he wanted me to have someone—a man who loves me, who understands me, who will support me and protect me like he has. But the idea of losing him is too much. It’s staggering in its magnitude.

“We have to support him, no matter what he wants,” Natalia continues, glancing over at my mother as if she’s repeated those exact words to her. “The most important thing is to put aside our emotions for the time being and be present for him. We don’t know how much time he has. You don’t want to regret anything.”

She turns my face to her and pierces me with a look. “You can have your feelings. After he’s gone. After, you can fall apart completely, but right now, you must be strong and courageous for him.” Her tone drops, a tone she only used on me when I was a little girl and had to teach me what’s what. “Crina, you do understand, no?”

I nod.

“Good.” She embraces me again, holding me close. Breathing out in relief, she looks over at the doctor. “Will it be possible to see him tonight?”

“One or two of you may see him, but one at a time, and for a maximum of five minutes. I don’t want to exhaust him.” He pauses. “I must warn you, he had a bad fall and it shows.”

Natalia pushes me forward. “You go first.” She holds me for a moment, leans in, and whispers, “Remember, no crying.”

She prods my back, pushing me to go, but I’m frozen in my spot. Biting the inside of my cheek, I pull back. Fear and nerves batter my heart. Marku, who’s been by my side this entire time, takes my hand and caresses it softly.

He takes a step forward and pulls me along until we’re at the door. He holds the back of my neck and hauls me against his chest. I inhale the comforting scent of crushed pine needles as he murmurs, “You can do this, baby. Go in there and talk to him. I’ll be right here when you get out. You can fall apart with me. I’ll be here to catch you.”

With a final squeeze to my nape, he knocks and then opens the door, holding it for me. I take a deep breath of man and pine and then step into the hospital room.

The door swings shut behind me. That distinctive antiseptic hospital smell permeates my nostrils and I scrunch my nose. My father lies on a hospital bed in a nondescript hospital gown that competes with the paleness of his skin, except for the purple bruise blossoming on his left side. His head is shifted to the side, the light from the window casting a golden glow over him. He seems to be sleeping.

God, please let him be sleeping.

I creep closer and stop. No movement. I take another fretful step forward and then another until I’m by his side. Along his temple is an ugly, dark bruise like a cascade of black fungi growing on a decaying tree.

His eyes flicker open. He blinks a few times and cracks a lopsided smile. “Ha, I guess I’m still alive.”

I roll my eyes. “Barely. Heard you got into a fight with a shower curtain and the curtain won.”

His smile broadens and he croaks, “Sounds about right.”

He turns slowly, wincing as he moves. I rush to help him and take the opportunity to inspect him carefully. Besides the huge blistering bruise, his skin is dotted with small, red flat spots. I make a mental note to read up on the signs of ITP. I’ve noticed the spots before, of course, but chalked it up to the accelerated aging caused by lupus. I help prop him up until he’s sitting up and then take a seat on his bed.

“I’m not going to ask how you feel. I can already see.”

He takes his time carefully scanning my face. “You know.”

I swallow hard and instantly deflect, “What?”

He shakes his head. “Don’t play with me, Crina. We don’t have the time. The doctor... What did he tell you?”

“He told me about ITP, internal bleeding, kidneys and liver and how you don’t want a transplant,” I blurt out.

He sighs. “So everything.”

He takes my hand in his. It’s bony, his skin paper thin and dry, but I love him so much, I just want to stare at that hand forever, memorize the way the delicate veins snake across the top. I want to memorize everything and take it with me. Take everything about him with me and hold it close to my heart until the day I die. And speaking of dying, I know that a part of me will die with him.

“Basically.”

“How do you feel?”

I smile internally. Of course, his first concern is me and how I’m managing the truth. “As would be expected.” This moment isn’t about processing my feelings. Not now. Not with him.

He nods knowingly, understanding that I’m not going to go there with him.

“Is he dead?”

My brows shoot up. Canting my head to the side, I innocently ask, “Who?”

“Alexei.” I jerk in surprise. “Just for the record, I wouldn’t have entrusted you with anyone but Marku. I know everything, Crina. You don’t need to protect me. I’m the one who should be protecting you but look at me...” he glances down at himself with disgust. “What kind of father am I?”

I grab his hand, squeeze it, and bring it to my heart. “Don’t you dare insult yourself. You’re the best father in the world. I’m the luckiest girl alive to have a dad like you. You’ve always loved me no matter what. No matter what I did. No matter how I acted. And I always knew. Will always know that you loved me completely.” Tears are falling from my eyes uncontrollably and I don’t even try to stop the flow. “I can’t stand the idea of you leaving us, but leaving without having had the chance to tell you how much I love you, how much you mean to me, would have torn me apart.”

“Crina...” He turns tortured eyes on me. “I do love you. I don’t care who made you because you are the daughter of my heart. You’ve always been my daughter, from the moment you started growing in your mother’s womb. I’ll challenge anyone who says otherwise. You made it too easy to love you, Crina, and it’s been a privilege to be your father. I only wish I wasn’t so tired...so very tired... That I still wanted to fight tooth and nail and make it for one more year with you. One more month. One more day.”

I shake my head in denial, but he refuses to accept it. “No, don’t do that. You made it so easy because you are a perfect child. And that’s why I allowed the marriage to go forward. It wasn’t to follow your mother’s wishes or to follow my *şef’s* orders. It’s because Marku knows what I know. He’s the only man I trust to love you the way you deserve, and I wanted to make sure you have that when I’m gone.”

“No, no, nooo,” I cry out, denying it, denying his last three words. It’s like a punch to the gut. I bend over, hugging my belly. He slowly drags his hand over my lap and grasps mine,

squeezing as tightly as he can, even though it's not that tight at all. Another tsunami of sorrow crashes over me.

It's not fair. It's NOT FAIR!

“Did you think I was going to leave you hanging? To leave you here with your mom, without me to mediate between you? I made her promise that she will let you move in with him as soon as you graduate.” I let out a choking gasp. “I’ve always looked out for you and I will always look out for you, even from beyond the grave.”

There’s a soft knock on the door and I turn around, about to viciously rip into whoever has interrupted, when I see Marku’s head pop in. He looks at me and my tears. His gaze sweeps over my father before returning to me. “You okay?”

Swallowing around the lump in my throat, I nod shortly.

Turning to my father, he says, “Sorry to interrupt, *dumneavoastră*.”

My father lifts a weak hand, dismissing his concern. “Not to worry, *fiu*. Just an old man having a chat with his favorite daughter.”

Fiu? Did my father just call Marku *son*?

Even Marku’s eyes bulge slightly at the word. His face is suddenly overcome with emotion. His eyes dart away and he clears his throat before saying in a hoarse voice, “Good, I’ll leave you guys to it.”

Just before slipping out, he reaches for me and grazes my cheek with his knuckles.

Then, he’s gone.

“See, I told you.” My father gives me a knowing look. “Came in here to check on you. He’s been doing that since I can remember.”

He turns slightly, wincing and paling at the same time. I lean over him, pulling up the bed sheet and cover, and folding it over carefully. “Don’t strain yourself.”

“Crina,” he rasps.

His face is so serious, lined with pain and fatigue. My heart cracks, thinking about how much he’s suffering and how I’m going to have let him go and learn to live without him. It’s not right to lose a father at this point. I’m too young. He’s too young. I certainly don’t feel like I can go on without him, but I must. He wouldn’t accept anything less from me.

When I’m done fussing, I pull up the chair beside his bed, plunk down in it, and take his hand again. Suddenly, my limbs and muscles feel heavy and tired.

“You have to forgive your mother.”

I’m already shaking my head at the word forgive.

“No, you don’t get to deny a man his dying wish,” he insists.

“Tata—”

He sits up and puts up a trembling hand. “And I’m going to tell you why.”

He sags back into the bed, and his eyes get a faraway look. “Your mother and I had been secretly dating for years, but I suspected I was sterile. It’s the reason I wouldn’t marry her, you know. I’d done treatment after treatment for lupus, but I wasn’t going to make it to a ripe old age and I wasn’t about to die and leave her childless. I repeatedly begged her to leave me, find another man, have a family.”

That’s so him, willing to sacrifice his happiness for the sake of my mother’s. His vision clears and he focuses on me. His lower lip trembles. “And what did she do? Not only did she refuse to leave, but she blackmailed me instead. She’d won a diversity visa to come to America. It had always been my dream to leave the past in Romania and start a new life in a country as great as this one. Your mother didn’t want to leave like I did, but she agreed on one condition. I had to marry her.”

I jolt in my seat. “You weren’t married, but you tried having children? How did you get away with that?”

He clucks his tongue. “As you know, I came from a powerful family. I’d made an arrangement with her father to give us time. I was selfish. I should have pushed her away, but I was too weak in my love for her. In the end, we got married. She left before me because my papers were not ready before her visa expired. A few months later she told me she was pregnant with my child.”

He stares me dead in the eye. “You were that child, *my* child. Marina did it for *me*.” He pounds his chest. It’s a hallow sound. “She knew it was my dream to have a family with her. I don’t think I would’ve made it this far if it weren’t for both of you. She’s always sacrificed more than I have. Always done more. It’s been unequal from the beginning and I’ve never been able to catch up. Never been able to reciprocate the many gifts she’s given me. She’s a truly selfless woman.”

My mouth drops open. *Are we talking about the same woman?*

“And she loves you as much as she loves me. It’s why she’s so hard on you. She knows how difficult life can be, especially for a *mafie* woman. She knows you won’t have a father forever, and she wants you to be strong enough to handle any situation, just like the one we’re in now.”

I sniff, gazing down at our entwined fingers. “Dammit, Tata, why do you have to pull a deathbed promise like this? It’s sly of you, really it is.”

He cracks a wide smile and chuckles. “How else do you think I’d get what I want?”

My eyes dart up to him. “What if I can’t do it?”

He pats my hand. “If anyone can, it’s you. You can do anything you put your mind to. If you can try to kill your biological father, then I’m sure you can manage to forgive your mother.”

“I *wanted* the first one,” I grumble under my breath. “Are you sure you don’t want to fight? We can look into a transplant.”

He waves his hand down his body and chuckles dryly. “Does this body look like it’s going to make it through a transplant?”

I take a long look at him, at his bony, ravaged body, and yet... I can’t let him go. “There’s dialysis.”

“Dialysis or no dialysis, my liver’s going to give out. For the ITP, they want to take my spleen, which will expose me to more infections.” He shakes his head. His voice is firm when he says, “It takes courage to die, Crina, just like it takes courage to live. I don’t want to live at any cost. We come from a different culture, a culture where there’s honor in death. Even in one like mine. I’m finally ready to take up that mantle. Once I knew you’d be taken care of, I gave myself the grace to choose what I want to do. My decision is made.”

“I’m surprised Mama hasn’t come up with a scheme to blackmail you like she did in the past.”

“I’m sure she’s spent time conjuring up a number of schemes, but in the end, she comes from the same place as me. We understand each other, and she respects my decision. She may not like it, but she respects it.”

He takes my hand in both of his and kisses it. “You must focus on the future, not on an old, broken man like me.”

“Hey—”

“Your future includes Marku and your mother. You’ll have to make peace with her eventually.”

“Will I?” I gripe. “I was planning on escaping and spend as little time with her as possible.” I shrug my shoulder, my head cast down. “But I suppose I can’t abandon her now.”

“And you won’t be alone. You have Marku. One day, you’ll have children.” His eyes grow misty. “I can see it right in front of my eyes. That’s a plus to being close to death. You can see the future.”

“Really?”

“No,” he chuckles. “But I don’t need to see the future to know that yours will be beautiful.”

I grasp his hand tightly. “But it won’t be soon, will it? We still have time...”

He smiles tiredly. The strain around his eyes and his slumped shoulders are tells that his energy is flagging. “Yes, there will be more time, I promise.”

CHAPTER 25

CRINA



That was the one promise he didn't keep.

Tata died that night from a heart attack. The staff used a defibrillator to restart his heart, but it couldn't bring him back to us. He'd warned us that he was ready to go, and looking back, he must have known it was coming.

In any case, the wrong father is dead. The father who should've died is alive and kicking. A shudder runs down my spine at the memory of the cold metal of his gun on my forehead. His harsh voice in my ear, promising me, "I may not have gotten you, may not have touched you, but I'm not done with you yet."

Goose bumps prick the hairs of my forearms and I turn over in bed and fling out my arm. It's draped in a sheer black shirt that I'd worn under my black skirt suit, the one I wore at the funeral. Again, a funeral for the wrong man. I would've danced on Alexei's grave at his burial.

One day, I swear, I will.

Tears leak from my red-rimmed eyes. Another wave of sorrow engulfs me and I let out a long, drawn-out wail. *He's gone, gone, gone...* I want to rage, but rage at what? At Tata? No, I couldn't dishonor him and his wishes like that. But I'm so angry. It's not right, it's not fair, and yet, it's my new normal.

I weep until I have nothing left but sniffles and snot running from my nose, which I carelessly wipe with my

sleeve. I should be grateful for my last conversation with him, even if he threw in that underhanded last dying wish thing. I bark out an exhausted laugh. Only Tata would do that, worry about me and Mama till his last breath.

Damn, I miss him. And I think, *how am I going to do life without him? Hell, how am I going to make it through the day without him?*

The whole community came out for the funeral and burial. There was a long retinue of slow-moving cars with blinkers, weaving through the streets and up Queens Boulevard toward the same church where I was baptized and married. After the burial, I stood for over an hour receiving condolences at the reception.

Then I told Marku about my headache and he immediately got me out of there.

The headache's still there, from lack of sleep and from exhaustion. The epic weep-a-thon I just had did nothing to help. Long shafts of golden light stream into Marku's bedroom, dust motes dancing like fairies in the warm air against the backdrop of Cristian's paintings.

Such a gorgeous late spring day, and no father. My nostrils burn. I squeeze my eyes shut, pinching my face as if that can staunch the flow of tears.

I snap them open and peer into the blade of sunlight with its dancing fairy dust motes. Maybe he's here with me. Maybe he's one of those dancing motes. I stretch out my hand. Dip it in a beam of light. Spear it through a sea of speckled dust.

Maybe he's one of those particles of dust, on me now.

I lick the skin on the back of my hand. Maybe I just ingested him and he's part of me. For some reason, that last thought gives me some comfort. I'm all about grasping anything that makes me feel better, even if it's fleeting. Because that's the lesson in surviving grief: take one moment at a time.

Marku is the only other thing that makes me feel better. He's been my rock. I don't know if he got a memo from above, but he came swooping in like my knight in shining armor and dealt with my mother. He moved me into his house while Aunt Natalia moved into ours. Seemed like a fair switch.

The door opens with a soft *whoosh* as the bottom slips over the hardwood floor. I hear the creak; I've become familiar with the sounds of the house. Turned away from the door, I feel the bed dip near my spine. A hand softly caresses my hair, taking a moment to twine a lock around one finger.

Marku doesn't ask me silly questions like how am I doing? He simply slips in behind me, the cloth of his suit rubbing against me. His arm loops over my waist. He pulls me in close and nuzzles my hair, just being with me. Holding me. Comforting me.

I let out a choked sigh. "He's gone. The funeral. The burial...seeing his coffin go down in the ground...he'll be so cold there."

"No, he won't," Marku replies. "If he's not here with you and your mother, then his ghost is basking on a beach in Jamaica. Or," he pauses, "he's gone back to the old country to hang out with ancestors. That man's no fool. He's not about to stay six feet under for long."

I whimper and laugh at the same time, tears falling steadily. Marku nailed it. I shouldn't be worried because that's exactly something my dad would do. He often took us to Jamaica or Barbados on winter break. He loved the sun. And he loved Romania, even more nostalgic about it once he left. So yes, Marku is right. He's not lying in the cold dirt. If he's not with us or in Jamaica, then he took a quick detour to hang out with the elders. It gives me an itchy-bitsy moment of solace knowing he's globe-trotting. He might be a tad disappointed that he doesn't get to flip open his U.S. passport at a customs officer. He loved accruing stamps of his voyages on his passport.

Marku just hugs me, keeping me close. He brings me water, and later a meal, guessing that I'm not up to dealing with anyone. Later on, he slowly peels off my clothing, taking particular care with the stockings clipped to garter belts.

"You like those on me," I comment.

"I like anything on you, but not gonna lie, peeling these off is like unwrapping a Christmas present as a kid."

In only my bra and panties, I huff out a laugh. "Such a joker."

He gazes up at me, his liquid brown eyes sincere. There's a hint of vulnerability that I haven't seen since our attempted murder of the Sperm Donor. "Nothing that has to do with you is a joke."

My mouth goes dry.

He dips his head as he rolls the stocking down my leg. "Best thing I ever did was marry you. I'd never want you to go through this alone."

My heart squeezes. Where would I be without him? Crying in my pillow, alone and bereft, that's where.

"I want to tell people," I blurt out, referring to our secret marriage.

His brows jump, although he studiously avoids my gaze. He thinks I'm saying this because I'm feeling vulnerable and exposed, but that's not it. I do not want to wait another however-many months to have a big wedding before I start living with him in the open. Part of it might be that I'm not in the wedding mood. Hell, I don't know if I'll ever be. I'm not the princess-y type that has fantasized about my wedding since I was a girl and Tata's recent passing makes it even more unlikely that I'll force myself to go through with a crazy public wedding.

My father's death has changed me. It's as if my life was sliced in half, the before and after. It's changed my mother as

well. Things she'd have fought to the death over a couple of months ago seem irrelevant now.

"You don't have to," he murmurs, intently concentrating on the foot massage he's giving me.

"I know I don't have to. I want to."

"Now's not the time. Let's wait and let things settle."

I place a hand on his shoulder. The hiding has taken a toll on him. It was especially hard at the funeral. As my partner, he should have stood by my side. Instead, he hovered around me, torn between wanting to touch me and trying to hide. I wait for him to finally raise his head and face me. "Why?"

"Because a lot of things have happened in a short period of time. You need a little time."

I place a finger beneath his chin, tipping his head up and locking eyes with him. "What's this? You've been wanting me to be open about our marriage since the beginning. You were furious over my mother's condition that we keep it secret until we graduate and have a big Romanian *mafie* wedding."

He lets go of my foot and takes a seat beside me with a sigh. "At one point, you were plotting to divorce me." I jerk in surprise. *He knew?* I guess I wasn't subtle about how I felt about him, and he knows me. He knows I wouldn't lie down and take anything. "Now that your father's gone, you may not feel the need to honor our marriage anymore. And..."

He leans over and pulls open the drawer of the nightstand. "Your mother handed me this a couple of days ago." He drops a pile of mail on my lap. The very top envelope is from Cooper Union. I tear it open greedily.

I made it in. I made it into the writing program.

Looking up, I hold his gaze and ask, "What do you know?"

A muscle jumps in his jaw. "I'm not stupid, Crina. It's an acceptance letter from a college."

I pull back suspiciously. “How do you know I got accepted?”

“Of course, you got accepted.” He rolls his eyes. “We caught you and Star in front of Cooper Union, remember.” *Oh, yeah.* “Even if we hadn’t, I once had a stupid idea about going to college, so I’d done a little research. I wouldn’t expect anything less than you pursuing an education.”

My brows slam down over my eyes. “Why was that a stupid idea? You’re one of the smartest people I know.”

His lips curl into a wry smile. “The Popescu clan is not known to have a reputation for going to college. It’s straight into clan business after high school. Especially now that Cristo is *șef* and Lucian is *consilier*. I could never consider doing anything else.”

“Why not?” I blurt out. “Why don’t you go? Why don’t we both go? We’re adults. We’re a couple. We can do whatever the heck we want.”

He pauses, a sheepish look on his face. “I’d considered it, but no.” He shakes his head, dropping slightly in resignation. “That’s not my path. It’s yours though.” He spreads the envelopes. “And I bet there’s more than one acceptance letter here.”

My hands flutter over the bounty. I tear open one envelope after another. They must have been accumulating over the past weeks. My mother probably threw them in a drawer without really looking at them, what with everything that had been happening with my father.

I pause in the process of reading another acceptance. “Wait, you’re okay with me going to college?”

He pulls back, offended. “Of course.”

I finish reading and reach for another letter.

“So, like I said, I don’t know what your plans are. If—” He swallows hard before going on. “If you’re going to leave me, there’s no point in telling anyone about our marriage.”

My hands go numb. I toss the letter down and throw my arms around him. Burying my face in his neck, I say, “Marku, I will never leave you. It breaks my heart that you assume I’m going to cut and run, but...” Having expected to fight tooth and nail for this, I probe cautiously, “You’re really okay with me going to college?”

He settles me in the shelter of his embrace. “I want what you want. If I can’t do it, at least my brilliant wife can.”

My bottom lip trembles. “I was afraid to bring it up to you.”

He gives me a wry smile. “*You* were afraid.”

The tension I was holding runs off me like a waterfall. Smiling shyly, I give a noncommittal shrug.

“Let’s get this out of the way right this instant. There’s no way my brave girl was afraid of *me*. You should never be afraid to bring anything up with me. We’re partners.”

I take a deep breath and blow it out. I drop my eyes and fiddle with my hands. “Even in my clan, a clan that’s known for education, women don’t go to college. Only one woman has gone. Cat, Luca’s wife. I guess, being a Popescu, I’d assumed you’d be against it.”

“Don’t assume, remember?” He covers my fidgety hands and strokes them. “Anything is up for discussion between us. I don’t care if it’s never been done before.”

“What if Cristo doesn’t like it?”

Marku’s eyes flash. “Cristo wouldn’t dare get between me and my wife. Anyway, that’s not the kind of man he is.”

“How do you know what kind of man he will become? Power changes people, and he’s only recently become *şef*.”

His face cracks into a broad grin. “You may not yet have a high regard for my clan, but I know him inside out. *Şefhood* isn’t going to change Cristo. He may have his faults. Don’t we all? But he’s not one to meddle in the affairs of his men. Unless there’s abuse or something like that.”

I cock a brow. “You sure about that?”

He dips his chin and stares at me intently. “What are you suggesting?”

“Well, there are rumors about what happened between him and Una...”

Marku stiffens. “Those are nothing but rumors. The truth is much more complicated. He was young and hotheaded, but he did not do the sick things people murmur about him behind his back. He may not be a good man, but he’s no monster when it comes to his clan. Una was clan.”

Turning our conversation away from Cristo and his blemished past, I push at Marku’s shoulder and say, “He might become a good man, a man like you.” I wink. “Who knows, love might change him.”

Marku barks out a laugh. “That’s the least likely scenario.”

“It’s changed you,” I point out, testing him.

“Baby girl, you’re mistaken if you think love changed me.” I place my hand on my chest and mock gasp, but he continues, “Because I’ve always loved you.”

“So what changed? At one point, we couldn’t stand being in the same room together.”

“Knowing you were in danger,” he replied solemnly. “I had to step up and recognize that you are my life. Nothing matters more than you. So if you want to go to college, go to college. If you want to have a kid, don’t worry, I’m ready to breed you nice and good. Almost losing you—then losing your father—taught me that nothing matters as much as wife, family, and clan.” He leans forward and kisses me deeply. “So do whatever makes you happy. Making you happy makes me happy, Chuckie.”

I unhook my bra, pull it off, and fling my arms around his neck. I tug at the buttons of his shirt until they’re undone. Between kisses, we struggle to get it off him. I caress his bare

torso, from the bulging muscles of his shoulders down his inked and burned chest.

He grasps my shoulders and stops me. “You sure about this?”

I straddle his lap and kiss him deeply. “More than sure. So you want to breed me, huh?”

He flips me onto my back. I laugh aloud, feeling free to feel, to live, to love. And, oh, how I love him. We may have been through hell and back, but Marku is my man, my husband, and nothing is going to stop me from shouting my love from the rooftops. By the end of the day, everyone will know we are married.

And after that?

After that we have the rest of our lives together.

EPILOGUE

CRINA



In the end, Marku and I both went to Cooper Union. Me, for writing. Him, for engineering.

Lucian settled in as *consilier* and Star went to New York University, practically in the same neighborhood.

Star and Lucian bought a nifty renovated carriage house near Washington Square Park when she started college. With a little conniving, and a lot of money, we bought a townhouse on the same street. Washington Mews is a lovely, pedestrian-only street, tucked away from the busy city and only a short walk from campus.

My mother visits regularly. Ever since I moved out—and, of course, with my father's dying wish playing in the background—we've come to a truce of sorts. We will never be friends or confidants, but now that I have my own life with Marku, she respects me as a married woman. Honestly, she was particularly taken with the fact that I announced my marriage to the world without waiting for the big Romanian wedding. From comments she's made here and there, she's surprised by my choice to go to school, but I suspect that she may even be a little proud of me for it. Right or wrong, she raised me to be a strong, respected *mafie* woman, and that's what I've become, in my own way.

I'm on the lookout for another building on our street to go on sale. Gabby started taking classes along with Star, but she's stuck in Queens. Star and I have decided that we need her here

with us. We figure if we buy her a place, Soren will have no choice but to move in with her. Thinking of her makes me think of...

Anton.

I grimace. If I ever get my hands on him, I will rip him apart into a million little pieces. I stop my train of thought. No, I refuse to let anything ruin this day.

It's *Mărțișor*, the first of March, which marks the arrival of spring for Romanians. Girls and women receive *mărțișors*, small jewel-like ornaments tied with a entwined red and white string.

I woke up to one such ornament by my bedside. A golden fountain pen.

Marku hasn't given me one of these since I was twelve. There's a twinge in my heart because my father gave me one every year. And Marku, knowing this, likely wanted to continue the tradition.

I turn over on my back, holding the little ornament from its tassels and swinging the pretty pen back and forth, back and forth. I'll wear it pinned to my heart today, and toward the end of the month, I will go to Sunnyside Park and tie the *mărțișor* to the branch of a tree. Every year, *mărțișors* are tied to tree branches throughout the park.

My grandmother once told me the custom began in Roman times. That the red and white string represents the duality of life and death, two sides of the same coin. That spirits and fairies pitter-patter between the living and the dead, that they hang out in the in-between spaces, like shady corners of large, drafty old houses or long, waving blades of grass in an open meadow. And right now, right this moment, I'm in one of those in-between spaces. Dan is here. I felt him slipping in between the rays of sunlight coming through the window, landing on the gold pen, making it shimmer extra bright for me, like a drop of pure sunshine.

He's with me.

My eyes tear up and my nostrils burn. He chose to visit on the day when Romanians honor spring and womanhood. Even though he's gone, probably having the time of his life as an angel or a leprechaun or something magical, for sure—he likes to pop in every now and then to remind me that he's still with me.

The shower in the en suite bathroom turns off. Seconds later, Marku strolls through our bedroom wearing nothing but a towel around his waist and rubbing his hair dry. My heart stutters for a moment. His hair is a beautiful mess of dark curls, his eyes sparkling at finding me awake with my *mărțișor*.

A smile spreads over his face. “You’re awake.”

“I don’t see how you thought I’d sleep through all that racket,” I reply, pretending to be grumpy.

He drops his towel, his dark, wet hair sticking out every which way. He looks so boyish at this moment with that crestfallen expression on his face. He sinks down beside me, making the bed dip to one side. “Did I wake you? You’ve slept through every other shower I’ve taken since we moved here.” His lips purse. I’d almost say it was a thoughtful pout. “I should’ve used the bathroom down the hall.”

I caress the damp skin of his knee and look over at him. “I was just teasing.”

His hand falls on mine, his fingers intertwining with mine. He does that often, taking my hand and lacing our fingers together. Lifting his chin toward the trinket, he asks, with an edge of worry, “You like it?”

My heart sings. “You know I do.”

The lines of worry smooth out and his face breaks into another stunning smile. He smiles so much more lately. “I’m glad. I told Tiffany that they should open a line of *mărțișors*. Once Americans get wind of a custom like this, they’ll be all in.”

Swinging it in front of him, I side-eye him. “Yeah, especially since grown women get real jewelry, not trinkets like this.”

His face falls as he snags the *mārṭiṣor* and closes his fist over it. “You wanted something big. Fuck, I knew I should’ve gotten something else.”

I sit up and tap his fist until he opens it. I snatch the little golden pen on the flat of his palm and clutch it to my chest. “Don’t you dare.”

He lets out a gust of relief at my teasing. I really shouldn’t play with him like this, but it’s too tempting.

“I love it.” Cupping it in my hand, I stroke it gently and glance up at him. “Just like I love you.”

He kisses me on the tip of my nose, on my cheek, on my temple. “Oh, so you love me now, do you?”

“I’ve always loved you. You were just too much of a pain in my butt for a while there, but I beat you back into shape.”

He lets out a loud guffaw. “*I* was the pain the ass? That’s a switch in narrative, if ever I’ve heard of one.”

I grab his shoulder to bring him back to me, my fingers slipping off his damp skin. I grab him again, this time putting some nails into it. He inhales sharply. That seems to have gotten his attention. His body tenses. It’s like watching a cougar go from playful to predatory.

He sniffs the air and declares in a gravelly tone, “I can smell you.”

I bet he can because I’m drenched between my thighs. I lie back down and spread my bent legs open. His eyes zero in on the spot where I want them, and my clit pulses in response to his attention.

“Look at that pretty pink gash you’ve got waiting for me.”

My face goes slack and I moan. That’s how it is between us. One second we’re teasing and joking just like we have our

entire lives. The next second, I want him to ravage me.

I tug at the towel wrapped tightly around his waist and whine, “I want it.”

He stands and I can already see his shaft tenting the towel. He undoes the knot and lets it fall, giving me a glorious view. Swirls of blue, red, and green pop and glisten on his skin, interspersed with the pink of his scars. I’ve gotten used to the scars. His body is like a beautiful work of art. It took me a while to realize he was painting his body the way Cristian painted on canvas.

His rigid arousal stands up, tall and proud. I don’t get more than a few seconds to admire him before he prowls over to me, caging me in between his strong limbs. He drops a kiss on my belly button and licks up the center of my torso until he reaches my breasts. He feathers my beaded nipples with his breath until I’m squirming beneath him and taking hold of his head to press his mouth where I need it most.

He indulges me by wrapping his tongue around my nipple and sucking hard. My hips jump off the bed and he takes the opportunity to settle between my thighs. The hard ridge of his cock rubs against my bare, slippery pussy. Groaning at the contact, he buries his face in my neck.

“You deserve this after the nice present you got me.”

He groans again, knowing where I’m going with that comment, the game I want to play.

He lifts his head and replies, “Is that right? You owe me, don’t you? A gift like that can go a long way for a little girl like you. By taking that gift, you’re indebted to me. How you gonna make it up to me?”

My breathy exhales accelerate and I pant, “With any-thing-you-want.”

He leans to the right and jerks open the drawer of the nightstand, pulling out a pair of handcuffs and different lengths of rope. “Oh, I remember now. You’re my plaything. My fucktoy.” He presses a hard kiss on my lips, thrusting his

tongue inside. He ends it and continues, “I get to do anything I want and you just have to lie here and take it.”

He plunges a finger inside me and my eyes roll back. When he warns me about *taking it*, he means me taking as many orgasms as he decides.

He glances at the clock. “Good thing you don’t have class this morning. This is gonna take a while.”

I gaze up at my husband and murmur, “Take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere.”

He picks up my hand and loops a rope around my wrist. “Damn straight you aren’t. I forced you into marrying me and now your mine, baby girl. For life.”

I gaze up at him, his dark piercing eyes steady on mine. A lock of hair the shade of nighttime dips over the olive-tinted skin of his forehead. “I don’t regret any of it, Marku. Not one moment of it.”

His eyes darken, regret and sadness skating past like fast-running clouds over a full moon. He leans forward and brushes a kiss over my lips. “In case you do, I plan on spending the rest of my life making it up to you.”

I pull him toward me with my free hand and take another kiss.

He won’t need to make up for it. He shows me every day how much he loves me. He cares for me in every way, gives in to most of my demands, and if he doesn’t, I haggle my way into getting most everything I want. He spoils me and showers me with love. He’s my best friend, my husband, my love. I wasn’t lying when I told him that I don’t regret a single moment of our story, because everything we went through brought us to this moment.

And this moment is pretty damn amazing.

THANK you for reading Crina and Marku’s story, UNREGRETTABLE! If you subscribe to my newsletter, you

will get bonus material like the prologue I wrote, which was not included in the book. (It was a last-minute decision!). It's in the VIP VAULT on my website, but you can only get the password when you sign up to my newsletter.

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I am currently working on Gabby and Anton's tortured romance in UNFORGETTABLE, but if you haven't read Star and Lucian's book, check out UNFORGIVABLE: A High School Bully Mafia Romance.

ONE-CLICK UNFORGIVABLE HERE>>>

WANNA TASTE NOW?

Lucian

Star. St-ar.

Only two syllables. Such an ostensibly simple sounding name. Simple it might sound, but she is like a star. They look small in the sky, just pinpricks in the huge expanse of black, but they're immense. Explosive. The result of an explosion, like the phoenix rising from the ashes. I bet she'd explode under my touch. Better yet, under my tongue.

She's as beautiful as always. Ice-blond hair the color of pearl dust, with hints of gold to give it warmth. Her inscrutable dark eyes are the color of onyx. I love her eyes. They're like whirling black seas, mysterious and impenetrable. Other than

her platinum-colored hair, most people don't notice her because she's always hiding in the wings, trying to melt into the wall. Yet, I've noticed her from the beginning.

Only...

I tilt my head to the side, studying her carefully, and I see something new. Her shoulders are pushed back instead of slumped forward like usual. Her eyes drill into me as opposed to darting away. She stood up to Cristo instead of promptly agreeing to his request.

Annoyance instantaneously showed on her face. Another first.

"We don't have to be enemies, you know. We can be friends," she suggests, although there's a begrudging tone beneath it.

Star takes a swallow and the old show of nerves makes me smile inwardly.

I laugh, a bitter one. "There's no such thing as friends. This world is made up of three kinds of people: family, competitors, and enemies. Friends are an American concept, a sheep's clothing for one of the latter. Competitor or enemy, take your pick."

"Exactly, so why pick me? Any other girl in your clan would do."

I languidly move from my position behind the grotesquely baroque sofa to where she stands, still rooted to the same spot. I stop a mere arm's length away from her.

She tenses.

I take a step closer.

And a wave of cherry vanilla hits me. My stomach clenches. It's the fragrance of innocence, of childhood, of the shampoo little girls with flaxen hair use in their baths.

A childhood I know nothing about. I have no need of false memories, memories that exist in other kids' lives. My own

memories are filled with white walls and the stink of antiseptic.

I press my eyes closed for a brief moment; the cherry vanilla scent unrelenting.

I snap them open. My gaze lands on her. She hasn't moved a muscle, standing stock still, like prey on the alert.

Yeah, that's right, little girl. I'm the Big Bad Wolf to your Little Red Riding Hood. I'm your biggest nightmare.

"He has his reasons for choosing you," I reply.

Fuck if I know what they are, but my *şef* never does anything without a purpose.

Circling her tightly, I exhale, and my breath flutters a few loose strands of her hair. I watch a shiver course through her delicate frame.

Be afraid, little girl. Be very afraid.

I breathe her in.

My heart skips a beat.

I breathe her out.

My heart pounds.

The tension between us is palatable.

"He's using you for his purposes, and I'm going to use you for mine."

Her head turns slightly in my direction. "To become *consilier*, you mean."

I still mid-step in the tight, hovering circle I've made around her. I've never made any bones of my intentions within my clan, but she isn't a Popescu. The only way she can know something like that is if she's sought out intel about me or watched me closely.

And is that bitterness I hear?

“That’s right. And you know what that means, don’t you, Star?”

I pause a moment. She shakes her head, frustration marring the smooth perfection of her forehead.

“That means I have a future to fight for, so we can never be friends. Get that idea out of your fucking head. I can fuck you.” She swallows. “I can rut you.” Her gaze skates away. “Hell, I can even breed you, but I can never marry you and I sure as hell can *never* be your *friend*.”

I spit out the last word like it’s a curse.

Her hand swings out, swift and firm, but I catch her wrist before her palm gets anywhere close to connecting with my cheek.

My gaze burns into her, although inside ... inside I’m fucking *laughing*.

Little girl got herself a spine over the summer.

“Let go of my hand,” she snarls.

Using that very hand, I drag her close until our lips are a hair’s breadth away.

Her dark eyes widen, pupils blown out, in fear or lust I don’t know. “Don’t touch me without my permission.”

I huff. “Ironic, that. You were about to slap me without mine.”

“You deserve it. You may be a king at Empire Academy,” she grinds out, “but you don’t control me.”

In a silky tone, I contradict her, “Oh, but I am. I am the king and I do control you. Test me, girlie, and I’ll have you over my lap in a heartbeat.”

God, would I love that.

Scandalized, she tosses her head and yanks her hand hard.

I tighten my hold.

“Let go of me,” she grits out between clenched teeth.

I get back her face. Another whiff of sweet dark cherries glides over me, but I fight the urge to taste her, and reply, “No.”

Her chest flutters up and down, almost heaving. Our gaze locks together. Her fragile wrist is manacled between my long fingers.

She shakes it. I stand firm.

She shifts from foot to foot and rolls her eyes. “Are you done already?”

“Not yet,” I snap back.

“I could break you, you know,” I say softly. Soft, but menacing.

Her lashes flutter, her only reaction. But it’s enough. I’ve made my point, but now it’s time to put distance between us. I’ve stood close to her long enough. Star may normally be demure and quiet, but she’s a lethal combination of strength and innocence, all wrapped up in the body of a siren. As tempting as she is, a man like me would devour her innocence raw. I’d tear at it and chomp on it till it’s been ground up and spit out.

I savor one last beat of touching heaven, knowing I’m the personification of hell, before releasing her and stepping away. I move so fast; she wobbles in my absence.

I wait for her to regain her footing, then motion for her to give me her phone.

She blows out a raspberry with her suckable full lips and grabs her phone from the side pocket of her over-sized joggers, encasing a tight ass the shape of delectable peaches. I should know. I’ve looked enough times.

She opens her phone and shoves it in my open hand.

I call myself and put my number in her contacts. Handing it back to her, I angle my head toward the front door, and say, “Now get out of here.”

She doesn't need to be told twice. She hitches her backpack over her shoulder, the backpack she never once took off this entire time and rushes out the front door without a glance back, like the prey she is. Light glints off the many buttons of her backpack jut before she disappears.

Star was always the smartest girl of the class. I see some things haven't changed.

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