



wicked

HEIR

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

MILA KANE

WICKED HEIR

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

VICIOUS VENGEANCE DUET

BOOK ONE

MILA KANE

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Also by Mila Kane

WELCOME TO MILA'S WORLD

Join my newsletter for deleted scenes, polls, and character
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AUTHOR'S NOTE



Welcome to Mila Kane's New York. It's not the city you know, and here the Kings and Queens of the Underworld reign supreme.

Along with life or death love, darkness and mayhem rules this corner of the book world. If that's your thing, read on.

If you're not sure, check out [my website](#) for a full list of TWs.

PROLOGUE

They say monsters are made, not born.

I was both.

Kirill Viktorovich Chernov

In another life, I had a different name.

In another life, I had a different future. At least, that was what I liked to think—it was cold comfort. Maybe I was destined to be my father's son and follow in his footsteps. Maybe believing anything else was a lie. One thing that had always remained true whether I was Kirill Lewis, the poor kid at a rich school, or Kirill Chernov, the cold, brutal heir in my father's bratva; Mallory Madison was mine.

Run as she could, hide as she had; it didn't change that simple fact.

Mine, and no one in this world could have saved her from that dark fate.

KIRILL

I walked the pier at Brighton Beach and watched people slipping on the wet, rain-slicked boardwalk. I lived in a penthouse money alone couldn't buy, but I was always called back to the pier. The salty, squalid air was a fitting reminder that even if life was luxurious for a moment, the cost of that privilege was here, in the warehouses behind the seafront. In the quiet, terrible things we did in the dark.

The brine never truly left my nose. It was ingrained.

Cold, gray water rushed under my feet, and noisy gulls circled. Couples were walking, and children were playing, somewhat dangerously, in the syringe-littered sand of the beach. Tweakers and pimps wandered the boardwalk, passing shops pushing international calling cards and signs in Cyrillic.

Brighton Beach was home to Russians in New York, and it was a shitty junk store hallmark card for all who came here seeking the American dream. I didn't know if my father had ever imagined the lauded ideal when he washed up with his fake papers, ready to disappear from immigration and anyone he owed money to. To Viktor, the American dream was green. He didn't care how he came to acquire that green, and he especially didn't care if it was red-stained. A little bloodshed and mayhem had never stopped Viktor Chernov from doing what he did best—rising to the top of a dirty, lawless heap.

I shifted my weight off my bad knee. In this kind of shitty, cold weather, it ached. Usually, I didn't mind the pain so much.

It reminded me of her.

“Kirill.”

A voice spoke behind me—my guard, Ivan. Ivan spoke English well, a necessity for the job.

To my father’s contempt, his son and potential heir to his dark dynasty didn’t speak Russian well. It wasn’t my fault. I had barely spent more than two minutes with the man until I was nineteen. Before then, I’d had choices, a life to live, and hope, amongst other things. After that, everything but him and the bratva had gone, slipping through my fingers like sand.

“What is it?” I asked Ivan, turning to shield my face against the wind on the pier and light a cigarette. One thing I liked about Brighton Beach was the cheap and fragrant fruit-flavored smokes. Russians were strangely whimsical about some things and utterly brutal about others.

“The package is in the warehouse. Pyotr wants to know if he should get started.”

No matter the millions I’d made the bratva, the exclusive penthouse apartment I lived in, the flashy cars I drove, or the secrets I amassed on the wealthy, powerful men who ran this city, my life’s work always came down to this—causing fear and wreaking havoc. Murder was all good and well and had its place in my daily business, but fear was a different beast. Every man could murder, but only some could inspire fear. There was a limit to pain but no limit to fear. I excelled in wielding it like a weapon, with surgical precision.

Molly, I found my life’s calling after all. My one true talent.

One day, I planned to show her in person.



THE WAREHOUSE the bratva used for wet work was near the pier. It was an abandoned, condemned building that sagged and rotted, smelling of sea salt and molding popcorn. The sounds of the pier and the endless carnival games gave the air a twisted edge as I sat before the man who had tried to cash in

on a deal and undercut me. No one crossed the Chernov bratva in New York. No one. I took a knife from my pocket. The man's eyes fixed on it. His name was Ilya if I remembered correctly.

"I like knives," I told him conversationally, my tone pleasant.

Ilya's eyes flickered to mine and then away.

I trimmed my nails, already brutally short, as I waited for his fear to kick in. He was already afraid. The stench of old sweat mixed with new was rank on him. But I needed more. I needed to see his terror, to feed the beast inside me. The one that never rested nor fed enough to be full. The one who was always awake.

"Knives are quiet. Knives never run out of bullets." I twirled the blade between dexterous fingers and leaned in, bringing the knife under Ilya's bound jaw. "Knives are intimate. Guns are loud and impersonal," I murmured as I slid the blade up the side of Ilya's face and cut through the gag easily. "Do you know why you're here?"

Ilya nodded. "Because of the Vardi deal. I swear, Kirill, I didn't take a cut. I would never. It wasn't me," he panted.

"As you know, if there's anything I hate more than betrayal, it's lying. You fucked up, Ilya. Be man enough to admit it and take your punishment," I said through gritted teeth.

People were so disappointing, and the disloyal pissed me off more than anything. A therapist would no doubt tell me it all started with Mallory, but I already knew that. Mallory was the start of all of it, and she would also be the end.

"I swear, I didn't know. I thought he was in on it when he showed up. I thought you knew he was here," Ilya pleaded.

I frowned at him, the slightest trickle of curiosity staying my hand before I slipped the sharp, thin blade into his neck from below. The soft place under his tongue was a favorite of mine. It didn't kill quickly and hurt like a bitch, or so I'd heard. "Who?"

"Nikolai. It's Nikolai. He's back. Your brother is back," Ilya said, his chest heaving.

In my distraction, I'd pressed the blade in, and blood welled from the cut as the rancid stink of Ilya's piss filled the air. The man had wet himself. There was no dignity in death.

I pulled the knife from his skin, and he cried out. I wiped it on my black jeans, my mind lost in his revelation.

Nikolai. My brother. Well, half-brother, and even that was too close a relationship for my liking. Where I was brutal in my dealings for my father's bratva, Niko was insane. Perhaps growing up with my father from a tender age and seeing the blood, murder, mayhem, and depravity had broken something inside him too fundamental to be fixed. He was dangerous—a loose cannon. Yet, as soon as Ilya said his name, I realized my father must know he was back. Viktor knew everything that happened in this city, including where his lunatic son was. That meant he was keeping things from me again. That was never good.

"Find out what you can about Niko, but don't let any of Viktor's men know." I strode out of the warehouse, wiping my bloodied hands on a rag and tossing it into the fire burning in a can outside.

"What about Ilya?" Ivan asked.

"If he survives, all is forgiven. He doesn't have the money. Niko does," I muttered, furious at the man who thought he was free to walk rough-shod over the empire I had built.

Before I was born, Viktor Chernov had run the strongest bratva in New York. By the time I was old enough to join him, it had been lagging, an antiquated system of doing business that would only see his profit margins narrow over time. Once I was reluctantly dedicated to my father's organization, I changed everything. The real money these days wasn't in shaking down local thugs or dealing nickel-and-dime bags of heroin on the street. The real money was in secrets, information, arms, and tech. I had helped the Chernov name expand its horizons. Niko wanted to burn it all down if it couldn't be his. The problem was me. My father had two successors, and neither of us would walk away. I had nothing

except this life. I'd fight for it to my last breath. Trouble was, Niko felt the same.

I slammed the door of the bulletproof SUV I traveled in. Since a run-in a year ago with a rival syndicate out of Chicago, Viktor insisted on drivers and cars that could withstand the zombie apocalypse.

I was pissed. I didn't want to think about Niko. I didn't want to think about Viktor and what new way he had thought up to pitch his two sons against each other. It brought back memories too dark for even me to stomach. The forge that had formed me into whatever I was now still haunted me. From a rising track star with a scholarship to a monster. It wasn't quite the trajectory most people dream of, but such was life.

I lit another smoke in the back of the car, enjoying the harsh curl of smoky fruit. It smelled like the chaotic markets and brothels lining the Black Sea. I sucked back the acrid taste, enjoying how it burned my senses. These days, it was hard to feel much unless it had an edge of pain. With that edge, my dulled and blunted senses came alive. Lately, the necessary edge only grew wider.

After a moment, I flicked the cigar out the window, tired of the flavor. I dug in my pocket for my vibrating cell. Ilya's blood was still stuck around my nails, gummy and dark. I tutted with annoyance. Bodily fluids could be so irritatingly sticky, whether you were trying to get it off your body or scrub down a kill site—not that I did cleanup anymore. I was long past the days when I'd scrubbed buckets of bleach over concrete floors and watched it turn to pink foam as it mixed with freshly spilled blood. The days of being a pupil in my father's vicious school of violence were behind me. Nico and I had been the only students left standing by graduating class.

"What?" I answered the call, seeing Max's name flash on the screen. He was my second, after Ivan, and the only one I trusted with my years-long task. He called it an obsession. He was right. I was fucking obsessed.

"Kirill, you might want to sit down for this."

Idiot. Despite the horrors we'd been through, the fool still thought I had the patience for banter. "Tell me."

"I've found her. Mallory Madison. I've finally fucking found her."

MOLLY

The Blue Rabbit on a Saturday night was the stuff of nightmares.

Sweating, salivating men filled the club, and cigar smoke rose from the private rooms downstairs. Illegal or not, Rafael, the owner of the gentleman's club in downtown Manhattan, didn't care. It wasn't like smoking indoors was the only rule being broken at the Blue Rabbit.

There was no rule Rafael and his rabble of ungentlemanly patrons couldn't break. You could call the police, but the commissioner was in the Pink Room getting a private show. Staff whispered in corners that Rafael Navarro was an actual Navarro from the ruthless Mexican cartel flooding the city with some of the priciest pharmaceuticals on the market. I couldn't afford to care about that. I was broke, and the tips here were good.

The men who patronized The Blue Rabbit were the wealthiest, most entitled men in this rotten city. They were also the most depraved, lawless, and cruel I'd ever met. I should know. My father used to be a member before he gambled too much and lost everything my mother had left him. The house, cars, private school, and reputation all flushed away in a mad frenzy of drugs and betting.

Thanks, Dad.

I was a few months into working the bar at the Blue Rabbit. I hated places like these and the kind of people who frequented them, yet I gobbled down their tips with gratitude.

Poverty and desperation went hand in hand. What seemed abhorrent only a little while ago gradually became palatable as the world shifted around you. Lately, I'd been thinking a lot about that.

"Lori! Get a move on," a voice called to me.

I wrapped a stained black apron around the shortie shorts that Rafael thought were appropriate for bartenders. "I'm coming," I hollered.

The boss slapped the bar and fixed me with an angry stare. Rafe was an asshole—a king asshole if the night was right—but I needed the job. "We have some important guests in VIP tonight. Make sure that they're catered to. Whatever they need." The glint in his eye warned me that the things they needed might not be something I was planning on giving away for tips.

"Lori, table three needs an ice refill," Tanya, my line manager and the scariest woman I'd ever met, called to me, saving me from the staring contest with Rafe.

He turned his dark, angry eyes to Tanya and shrugged, unfazed. He didn't care who looked after his sleazy business acquaintances, and they sure didn't give a fuck. They'd probably be too drunk or high to care which pair of lips fastened around their floppy cocks.

"Thanks," I muttered to Tanya.

She nodded, expressionless. She knew I didn't serve anything other than drinks at tables—*yet*. A word Rafe liked to goad me with. His mindset was that all staff were free game as there would always be a day when a sudden bill was too important or you needed to bail someone out of jail. You'd make an exception, and then... you'd set a new low. But you had the money, and it wasn't so bad, was it? There was a special place in hell for men like Rafael Navarro.

"Table three does need ice, though," she prompted me.

I nodded, jolted from my daydreaming. I pulled a heavy bucket from the rack and scooped shiny balls of ice into it. I hated going out on the floor, and tonight, a strange electric

energy made me dread it more. This place got like that sometimes. A chemical charge of men rushing into the weekend from their stressful, pressure-filled week dealing with millions of dollars. They wanted to get wrecked and destroy things.

In the Blue Rabbit, the women were the ones who got destroyed. Every. Single. Time.

Women were disposable, paper dolls for men to slake their anger—it was a lesson I had truly learned, even before I came to the hallowed, somewhat sticky halls of the Blue Rabbit. My father had been my teacher in that particular lesson, and those childhood memories were the hardest to forget. They were etched on my memory like tattoos burrowing into bone.

In my life, I'd met one man who'd broken the pattern I'd come to expect from those in power. Not even a man—a boy. He'd given me hope for a long time, but even that youthful optimism faded with the relentless toll of time.

I left the safety of the back of the bar and weaved through the tables. The music was pounding so loudly that it vibrated through my soles and up my legs. Samantha was shaking her beautiful body on stage, her burlesque outfit doing her curvy body justice. That pin-up costume cost more than my monthly rent, and The Blue Rabbit was one of the best burlesque shows in the city. A special privilege for a chosen few. There were no greasy poles at this gentleman's club. Sam spun on stage, stripping off one long, black elbow-length glove. She was gifted. She favored her right side, and I knew she was protecting an old injury. She'd been a teenage Julliard hopeful once upon a lifetime ago, and a bad injury had ended that young dream.

The Blue Rabbit was where dreams came to die.

“Hello, gorgeous. Are you on the menu tonight?”

A brash voice filled my ear, and a hand landed on my ass.

I continued without a backward glance. Just last month, I'd have turned back and argued with the lech and tried to make him understand that grabbing women without consent wasn't a

nice thing to do. I'd been so ridiculously naïve. Even after my ruined childhood, I'd kept that naivety for a while. Seven days into my job here, I'd gotten the message.

No one will help you here, little lady.

I wove around crowded tables toward the VIP section. Further back from the main stage, the music was dimmed. The smell of expensive cologne reached me, and murmured voices filled my ears. In the VIP section of the exclusive, members-only club, you could find titans of industry, princes of small countries, and kingpins of the underworld sitting at the same table.

Tonight, it was a small group of businessmen, their bespoke suits sharp enough to cut, their intense expressions predatory and empty. Businessmen, kingpins, corrupt politicians—they all looked similar, with small differences. I'd learned them well. I avoided eye contact as I picked up the empty ice bucket and slipped the new one into the cradle.

“Just in time,” a voice called.

I shuddered. During the last week, I'd been recognized by an old classmate. The wealthy green-leafed town where I'd been the first version of myself—Mallory Madison—was only a short train ride away. Every person I went to school with was here in New York—or so I hoped because it would include the one I was looking for.

Kirill.

Last week, one of the most obnoxious men I'd ever had the displeasure of meeting, Kaplan Holmes, had walked in. He'd been coked out his head, but not so far gone he hadn't recognized me. He'd looked at me wide-eyed before throwing his head back and laughing.

“Mallory fucking Madison – you're still alive?”

He'd been in every night since. Even in high school, Kap had been a rich kid bully who'd loved to make others squirm. Nothing had changed. He'd caught me up on his boring, privileged life as I attempted to avoid him. He'd racked up over five grand in charges, sending me back and forth to his

table. He knew my real name, the one I'd had a lifetime ago, and he seemed to know he had me over a barrel. I fantasized about poisoning his drink nightly but had to settle for spitting in it for now.

"I'm starting to think you have a problem," I noted, swapping the ice bucket before giving the table a bland smile. It was best not to focus too clearly on any one face. It encouraged conversation.

Kap smirked. "Maybe I do, sweetheart. Everywhere I go lately, I hear about you."

I paused, finally looking at him. "Meaning?"

Kap settled his bulk against the leather booth. Kap was around my age, but he had the middle-aged spread that rich former athletes developed when they were past their prime. "Meaning, little Mallory Madison, someone is looking for you."

Anxiety leaped in my veins. When you'd been on the run for as long as I had, you learned there would never be an endpoint to the fear of discovery. It had followed us from the night my father fled and dragged my mother and me from Woodhaven as if the devil was on his back.

I shouldn't be in New York.

It was my father's voice, yet mine too. It was stupid, risky, and ridiculous, but the truth remained that I had little choice. How would I find Kirill if I wasn't here? How could he find me?

"Who?" I asked numbly. *Was it him?*

"If you want to know, I might be persuaded to part with the information for a price," Kap said, sitting forward. His piggy, greedy eyes glittered with malice. "An hour in a private room downstairs, on the house. You and me."

A bitter laugh left me as I crossed my arms over my chest. I was pretty thin these days, so there wasn't much to see, but the slide of Kap's eyes on my skin made me feel dirty. The desire to know who the hell he was talking to almost made me cave. I'd been in New York for months and had no luck. Mallory –

my given name—meant bad luck, and it had lived up to its ominous meaning.

“Let me get this straight. Not only do you want to touch me, but you want to do it for free?” I asked, my voice braver than it had been in a long time. The girl who asked that question wasn’t Lori Wilson, desperate to get as many tips as possible. That voice was Mallory Madison, who’d had the world at her feet.

Kap’s meaty fist clenched on the table, and he narrowed his eyes at me. “You’ll pay for that, Madison.”

I immediately grabbed the ice bucket from the floor, and the startling cold chilled my hands. “Put it on my tab, Holmes,” I muttered and turned away.

That was silly. Dangerous, even. I shouldn’t be goading Kap Holmes to retaliate. I had too much to lose. No, scratch that. I had *almost* nothing to lose, but wasn’t that more dangerous? There was nothing anyone could take from me at this point that wouldn’t hurt or leave a mark.

Sometimes, even that deterrent didn’t seem to matter.



ANOTHER NIGHT, another crappy shift down. I stuck my tips down my bra and bundled up in my threadbare coat to walk home. The gray sky was lightening into a purplish dawn, and there was no point wasting bus fare. I preferred working until dawn because the coffee shops and bakeries would be opening soon. There would be people out and about—built-in security. I wandered rain-slicked streets toward the bedsit I shared with my father.

I went into my room, not wanting to interact with Henry. Lately, he kept weird hours, up early and sleeping randomly during the day. He didn’t work—he claimed it was too dangerous in case he was recognized. Right. He’d be recognized by some gang members he stole money from seven years ago. That sounded likely. It was an excuse and a weak one at that.

I took off my coat, shivering when the cool air met my sweaty skin. One thing about the club was that it was always as hot as hell in there—a blessing in winter and a curse the rest of the year.

I stripped off and wiggled into an oversized T-shirt huge enough to reach my knees. I added sweats, thick socks, and a hoodie and crawled onto my mattress. Sure, it was on the floor, and a box spring was an impossible dream, but the sheets were soft, and my feet were aching.

I put my crappy old phone on charge and pulled my journal from a drawer. Sucking on the end of my pen, I stared at the blank page for a long moment before starting to write. The whole day went in there, uninspiring as it was. It helped count the days like tally marks on a prison wall. Finally, I finished my entry with the same thing I always did.

Love always, your Molly.

Everything I'd written in every journal I'd had for seven years was a letter to Kirill. I'd give them to him one day, even if I had to live a hundred years to do it.

I settled back in bed and cracked the top off the bottle of water Rafe had handed out at the end of my shift. Rafe never did anything for free, so I planned to enjoy every drop. I drank my fill and let my mind drift where it liked. Kirill Lewis. *My long-loved lost boy.*

I'd tried to find my best friend countless times over the years. He had become a ghost, and I never got a hint of where he was. It hadn't helped that my father had dragged my mother and me upstate to hide like the coward he was. We had only recently come to New York, and I was itching to find Kirill. I had no idea where to start except where he'd been heading the last time I saw him. My mind returned to New York because that's where Kirill's father had been. It was all I had to go on. I'd found out his mother had left Woodhaven only a month after Henry dragged us away from town. No one in his old neighborhood would tell me more than that.

It was an impossible dream, but I clung to it anyway. I had nothing else.

KIRILL

Sitting in my black Bugatti down the street from the gentleman's club, The Blue Rabbit, I was impatient to see Mallory. Viktor favored armored SUVs, but in our world, they were the same as a neon arrow in the air above the hood. When I was going somewhere alone, I preferred to blend in. Well, as much as someone with my height, build, and many tattoos could. Thank fuck, this was New York City, where citizens knew to mind their own goddamn business.

I'd already dispatched my bodyguards, much to Ivan's consternation. The man was a stickler for safety, but I was undeterred. I didn't need them. I'd waited too long to see Mallory again. I didn't want anyone there but us. Me and the girl who'd started it all.

I sat and waited in the dark for my first look at the object of my obsession.

The backdoor to the club squealed open as metal scraped stone. The soft chatter of voices filled the air as the club's staff spilled out, each carrying a club-branded water bottle in the early morning drizzle.

There. There she was.

Gooseflesh crept along my limbs and sent a shiver down my spine, despite my thick coat keeping out the dampness. It was like seeing a ghost.

After seven years, that first glimpse of Mallory was better and worse than I had imagined, and I had spent many a night imagining it.

I'd thought about finding her in the cold warehouse in Brighton Beach, where Viktor had taught Niko and me how to extract information from a mole. I pictured Mallory to distract me from the screams piercing the air while my brother worked his magic. I dreamed of her to avert the knowledge that it was my turn next. I'd thought of Mallory the first time I'd taken a life. The first time the gun in my hand sent another person slumping into a bloody heap.

I thought of Molly for every single one of those firsts. She had been my first everything, and she would also be my last. I had renewed those vows every time blood sank into my hands, staining my soul irreparably.

She had barely changed, yet she was different. The past hadn't only marked me, but her too. Good. In that case, maybe she'd look more fondly on the monster I'd become.

Her coat was cheap, and her boots were worn down. She looked tired and thin like she'd been pushed to a point. I already knew why. Singlehandedly supporting her mother. A pointless, sad existence that was never meant to be, if only she'd waited for me.

For some reason, the thinness of her cheap coat increased my annoyance. Fresh fury welled in my veins as I watched her struggle. Despite the gray, chilly morning, she ignored the approaching bus in favor of walking. She was still as stubborn as fuck.

This was the life she had chosen over me.

My girl had forgotten how she was supposed to be treated. She'd forgotten who she was. That was okay because I was going to remind her. She would live like a queen by my side, so long as she didn't fight the collar I would leash her with.

I followed behind her, but not too close. Mallory had always been wise and wary, and I couldn't imagine anything in her life had comforted her enough to lose that instinct. She'd been good at sniffing out a predator on the wind, though she had a blind spot when it came to me. She had been fooled about the darkness living inside me.

I wondered how long it would be before she realized I wasn't the same Kirill she had loved.

She was stubborn and strong-minded, full of ego and pride. I'd break her down piece by piece, but not her body—not where it would show. Her body belonged to me. She might be walking around with it, but it was mine. I'd remold her into my possession, so she would never dream of being parted from me. She would need me as much as I needed her, and we would be free from the chains of society's teachings of acceptable love. Since becoming a Chernov, I understood that the rules didn't apply to everyone, and very few applied to me.

I was a king in my world; a king took who and what he wanted. I'd been born wanting my Molly, and I'd die that way. I wanted her with every breath, and that would never change.

I watched her as she walked, staying in the shadows. I could have followed her easily with my eyes closed. The pull of her led me.

She walked with her shoulders bunched, defensive and cold. It should have been pathetic, but it wasn't. After all this time, my Mallory was strong. The monster inside me was satisfied by that realization. Breaking her to my will would be much sweeter when she fought back. Maybe her fire could warm the ice that had formed around my heart.

I kept to the shadows easily. When you'd lived in them for so long, staying there was easier than stepping into the light. Mallory wove her way through the streets confidently. I longed to get closer. Her long white-blonde hair was stuffed into the back of her jacket. I wished I could get close enough to touch those long, tumbling curls and pull them free. I wanted to wrap the strands around my fist and bend her head to mine. I wanted to see the shock in her eyes when she recognized me. I liked the thought of her surprise and shock when she realized I was no longer the man she'd known. No, I didn't like it—it made me hard as a rock. I strode the streets behind her, carefully keeping my wolf's scent from the little rabbit scurrying home in front of me.

Not yet, Molly. Not yet.

But soon.

I WAITED until she'd been inside her fifth-floor walk-up for an hour. According to Max, her piece of shit father wasn't around, though he technically lived with her. I wasn't worried about Henry. The sooner I saw him, the sooner I could end him. But I wasn't ready for Mallory to know I'd found her yet.

Her door had a ridiculous excuse for a lock, which I picked in three seconds flat. That would need to be replaced. I couldn't have someone else coming in here and hurting her when I'd just found her. Hurting Mallory was a privilege I'd earned. Only me.

Besides, I thought darkly as I entered her small, pitiful apartment, Mallory was my possession, and nobody fucked with my things.

I moved toward her room like a man possessed. I could smell her in here. Somehow, despite the years that had passed, the scent of her skin had remained in my head, perfect and untouched. I picked the lock on her bedroom door and pushed it open soundlessly. There she was, her small body curled up under a thin comforter. She had a bedsheet across the window instead of a blind. The weak morning sun shone through, lighting the room enough to pick my way across and stand over her. The sight of her poverty made me angry. I'd decorate her cage with the finest things money could buy. She would want for nothing except her freedom.

I knew Molly couldn't wake. She'd always been a heavy sleeper, but I hadn't wanted to take any chances. The slow-acting sleeping tablet in the bottles of water I'd had Rafael Navarro give her at the end of her shift would ensure she didn't wake.

Rafael was the second son of the powerful Mexican Cartel lord, Luis Navarro. His elder brother, Gabriel, was not someone you crossed lightly, and I had no intention of doing

so. A bratva boss—or in my case, a bratva heir—didn't walk into a rival family stronghold for any purpose other than starting a war. Instead, I'd had my second, Max, discreetly talk to Rafael about Mallory, telling him I'd be taking her off his hands soon. There was nothing the promise of a future favor and a guarantee of discretion couldn't achieve among like-minded individuals. My Mallory was only days away from finding every door in her life closing on her, a rapidly narrowing tunnel that only led in one direction—my door and the cage I'd prepared for her.

My mind lingered over the nickname I'd given the woman lying innocent and vulnerable below me. *Molly*.

I leaned down. I couldn't stop myself. Touching her arm lightly, I waited to see if she woke. When she didn't, I let my hand slide to her cheek. She was wrapped up like a homeless person, and the temperature in her room couldn't be much higher than the streets. I touched the apple of her cheek and let my hand linger around her jaw, imagining what it would be like to close my fist around her neck and wake her. That way, there would be no waiting or toying with my food. I'd wake her and take her in the same breath. She'd be locked in her new home by the time the sun was up, mine to devour at will.

But no, I had waited too long to rush. Breaking Mallory's rebellious spirit wouldn't be easy if she were anything like she used to be. I looked around her hovel. Then again, maybe the world had already broken her. Time would tell. No matter what, Mallory Madison's days of freedom were numbered.

Her skin was so soft and warm that it made my isolation and frigid life all the more painful. The ice had formed from the inside when my father had made me a true Chernov, and nothing could thaw it.

I slid my finger toward her mouth, lightly moving across her sweet lips. A dark thrill went through me as I pushed my thumb inside the hot cavern, and her tongue instinctively moved across the end like she was sweetly sucking it. I liked how it felt to have some part of myself inside her.

As I went to pull my hand away, she mumbled something in her sleep and turned her face right into my palm. Her hot breath scorched me, and her soft lips brushed against my flesh as she whispered a word. It would have been too quiet to hear if not for the early morning silence.

“Kirill.”

I pulled back as if she had bitten me, my heart thumping in my chest. It was a reminder that my ribcage still housed something alive. My heart had pulsed like a phantom limb for years, and I’d almost forgotten it was there. I retraced my steps to the sitting room, my head swimming with her scent, the feel of her skin, and the sound of my name on her lips.

The bathroom beckoned to my right. I entered, my lip curling at the black mold on the tiles and cheap peeling wallpaper. Mallory breathed this in daily. The thought made me angrier. There was a used-up tube of toothpaste on the sink, with the end cut off, and a sad little pink toothbrush with slayed bristles. The laundry basket proved to be a more intriguing hoard to go through. A matronly pair of full-cheeked, gray cotton panties sat on the top of the pile. I reached for them, and they were pressed to my nose before I could help myself.

I inhaled Molly’s secret, private scent, and nearly came in my pants. Fuck, I was like a junkie, finally getting a fix after years of withdrawal. I considered dropping my slacks and using her innocent, ugly panties to come, but it might ruin my game if she found them. It was too soon. Still, I had to adjust myself because my hard-on pressed so hard against my belt that it threatened to pop through the leather. As I withdrew my hand, precum coated my finger, leaking copiously from the tip. I returned to her toothbrush and wiped my essence on the bristles. Her body should prepare itself for my ownership. The thought of her unknowingly taking that small part of me inside her made dark and twisted need burn a hot path through me.

I left her underwear in the hamper and returned everything to normal, or near enough. I’d return tomorrow to have a better look at the life Mallory had made for herself in my absence.

For now, it suited me to watch from the shadows and wait, spinning my web so there'd be no escape when the walls closed in on her this time.

MOLLY

After a good night's sleep, I was annoyed to find my feet dragging through the day. Even when I slept enough, I felt half-dead the next morning. I downed so much coffee before starting my afternoon shift that I was practically vibrating when I arrived at the Blue Rabbit. In my deep, slightly strange dreams last night, I'd decided that dancing at the club was the only way to make the extra money I needed for Grateful Dawn. I'd woken up determined to ask Rafael about it.

A few hours later, my dream died painfully.

"No." Rafael pointed to the door and flicked his fingers at me like he was shooing away a cockroach.

We were standing in his office, only half an hour into my shift, and my optimistic mood had already been ruined. It had taken months to gather enough courage to ask Rafe for an audition to dance. Sam and the others made it look beautiful and tasteful, and they raked in tips like no one's business. I needed the money. Again, the lines of what I'd do to survive had shifted.

"Just no?" I asked.

"Just no."

His confirmation was a blow. My anger sparked. "Why not?"

"I don't have to give you a reason, Lori, because I'm the owner, and you work here. Now get out and do that work before I give your job to someone else," he growled at me.

“You’re an asshole, you know that?” I turned to go, but a hard hand wrapped around my arm and tugged me back.

Rafael loomed over me. “Watch your mouth, Lori. You have no idea who you’re speaking to. I’m not a nobody you can walk over, and I’ll play dead. Besides, if you knew what you were asking me to do and the consequences it could have for both of us, you’d be thanking me instead of causing a scene.”

A flicker of fear had me tamping down my next rude retort. *What the hell did that mean?* I tried to sound sweet, though I was pretty sure my smile was more of a snarl. “Can’t you at least tell me why?”

A muscle ticked in my boss’s jaw. “I don’t have to explain myself to you, little girl, but because you’re so desperate for a reason, I’ll give you one – take a look in the mirror. Who’d want to watch you dance? You’d be better off trying to model androgynous clothes to rich idiots because you aren’t what men here want to look at. They want the real deal. Something sexy, someone hot – you’re not it.” Rafael’s words set my cheeks on fire, and he pushed me away.

I stumbled toward the door, stung, embarrassed, and pissed off. “Asshole!” I flung over my shoulder, not caring if it got me fired.

It took about two seconds of storming down the hallway to realize how stupid that was. I needed the job. I couldn’t afford to have pride right now. I’d always been hot-headed, and it wasn’t getting better with age.

The truth was that my intense anger could break free at any given moment. Hidden deep down, a pit of molten coals burned inside me, only needing the slightest provocation to flare into scorching fury. I was angry at my father for ruining us. I was angry at myself for letting him take me. I was angry at my mother for tying me to the man I hated. I was angry at Kirill for making me love him and then disappearing. I was angry at the world and had nowhere to put that anger. I had stuffed it down so many times that I had worn a path of fire from my outraged heart to the pit of my belly, where my many resentments smoldered.

“Lori! Get your ass out here before you get fired,” Tanya called.

I sighed wearily. It was going to be busy tonight. A VIP party was coming in upstairs, and they were apparently big spenders. I didn’t care. I wouldn’t be sent to their table anyway.

“Can’t you see she’s fuming? Give her a minute,” Theo said.

Theo had been my co-worker for six months and ended my spell of being utterly friendless. He and his roommate, Federica, also a co-worker, were the only people who’d care if I died tomorrow.

“Heads up. That guy you don’t like is here. The son of that senator wannabe,” Theo muttered.

Great. Kaplan Holmes. For the fifth time this week.

I tied my apron around my waist and washed my hands. Kap was probably still smarting over my put-down the other night. Once again, impulsivity had put me in a situation I now had to be careful about. I turned my head upside down and collected my hair into a topknot.

“Hey, not behind the bar. Tie up your nasty lion’s mane in the dressing room,” Theo teased me.

I straightened and gave him the finger. “Tie this up.”

“Ooh, baby, with pleasure,” Theo sang. His cheeky grin helped lighten my terrible mood. “What’s up anyway?” he asked, standing beside me.

I unstacked the washer and rubbed the inside of the glasses with a clean cloth. Theo cut lemons into perfect wedges and arranged them in a bowl. There was something comforting about the familiar routine.

“I need a pay rise or a winning lottery ticket. Either would be good, and both have about the same chance of happening,” I muttered.

“Is it about your mama?” Theo asked.

The gentle sympathy in his voice made my throat tight. Holy shit, I had to get it together. I didn't cry, period, never mind at work. "Prices have increased, staffing costs, food, heat, and medicine too."

"That's shit," Theo murmured.

I nodded. Something I loved about Theo was that he never made me feel like I should be more positive or told me to look on the bright side. Sometimes, there wasn't one. He commiserated with me, and it was what I needed.

"You know my friend is still looking for someone for that music video," he added.

"Really? But he's a rising star, and I'm no one. Also, according to Rafael, I'm the opposite of sexy, so there's that, too," I muttered.

Theo dropped a lemon wedge in mock outrage. "Rafael said that? How'd you piss him off that much? That's way out of order. Unacceptable."

"Yet you're not denying it," I snapped, slightly hurt.

"Honey, we're not angsting teens. We know where we are on the scale of human attractiveness. You're a beautiful woman, but you're too high class for this place. Men here wouldn't understand your kind of beauty. If it's not fake tits and ass, they can't see it. My buddy's music isn't about tits and ass. It's indie rock, so no tits and ass allowed," Theo said, making me laugh.

"Well, that's good to know. What's the pay if you don't mind me asking?"

"It's enough to cover a few months of bills. I'm setting up a meeting tomorrow. If he likes you, and you like him, get that money, and get famous."

"Oh, who's getting famous?" Federica, or Fede as she was known, bounced over to the bar and leaned on it.

I bet Fede would have no problem getting a side gig dancing. She was beyond gorgeous and all-natural. With her Spanish

ancestry, she had an enviable hourglass shape, waist-length black curls, and olive skin.

“Our Lori here when she gets on my buddy’s music video. He’s going to blow up any day. Your face will be everywhere,” Theo said with his customary OTT optimism.

Getting my face everywhere wouldn’t be a bad idea when I thought about it. I couldn’t find Kirill anywhere in this damn huge city, but maybe there was a chance he could find me.

If he wanted to, wouldn’t he have already done it?

The poisonous inner voice that parroted my father chirped up before I shoved it back in its box. Not tonight. Anyway, I hadn’t made it easy to be found with my expensive fake identity.

“Oh, is that Austin? I love his music,” Fede said. “I’ve heard he’s a real player, so don’t sleep with him unless you’re cool with it.”

“Ha! Lori, have a one-night hook-up? Excuse me, have you met Lori? She doesn’t have sex. In fact, I’ve asked my new boyfriend to put out an APB for a missing sex life.” Theo chortled, making Fede grin.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’m glad you make yourself laugh. At least that’s one person.”

“Tucker likes my jokes just fine,” Theo said, unfazed.

“So, you’re still seeing him? He doesn’t mind that you work here?”

Theo snorted. “Where, a club?”

Fede tossed her hair and leaned in, lowering her voice. “A Navarro club. You know who Rafael is, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard it all. A kingpin or narc in witness protection. There are a million stories about the man. I bet the reality is boring as hell. He’s probably a rich little trust fund prince playing at being a businessman,” I quipped.

I wiped the bar, failing to notice Tanya, the terrifying line manager extraordinaire, looming over my shoulder. Theo gave

me a meaningful look, and I bit my lip, bracing myself for her crushing set down.

She put a hand on her hip and smirked. “I think Lori’s on the money. The twist is that Rafael spreads the rumors himself.”

Thank fuck, Tanya was in a better mood today than yesterday. She’d had me clean the men’s room three times in an hour because she caught me with my phone out.

Her light expression dissolved a moment later, and her hardened work-bitch face returned.

“Okay, enough chitchat, you three. It’s go time.”



ALL THE WAY HOME, I felt a crawling sensation across my back, like someone was watching. I cursed my cheapness at not taking the bus and hurried home. It was sleeting when I arrived, and the icy rain settled on my head, making me feel frozen and shivery. My numb fingers fumbled at the lock as I tried to insert the key. It wasn’t late, but it was already getting dark.

There! A movement behind that car – was it a person?

I blinked into the gray twilight light and tried to spy a crouching figure. After a few minutes of nothing, I unlocked the door and went inside. Great. I was jumping at shadows. I wasn’t a stranger to feeling watched or under threat. Henry and our years of running had ingrained a permanent anxiety in me that never slept. New York was a dangerous city. I couldn’t let my paranoia paralyze me. I had to get on with life.

I jogged up the stairs to my apartment, trying to get blood into my limbs. The weather sucked. I would lose what I saved on bus fare from pay and tips if I got sick—not that I’d call in. I never called in. I was the asshole who dragged herself through her shifts, coughing and sneezing because I didn’t get sick pay and couldn’t afford to take time off.

I opened the door and entered, shrugging off my coat. I liked to walk around in socks, and I hated the sudden surprise of

walking through an icy puddle. I toed off my boots and hung my jacket by the door. Snapping the overhead light on, I started forward and then stopped.

There was an odd sensation in the cramped one-bed as though someone had been there.

“Henry? Are you home?” I called, searching the shadows for signs of my father.

There was no answer, and my skin prickled. Henry wasn’t the hide-carefully-type and wasn’t clean and tidy. My eyes fell over the surfaces. A cup sat the wrong way up on the draining board as if someone had washed it and left it to dry—someone who wasn’t me. Unease crawled through my veins. Something felt off, and I couldn’t put my finger on what it was.

I wandered through the apartment, checking on things. I had shit-all to steal of value, but local junkies were known to take the most random things when they were looking to make a quick buck. Still, there was very little you could get for anything in my apartment. If I locked the door tomorrow and never came back, I’d miss nothing except my diaries.

I went into my room, and the feeling of wrongness grew stronger. Walking over to my bedsheets, I inspected the pattern of creases. I hadn’t made the bed this morning, so it wasn’t easy to tell if someone had touched anything. Fuck, I was so messy and disorganized at the best of times. Letting out a breath, I sat down and flopped back. I was being paranoid. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, suddenly noticing a sweet spiciness in the air, like black cherries and dark chocolate. I raised my sleeve to my arm and inhaled. I must have picked it up at the club.

The sleet outside had turned to hard rain. I burrowed under my thin bedcovers—work clothes be damned—and closed my eyes. I should eat dinner or do something vaguely productive, but the part of me that was scared wanted to hide under her bedclothes. For that evening, I decided to let myself wallow. Life was so fucking exhausting.

KIRILL

*M*y penthouse was better secured than the tower of London back in its heyday, yet, I had to make further provisions for its future guest. Mallory, my lifelong obsession, would soon be a permanent fixture here, and I needed to keep her safe. More than that, I needed to keep her inside.

I flicked through the camera feed from the small units I'd placed in her bed. She'd dragged herself home and passed out without the help of crushed-up sleeping tablets in her water. Would she sleep through it if I went over there now and touched her again? The whisper of my name on her lips was on repeat in my memory, tempting me to do just that. Instead, I forced myself to focus on work.

At any given moment in my city, there were numerous fires to put out. The Romanians weren't happy about Nikolai poking his nose into the trafficking business. I wasn't too fucking happy about it, either, but what the hell was I supposed to do? Unfortunately, he was a U.S. citizen, so a well-placed tip to a hotline wouldn't bring immigration down on his back, either. I needed a coldly impersonal way to get rid of him that was untraceable. Viktor would accept nothing less, and the fucker always suspected me when something went down with Nikolai. He probably shouldn't make his bias so clear since we were supposed to be competing fairly for the same title—well, our version of fair in our twisted world.

My phone vibrated in my pocket as I watched the feeds. The black and white image of Mallory, sweetly sleeping, with no

idea of being watched, was oddly soothing.

“What is it?”

“It’s your brother. He’s shown up at Pravda,” Ivan said over the reverberating bass of the club in the background.

I swallowed a deep sigh. I didn’t want to leave Mallory, but I knew Nikolai. He’d only act out more if he thought I was ignoring him. I didn’t want him wondering what was so important that I wasn’t going to meet him. I didn’t want him to find out about Mallory.

“On my way.”



PRAVDA WAS a nightclub deep in the heart of Manhattan. It was the latest hotspot, and it was mine. The most unfortunate side of running clubs was having to make appearances at them. They were excellent fronts for the kind of dark dealings that were routine business in my world. Want to buy weapons for your private war? Come have a drink at the bar. Want to flood a new city with an experimental drug? Pull up a chair.

“He’s at the bar,” Ivan said in my ear.

I nodded, bracing myself for the meeting I had been avoiding. I stalked through the VIP area, noting the men of the *bratva* who were letting off steam tonight. For Chernov men, that usually meant snorting illicit substances off pliant, paid-for flesh. I didn’t partake in the debauchery of my men and never had. I was above it and couldn’t afford to lower my guard. I might be heir to the kingpin, but I was only one of two potential heirs. I could never forget it, not even for a moment because that was when Nikolai would make his move.

My half-brother sat at the bar with a cigarette hanging carelessly from his lips. His eyes narrowed as he twisted and took in a couple on the couch. The woman was astride the man, moving rapidly. Niko smirked as his eyes roved hungrily over the girl’s nakedness before he turned back to the bar and fixed me with a knowing look.

Our eyes met in the mirror. It was always unsettling to be in the same room as Niko. He and I were close back when I'd clung to the belief that I could one day be Kirill Lewis again if I managed to escape Viktor or convince him he didn't need me. Niko had been a little unhinged, even then, but nothing like he was now. While the terrible things Viktor had forced us through had ripped my soul and created a darkness inside me that could never be illuminated, it had simply sent Nikolai mad.

"Brother, good to see you," Niko said, approaching me slowly. I turned to greet him, embracing him with one arm, the other on the knife in my belt. "No need for that, Kirill. It's not very welcoming."

Christ, I wished I could gut him and let him bleed out on the floor, but Viktor had forbidden it. Viktor Chernov was still the boss, and there was no mercy for the man who went against his wishes, family or not.

"Likewise. I had no idea that you were coming. Last I heard, you were in Moscow," I said, sitting down again at the bar.

The bartender immediately approached and poured Niko a few fingers of whiskey, our finest.

"Leave the bottle," he barked at the young guy as he went to leave.

I nodded my permission, and we were alone again.

Niko tossed back his first drink like it was a shot and poured another. "It's too fucking cold there, and the women are no fun. Nothing shocks them." He chuckled darkly.

I could only imagine what a man like Nikolai found shocking. My stomach turned. I sipped my whiskey.

"So, now I'm back, tell me where you need me."

I paused for a moment. I'd expected this conversation, but that didn't make it any easier to navigate. Lately, my whole life was made up of conversations on a razor's edge, with violence on one side and money on the other. Luckily, I had balanced on that edge and only fallen into profitable ventures, but it was

a constant trial. It never stopped. Handling Niko was more complicated.

“What does Viktor think?” I asked after a moment.

Niko’s mouth pulled up to the side. His mother was Georgian and had passed on her dark good looks. His skin was tan all year round, and he had her unusual gray eyes. He was a man who pulled women’s gazes wherever he went and knew it—a perfect, roguish mask for the monster beneath. I was nowhere near as deceptive looking. Taller and broader than my brother and father, I looked like the killer I was. I was still pale as fuck, dark-haired, brooding, and dangerous-looking. That was fine with me. I didn’t need to trick anyone into giving me what I wanted. I simply took.

“What makes you think he has any idea I’m back?”

“Because Viktor knows everything, doesn’t he?” I mused.

My brother narrowed his eyes and smiled. “Of course he does.” Niko took another long slug of whiskey. “He was thinking about the business with that hedge fund manager, the one interested in investing in human capital.”

Fuck. Of course, he would. The one fucking deal I wasn’t interested in pursuing. People were messy. Trafficking was messy. It was dangerous, with huge margins for error, and it wasn’t the kind of risk I enjoyed taking. It wasn’t a good investment in staffing or resources. Keeping the goods alive and mostly unharmed was a pain in the ass. I’d rather sell drugs and guns any day.

Viktor had zeroed in on the trafficking potential as a future revenue stream. He was short-sighted, with interest only in immediate gains. As my father’s obedient little killer lapdog, Nikolai wanted to score points by agreeing with the old man and taking it over. I’d let him if I weren’t sure my psycho brother would manage to get the operation up and running. It wasn’t something I wanted for the future of the Chernov bratva, an organization I would be head of, even if I had to kill the man beside me to achieve it. Niko might be mad, depraved, and creepy as fuck, but he was an intelligent man. That was half the reason he was so utterly terrifying.

“I don’t like the guy. I don’t trust him.”

“Let me check him out, and then we’ll go from there,” Niko said.

I could tell by his tone that this was a plan already out of my control. Viktor had given Nikolai a task, and there was nothing I could do about it.

“I heard congratulations are in order,” he continued.

Tension spiked in my spine. Had Nikolai found out about Mallory? Fuck, I could no longer wait to make contact when someone like Nikolai might swoop in and hurt her before my plan whirred into motion.

“Why would that be?” I asked, forcing a bored tone into my words.

It didn’t pay to sound nervous around the men of my world. A jaded, nihilistic mask was a person’s most valuable weapon, and I employed mine constantly.

Nikolai turned to me and filled my glass. His eyes had a look I knew well. A bright spark of excitement that had never, ever spelled good news. He grinned, savoring the moment before he told me what was sure to be something big.

“I heard you’re getting married.”

MOLLY

I watched a towering elderly man with his flannel shirt on inside out fold his piece of paper in half and sit down, his chair scraping across the church basement's faded floorboards. Holy shit, it was my turn. I didn't want to follow Old Joe, but it looked like I had no choice.

I stood reluctantly and steadied my shaky legs. "Names matter. Names tell a person where they belong and who they belong to. Names tell someone how lucky they are or not. Names have power."

I took a deep breath, resisting the urge to look up for a reaction. "How many names does a person get in their life? That depends on how many lives they live. Some lucky people wear the same name every day and never feel the need to change it. To others, names are like skins that can be shed and left behind. I'm a name snake, born and bred."

I was about to continue when a soft chime jarred me. I looked around at the volunteer tutor, Jason, who smiled warmly.

"Well done, Lori! Thanks for sharing today," he said, giving off that youth pastor vibe that made me want to scratch my eyeballs out.

I shuffled back to my seat as he passed out prompts for next week. A creative writing class in a church basement with the remnants of the previous AA meeting and whoever else felt like wandering in off the street was a far cry from the Columbia program I was desperate to get into. But it was a start.

“That was good, Lori. I enjoyed it. I’m a name snake. It’s catchy!” Pastor Jason said, joining me at the tiny refreshments stall before I could grab a donut—my dinner—and bounce.

I nodded, my mouth full of pink sprinkles and vanilla frosting.

“Was it true?” Jason continued, proving himself completely resistant to taking a hint when I continued to edge toward the door, pointing at my full mouth.

I stopped and forced the dry cake down my throat. Ouch. “Was what true?”

He blinked at me. “That you’ve had many names,” He wiggled his eyebrows. “It sounds mysterious.”

I forced a smile. “It’s just a creative prompt, right? I mean, I don’t think Old Joe has a superhero alias either, but you should go and ask him.”

Jason’s laugh boomed, making me cringe. Christ, the man was extra. From his prominent chin, blinding toothy grin, and the gelled quiff erupting from his forehead, Pastor Jason wasn’t my type. He reached out and brushed something off my lip. I stiffened. I hated being touched by strangers. I hated to be touched in general, but geez, invasion much?

“You had a sprinkle there,” he said, his hand lowering a little too slowly.

“Damn, I was keeping that for supper,” I said, fighting the urge to tell him to fuck off.

I liked coming here. In my relentlessly crap existence, this was the one thing I did to remember the girl I used to be. I didn’t want to stop because I’d kneed Pastor Jason in his tiny, blue balls.

My cell ringing saved me from having to deal with the pushy pastor. I held it up, using it as an excuse to run out of the church basement like my ass was on fire.

The shit days in my life started with staggering predictability, and today was following a familiar pattern. Dodging the landlord this morning because the rent was behind again. Eating cheap cereal straight out of the box because fresh milk

was a luxury for those with diamond tiaras and working refrigerators. Probably.

Today was going for the record as I made the mistake of answering my phone before checking the caller I.D.

“Miss Wilson?” A stern voice asked.

It took me a long moment to respond. Despite four years of practice, I still failed to react naturally to my fake identity. I’d make an appalling spy.

“Speaking.”

“I’m calling from Grateful Dawn nursing home about your mother, Mara Wilson. You do know the rates went up last month? We haven’t had your check for the difference.”

I recognized the tone. It was one I heard often. The impersonal and uncaring tone of someone demanding a payment they know can’t be met. I didn’t blame the faceless finance office stranger. It was my fault. No, that wasn’t entirely true. It was also Henry’s fault. There were few things in my miserable life I couldn’t attribute to my fuck-up of a father. Grateful Dawn nursing home tipping my frail mother out on the street would be the icing on the cake.

“I know. I’m on it. I’ll bring it by soon,” I said, hurrying along the crowded midtown street. I needed to get to The Blue Rabbit or risk Rafe docking my wages again.

“Soon, as in today?” the voice pressed.

I stopped in the street suddenly, and a Japanese tourist recording a live video walked right into me. I apologized. She apologized. And then we went again before backing away from each other.

“Today or tomorrow,” I offered and waited to see if the fragile reprieve would be granted.

“At the very latest. Today would be better, Miss Wilson,” the voice in my ear said before promptly hanging up.

Well, winning the lottery would be better too, but that didn’t mean it was going to happen, I grumbled internally, heading

down the subway stairs. I had fearless comebacks in my head, but they rarely made it out.

Forget the lottery. Who needed all that cash? I'd be happy with a safe roof over my head and a job that didn't make my skin crawl. Non-creepy jobs were in short supply when your formerly wealthy, asshole addict of a father blew your life to smithereens, and you had to leave in the middle of the night without so much as a high school diploma.

My ratty sneakers squeaked on the stained tile at 10th street station, and I was careful not to touch the railing. I'd made that mistake once before, and trust me when I said there wasn't enough hand sanitizer in the world to rectify that mistake.

I had nothing to offer. The only thing people seemed to want from me was my looks. It had taken seven years of working dead-end jobs, waitressing, retail, and all sorts of life-sucking positions before I realized I was swimming upstream and damn tired of it. When I got the job at The Blue Rabbit, it was a reprieve. Yes, it was a gentlemen's club, and yes, it was hell on Earth, but the tips were good, and I only worked the bar—for now. I did it because I had to look after my mother. Henry, the all-time worst dad of the year award-winner, had stopped pretending to be concerned if her bills got paid.

I'd brought us to New York, an expensive city, and I was the reason we stayed, so I was partly to blame. Because of that simple fact, I sucked back my pride and revulsion and went out to work day in, day out, rain or shine. I couldn't leave the city. I wasn't ready yet. I couldn't let go of the one dream remaining in my tattered, abused heart. The only thing I had left to hold on to when everything else was stripped away.

There was a man somewhere in this city.

A man who knew me better than I knew myself. One day, I'd find that man. It was my dream. I didn't know what happened after that. I had no expectations, no hopes, or plans. Plans weren't for people like me. Fate had laughed at my plans too often.

But I still had my dream. No one could take it from me.



ANOTHER NIGHT, another shift at The Blue Rabbit.

If a table of rival businessmen came in, I could score tips-wise. No one spent more than sleazy Wall Street types trying to one-up each other. The ticking time bomb of my mother's care home bills was always counting down in my head. I was running out of time to pay the increased amount. I bit my nails down into the quick, a horrible habit I'd never been able to shake.

I was an hour into work when the mood shifted. When they arrived, the whole place paused as if it was holding its breath. Men with tattoos and hip suits, looking around with the kind of deadly grace you didn't want to fuck with. I knew The Blue Rabbit attracted all types, some of which were lords of the underworld. But until tonight, I couldn't say I'd ever seen a truly dangerous-looking man in here.

Most of the regulars were bankers or spoiled, entitled trust funders. There was a smattering of politicians, tycoons, and high-up officials. They all reeked of the privilege and wealth that reminded me of my father and turned my stomach. They weren't physically dangerous, at least not in the way these men were. These men didn't dress like bankers or politicians. Every eye gravitated toward them as many a fat regular sat up straighter and sucked in their paunch so they didn't look inferior.

A man joined them. Suddenly, I couldn't look away. Taller and broader than the rest, he wore a long black overcoat with wide lapels pulled up against the cold. He held himself like someone important, reminding me of the one time I'd glimpsed a celebrity in line for coffee.

But I wasn't sure which movie stars traveled with an entourage that looked like they had escaped from Ryker's Island. The group moved through the main floor. It was subtle, but I had the impression that his friends were clearing a path for him through the crowd, despite him being bigger and

broader than any of them. His hair was dark waves, so familiar it hurt. That was Kirill's hair, wasn't it? It curled over his collar, and he flicked it back from his forehead as he strode past me and headed directly for the VIP area. I turned and watched, speechless and rapt.

"Hot damn, there's an eye candy show I'd pay for." Theo whistled, watching the group of hardmen pass us. "Step on me, daddy," he growled, making Federica laugh. "Who is that?"

Their quiet conversation fell away as I found myself rounding the bar.

"Hey, Lori, where are you going?" Theo asked.

I drifted away from the serving station. My heart was pounding so hard in my chest that I felt dizzy, and the throbbing in my temples made my knees weak. The group had settled in a large booth at the back of the VIP area, scattering other tables aside as they went. I didn't know if they were asked to move, but the surrounding tables cleared out quickly.

The leader sat in the middle, stretching his long arms over the back of the booth while his men settled on either side of him. He straightened his endless legs under the table. Another man with a scar across one eye sat beside him, talking animatedly, his hands gesturing through the air with sharp punctuating movements. The man with Kirill's hair was staring at him, emotionless but rapt.

I found my feet moving forward before I could question the wisdom of it. I strode toward the table, everything else in the place falling away.

"What do you want?"

A body collided with mine, and I bounced off it and nearly fell. I'd been so intent on getting to the stranger with Kirill's eyes that I hadn't realized two of his friends had blocked me from going any further.

"I need to speak to that man," I said lamely.

"Which man?" one of the guards asked.

“Him,” I said, holding my breath, “The boss.” How else could I describe him? He was clearly in charge here. The power rolled off him like steam.

The men looked at each other. Fuck, these guys were tough-looking. I would run the other way if I met them at night in my neighborhood.

One had a teardrop tattoo falling from his eye. He turned and arched an eyebrow behind his shoulder. He turned back after a moment. “You have the wrong person. Sorry.” He sounded anything but.

“I-I can’t have. I mean, let me see for myself. It’ll take a second,” I said, trying to push past them.

“Look, lady, just do your job. We’re here to have fun. Don’t make a scene,” the other man said, his voice thick with an eastern European accent.

As he reached for me, his jacket flapped open, and I saw the shiny black grip of a handgun on his hip. My throat went dry. Plenty of people packed in New York, and many of the clients at The Blue Rabbit, too, but I’d never get used to seeing a gun out in the open.

“Leave now before Mr. Chernov becomes annoyed.”

“Mr. Chernov? Is that his name?” I pressed.

I was deranged at this point, but I couldn’t help it. For seven years, I had looked for Kirill, and this man could have been his double if my childhood friend had lived up to the potential of his powerful features.

“Mind your own business, lady,” the man said and forcefully pulled my arm to turn me.

“Lori, get your ass over here!” Theo hissed at me from the entrance to the VIP area.

I turned reluctantly and went back toward the bar.

“What the fuck are you doing? Have you lost your mind? You don’t stroll over to a Brighton Beach crew and say hi,” Theo muttered, looking at me like I’d survived a near-death experience.

I shook my head. “What’s a Brighton Beach crew?”

Federica was frowning over my shoulder at the men. “A gang?”

“It’s the mob, Lori – organized crime,” Theo explained, fanning himself with a menu.

“Why Brighton Beach? I love Coney Island,” I mused.

Fede rolled her eyes. “Brighton Beach can be dangerous. Attention from men like that can be dangerous.”

“It might be too late for that. He’s looking over here,” Theo mumbled, covering his face with his hand.

I twisted to see the man again, my eyes snapping to him like he was a magnet. His lackeys had sat down so I could see him. He smiled at something someone said, and the sight was another kick to the gut. It was Kirill. It had to be. It was Kirill, and there was no way I was leaving here without speaking to him.

I half-listened to Theo and Fede’s conversation, nodding where appropriate, while the rest of my attention was fixed on the mystery man. I grabbed the drinks menus from the bar and started toward the VIP section again.

“Lori! Don’t be embarrassing. Take a hint!” Theo hissed.

I was past hearing him. I was past caring about anything except speaking to the man with Kirill’s face. I had to. He wasn’t leaving here without talking to me.

I approached the table again, and the same friend rose, looking murderous, until a sharp word forced him back down.

“*Bratan.*” The man’s deep voice raked across my memory. “Let her come,” he said in English.

He raised his eyes to mine, and that look was a punch to the gut. All the air left my body. I knew those eyes.

Kirill.

I stood mutely, staring at him as his men muttered in Russian and laughed amongst themselves, no doubt at the clueless bartender who couldn’t take a hint. Still, his eyes held mine

and, at that moment, there was nothing but him and I. Nothing but those eyes staring into mine.

“Hand over the menus. Or are we to guess what’s in them,” the same brute who’d nearly pushed me over growled, grabbing for the velvet books that held the cocktail menu.

The man, Mr. Chernov, looked at him, and he paled. It wasn’t even an aggressive look, but something must have passed between them because the pushy guy got up and excused himself as Chernov leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees.

I couldn’t hold the words back one more moment. “Are you him? Kirill. Kirill Lewis?”

He stared at me, a muscle ticking in his defined jaw.

His friend nudged him with an elbow and laughed. “Kirill, she thinks she knows your name.”

Kirill. The name echoed like a bell in my head, growing more deafening by the second.

He stood. Mr. Chernov. *Kirill.* He stalked toward me as his men watched. He was so tall that I had to crane my neck to keep him in sight. He stopped before me, not close enough to touch, though I swayed into him anyway. My lack of lunch and donut dinner wasn’t doing much for my swimming head and pounding heart.

My mouth felt stuffed with cotton, and I could barely keep my feet as the man’s full-lipped mouth rose in one corner. A smirk I’d know anywhere, frozen in time and perfectly preserved.

“I know her name too,” he finally tossed over his shoulder at his friend, though his eyes never left me. “It’s Molly.”

The weight of seven years of searching, hoping, despairing and loneliness crashed over me like a tsunami of emotions I didn’t have the metal to cope with.

“Found you, princess.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came. Darkness rushed to meet me, and I fell.

MOLLY

NINE YEARS AGO

“*M*allory, come on in,” Principal Wood called from his office. With the weight of my sixteen-year-old world on my shoulders, I pushed myself to my feet and slouched into his office. I wondered what my punishment would be for ignoring the teacher in class this time.

We weren't alone. I wasn't expecting that.

A boy sat in a chair with an upright posture that screamed angry loner. He turned to look at me as I came in. He had an awkward face made up of pieces that didn't quite fit. A mishmash puzzle that didn't go together. His large brown eyes were arresting. They were as dark and bitter as black chocolate and strong coffee.

“Mallory, take a seat. I'll make this quick,” Principal Wood said, sliding his rather large bulk around the other side of his desk and sinking into his chair with a sigh.

I bet coming out and fetching me was about as much work as he planned to do today. For such an exclusive school, Wood only seemed to hustle himself when it came to sucking up to the parents and sponsors. Black Hall Prep was a school for the entitled and unbearable. I included myself in that. An elite academy where the pecking order was decided by your surname, net worth, and how cruel you could be. The teachers seemed to think their role at Black Hall Prep was to ensure the pampered psychopaths who attended were comfortable at all costs.

I ignored Principal Wood and continued to study the boy sitting beside me. He was tall. *Really* tall, judging by how his endless, lean legs stuck out in front of him. I noticed his school uniform was worn and patched on the knee. Stranger still were the splotches of red decorating his white shirt. His collar held a red bloom that I could swear was blood. Where had this kid come from? I was sure I'd never seen him before. His fingernails were ragged and bitten, and his pale skin was dotted here and there with beauty spots. Red streaks of blood wrapped around his right hand.

“Mallory, are you listening?” Wood demanded.

I turned my hot gaze to him, and he blinked, pulling himself back from his evident frustration. Given the amount my father paid to this school to ensure he never had to bother about me, I knew Wood didn't want to ruffle my feathers.

“Yes, sir,” I said sweetly after a long pause.

He swallowed, his fleshy neck bobbing with the effort, before looking at the mysterious boy beside me. “Good. Well, to business. This is Kirill. He's new. Transferring mid-year can be tough, so I thought you could be his buddy and show him around.”

Whatever I had been expecting, it wasn't this. “Are we the same age?”

Kirill looked older than me, not for any one reason I could put my finger on. Sure, he was tall, but there was more to it. An air of experience, maybe.

“No, he's a year older and is looking at a potential track scholarship for college. He works hard and makes good grades. I don't want him to get distracted by the more disreputable elements in this school.”

Ah, there it was. Kirill was an outsider. He wasn't like us. That was Wood's unspoken admission. Despite his height and wiry strength, this kid would face adversity in this hellhole of class, wealth, and obscene privilege. The worn uniform and the defensive expression all made sense now. He must be one of

Black Hall Prep's charity cases, picked purposefully to improve their stats and image.

"Is this my punishment? I don't have to do anything else if I do this?"

A slight look of irritation and maybe a slither of compassion for Kirill crossed Wood's face, so fleeting it was almost unrecognizable. Maybe long ago, this man had been an earnest educator. Maybe he had worried about students' feelings once upon a time, but those days had long been lost to endless bribes, sucking up to wealthy benefactors and gobbling down the scraps they threw his way.

"This is just a request, but yes, it is all I'd need from you."

I folded my arms across my chest and nodded. "Fine, we have a deal. Get your stuff. We're going," I tossed to Kirill as I stood up and left the room.

My beat-up boots squeaked on the floor as I gained the hall and turned on my heel to look at my newest shadow. Kirill followed along behind me, even taller than I'd expected. I walked backward up the hall, inspecting him all the while.

He met my stare without flinching. A muscle ticked in his angular jaw. His face was gaunt. "Where are we going?" he asked in a deep voice.

No boy in my year had that voice. It scraped along my bones.

"Do you care?" I asked mindlessly.

He stopped in the corridor and rubbed the back of his long neck with a huge hand. "Yes," he replied, bringing me to a stop. "You don't need to show me around. I'll tell Wood you did."

"In case you didn't understand, you need a local guide, an interpreter," I quipped.

He raised a dark slash of an eyebrow at me in question.

I rolled my eyes, knowing I would have to spell it out to this newbie. "You're not like us. You don't belong, genius. Some people won't like that. They can make it hard for you here."

Kirill was expressionless, but he moved. He took three steps toward me. Not much, but with his long legs, the distance quickly disappeared. He was a boy on his way to manhood, caught in the space between. He was so tall that I had to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact. The rest of his body hadn't received the message yet, and his broad shoulders remained bony, his long body lanky and lacking muscle.

"Mallory, wasn't it?" he asked, throwing me with the sudden change of subject.

I nodded. "It means bad luck, which you've had since coming here."

"Well, Mallory. I don't care what you or anyone else here thinks of me. I don't care if they want to make it difficult for me. They can try. I have one goal and not long to achieve it. Nothing else matters to me."

His words were delivered with such confidence that they struck me hard. Not much reached me these days, but this stranger's conviction rang true to my jaded ears. I didn't think I'd met anyone in a long time who genuinely didn't give a shit about appearances and social climbing.

"Nice speech. Did you practice in front of the mirror this morning?"

"Do you have any other setting than jaded nihilist?"

I tossed my hair back and gave him a shit-eating grin. "It's not an insult if I need a dictionary to understand it," I sniped. "But if you're asking if I'm always a raging bitch, the answer is yes. I'm the bitch no one messes with. The one whose father isn't someone to be messed with." I didn't mean to sound defensive, but somehow, I did. Why did I care if this self-righteous asshole didn't want my help?

A slight smirk played around Kirill's full-lipped mouth. Such a pretty mouth for such an odd face. "Is that right?" Kirill asked, stepping closer and looking down at me. He towered over me like an awkward giant.

"That's right." I gave him my patented, sugary sweet smile, the one my father had backhanded me for last month. I didn't

care that much. It meant it had worked.

Kirill didn't seem to buy it, however. He looked at me like he saw right through my mean girl disguise. "Good job you're my guide, then. I wouldn't want to be on your wrong side, Molly."

There was a good chance he was mocking me. He reached a hand for my bag and slid it off my shoulder. His blood-stained fingers left a red mark on my school shirt. He hefted it effortlessly onto his shoulder and started past me toward the front doors.

"Molly?" No one called me that as a nickname, but I liked it. I liked it right away.

"You don't seem like bad luck to me, so I'm going to call you Molly," he tossed over his shoulder. "Are you coming?"

"Where are you going?" I was unsure what to make of this kid.

"Home. School's done, isn't it?"



KIRILL'S HOUSE was across town. The wrong side of the tracks. People sat outside the sagging, dilapidated houses and watched us walk past in silence, speaking in hushed whispers. Young guys gathered around cars and watched us with aggressive looks. Kirill walked past them all with straight-backed confidence I wished I had. Nerves prickled my spine as one man stepped onto the sidewalk in front of me, causing me to bump into his folded arms.

"Hello, pretty kitty cat." He laughed, showing a row of gold-capped teeth. His skinny white arms were riddled with tattoos, and his wife-beater was stained with things I didn't want to name.

"Not her," Kirill's voice was like a whip.

The tattooed-nightmare man sneered at me, but after a tense moment, he stepped to the side.

I scurried after Kirill, my heart pounding in a way it hadn't in a long time. I was afraid—real, genuine fear. After my safely numb life of late, it was a shock.

“I shouldn't have brought you here wearing that,” Kirill said quietly as he waited for me to catch up. “These guys like innocent little things to play with.”

I let out an offended laugh. “I'm hardly innocent.” I didn't know why it felt like an insult in front of this guy. He had no idea about the home life I had to endure.

“You thinking that makes you more innocent than I thought,” Kirill said wryly, annoying me even more.

I was about to let him have it when he turned into a garden. Although “garden” was a generous description, it was slightly less depressing than the others. He opened the front door, which was unlocked, sure—seems safe around here—and disappeared inside.

My heart felt like it had jumped into my throat. Why was I here? Why had I followed this stranger home? He had my bag, but I could have asked for it. Was my recklessness finally about to harm me? Belated alarm rushed through me as I stood on the threshold. I hated to feel afraid. I hated it more than anything, so I decided not to be.

I wasn't afraid. Whatever I'd gotten myself into, I could handle it.

I followed him inside.

The living room was as depressing as the front of the house suggested. What I hadn't expected was the woman lying on the couch. The smell of liquor and cheap air freshener assaulted my nose. A lonely, scented candle was burning on the table next to an overflowing ashtray. It was as though this woman had picked up the vanilla and lemon verbena jar candle in a store and imagined that burning it would transform her home into one from a magazine. It hadn't worked.

I stood awkwardly in the doorway, paused in the act of toeing off my boots. Kirill turned and looked at me, his mouth quirking with amusement at my attempt at manners. Maybe I

was a lot softer than I liked to think. His smirk certainly seemed to imply it. My cheeks burned a little. I wasn't used to this. This stranger had me off balance and out of my comfort zone. All my carefully constructed masks were wearing thin under his insightful stare. I finished removing my shoes because it would be weird to have one on and one off.

"Make yourself at home, Princess," Kirill's tone was softly mocking but not in a way that bothered me.

He approached the woman on the couch, folding his lanky body to crouch beside her. "Mom, I'm home. I'm going to make dinner."

The woman didn't stir. My heart tugged at the sight of her. It was my kryptonite. I'd taken care of my mother for years, and seeing Kirill's gentleness with the woman on the couch softened something inside me.

He stood and stared at her for a long moment before turning to the kitchen. "Come on. I'll make you a sandwich."

I followed and watched him open a shiny bag of cheap white bread. It was contraband in my house. I hadn't had that kind of stuff in ... ever. As well as being a sociopath, my father was also a health-food nut.

"So, you're my local guide. Who do I need to watch out for?" Kirill asked as he prepared peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with calm efficiency.

"Well, weird boy, let's start with whose blood it is on your shirt," I replied, finally finding my voice.

He raised an eyebrow at the moniker but didn't remark on it. "Tall kid, football player maybe, looked like the product of serious inbreeding. I think his buddy called him Kap."

I winced. I knew exactly who he was talking about.

Kirill gave me a sideways look. "That bad?"

"Kaplan Holmes. He's bad news and boasts one of the bigger fan clubs. You cross him, you cross them all," I told him.

He was also coming off his fourth suspension for sexual assault. Like all the rest, the girl who had accused him

disappeared to another school, and good old Kap got to return to class with his loud protests of innocence. He was gutter filth, but that didn't stop my father from wanting to set me up with him. He did business with the Holmes Corporation, and it would suit him down to the ground to be tied to them in some way.

"Does breaking his nose count as crossing him?" Kirill wondered.

I clapped a hand over my mouth at the sudden image, fighting a giggle. I *never* giggled. When I regained my composure, I tried to force the smile off my face, but Kirill's smirk let me know he'd seen it. So much for seeming cool around this new guy.

"You're absolutely fucked," I told Kirill.

He turned from the counter and set down a plate for me. The sandwich was cut carefully into four. He set his down and settled his long body into a rickety chair. I sat opposite and watched him raise his water glass in a mock salute.

"Good job I have you as my interpreter, then. The bitch no one messes with."

I let out a laugh at that. I couldn't help it. I picked up my sandwich and took a bite. It was good. Really good. I couldn't remember the last time someone had made me something to eat who my father wasn't paying.

"I can handle Kap Holmes. I want your shirt in return, though," I said through my mouthful. "Someone needs to frame that thing."

Kirill laughed. It was warm and deep, and I immediately wanted to hear it again. His interestingly odd face creased in a proper smile for the first time, and I had a sudden insight into how he would look when he was older. It wasn't unpleasant. Not even a little.

"I'll drink to that," he said and clinked his glass against mine.

KIRILL

NOW

The plastic chair beneath me squeaked as I shifted on it. It had been an hour since I'd brought Mallory to a hospital I trusted, and she hadn't woken up yet.

Standing, I went to look at her for the tenth time in the hour. It was less thrilling watching her sleep here, knowing she was relatively safe in a public place. I preferred watching her sleep when she was holed up in her shit-hole apartment, with only a flimsy lock and a ratty blanket to keep me away. Soon, very soon, I'd watch her sleep every night in her pretty, new prison.

I had the doctor run a battery of tests on her. I wanted her in tiptop physical shape before we advanced our game. Molly had no idea that the opening moves had already been played. She needed to be strong and healthy to survive me and my vengeance. Later, once my vengeance was sated, she'd need to be strong for her life by my side as my wife and mother of my children. I wouldn't live without her ever again.

She shifted in her sleep, her smooth brow creasing as she twisted and turned away from nightmares. I wished I could install a camera in her head and see what demons hunted her, even in her sleep. I didn't care much for the competition.

Doctor Petrov had warned me she was depleted in sleep and vitamins. He had tutted a lot when examining her, with the kind of judgmental misogyny typical of a Russian ex-pat of his age. He was incapable of understanding that some young people were poor and that poverty took its toll on their bodies. Regardless, his dispassionate list of physical symptoms had

tightened something in my belly. She'd chosen this life instead of waiting for me as she'd promised.

As I watched her sleep, the doctor returned.

"Ah, Kirill Viktorovich, I have the tests for her. Anemic, like I thought. She also has a contraceptive implant, but it's old. It mustn't have worked for a year now," he said, looking up from his clipboard.

"Do you have what we discussed?"

Petrov tapped a slim case by his side. "It's here."

"Let's get a move on before she wakes up." I returned to the chair, continuing my vigil.

Petrov shuffled toward the bed. Alexei Petrov was a Chernov man and on call for me at any hour. I didn't know or care who he'd had to pay to look the other way to tend Mallory in his hospital.

"The birth control implant—"

"That's her responsibility," I said in a tone that Petrov didn't dare argue with.

"I could remove it since it's no longer working," he suggested.

"And why would I want that? Do what I ask and nothing more." My artful tone could freeze a man at a hundred paces.

Petrov lowered his gaze and went about his work. He put an IV line straight into her pale, slender hand and unzipped the little case he'd brought in. He sterilized Mallory's hand where the tracker would go and inserted it seamlessly under her skin.

I watched him work for a moment before pulling Mallory's purse from the table and opening her wallet. I tucked her driver's license into my wallet after taking a picture to send to Max. I sorted through the rest. She had one bank card and a library card, and that was it. There was something painful about how small her life was. She was a grown woman of twenty-five, yet her wallet didn't look much different from when she was a teenager.

I called Max after I sent him the picture. “Where is Igor?”

Max was quiet for a moment before speaking. “I sent him to the hospital. He’s waiting outside.”

Anticipation curled through me like smoke—the monster scenting blood in the air.

I left Petrov to his work and slid open the door of the private suite where Mallory was recovering. Outside in the hall, five of my men stood on either side of the door. Viktor Chernov’s potential heir wasn’t without enemies, and constant security was one more nagging pain in my life. The man I was looking for was standing at the end. He had his chin raised and was putting on a good show.

I approached Igor slowly, letting his fear rise and wash over him, sending that obstinate chin down a few inches.

“Do you know what you did?” I asked him coldly, stopping in front of him.

He swallowed so loud it seemed to echo in the hallway. “I-I’m not sure.”

I leaned in as if I was about to whisper to him and brought a heavy hand down hard on the back of his neck. I used his forward momentum to swing him around and straight into the wall. His head hit off the expensive-looking marble with a smack and smeared red against the gray and white color scheme.

“You touched something of mine,” I growled in his ear before slamming his head into the wall again.

Igor didn’t fight back. He wouldn’t dare. Not that I couldn’t have taken him, regardless. Viktor’s kink was having his heirs battle it out with men in training, and I’d proven myself the king of the heap many times.

“I didn’t know she was yours,” Igor gritted and spat a mouthful of blood onto the floor.

I didn’t bother to dignify that with a response. Instead, I pulled his hand behind his back. “Which one was it?”

Igor paused a moment. “The left,” he said quietly. That pause gave away his lie.

Holding his right, dominant hand, I bent his pointer finger back first. The sound of the bone cracking echoed down the hall.

“Maybe next time, you’ll bear it in mind,” I said calmly as I broke every one of his fingers until he was quiet and pale, his hand swollen beyond recognition.

I let him go and fixed the cuffs of my jacket, tutting at a dot of blood.

I turned my attention to my security. “Let it be known, here and now, that the woman in that room belongs to me. Hurt her, talk about her, look at her for too long, and I won’t go easy on you. You’ve been warned.”



I LEFT Mallory at the hospital when I got word that her friends had arrived. I’d let them see her for now as it suited my plans, but soon, she’d have no room for attachments other than me.

I went back to the dump of her little five-floor walk-up. There was something intoxicating about that place. I entered alone, leaving my men in the hall and Max dealing with the aging landlord who lived downstairs.

The scent of cheap cleaning products and greasy meat from the take-out place downstairs permeated the air. But deeper, underneath it, was another layer that was purely Mallory. It was the scent of my sweetest dreams and darkest nightmares.

I could spend hours looking over the humble elements of her pitiful life, imagining her here, striving to survive. I entered her room, enjoying how her scent was stronger there. Soon, this place would be empty, and Molly would have nowhere to go. I’d get rid of all the tat she called clothes and dress her in the finest and most debasing things I wished to see her in. As I left the room, I spotted the corner of a book poking out from under her pillow. Intrigued, I picked it up and leafed through

the nearly transparent pages—a journal. I read a page and jolted when I saw my name scrolled at the bottom of the latest entry.

I slammed it shut, dropping it to the floor before I could read more. The sight had tugged oddly at me, burrowing its claws in deep. I drew a long, ragged breath of Molly-scented air into my aching lungs.

Soon, Princess, you can whisper those longings in my ear. I'll never get tired of hearing them.

“Kirill, I’ve spoken to the landlord. She’ll be out within the week,” Max called from the sitting room.

I stared at the journal like it was a snake poised to strike. “Well done.”

“What will you do with her stuff?”

I turned and looked around the room, bending sharply to grab her journal from the floor and tucking it under my arm. Nothing else in this entire place was good enough for Mallory or the life she’d soon live.

“Burn it for all I care.”

MOLLY

I woke with a start and Kirill's name on my lips. Slowly, the room filtered into focus, and I realized I had no clue where I was. A monitor beeped to the side, and I felt a sting in my hand—an IV. The late afternoon light was shining through the curtains at the long windows. I felt like I had slept for a week.

I struggled upright as the door to the room swung inward. Opening my mouth to speak, I immediately started to cough as my dry throat protested. Fede walked through the door and gave me a bright smile. When she saw I was choking, she rushed toward me and handed me a glass with a straw, unseen by my bedside.

"Here, you must be parched. You've been sleeping a long time," she said, sitting beside me on the bed.

I swallowed the water gratefully and cleared my throat. "How long?" My voice was a croak.

Fede frowned and brushed my hair back from my forehead. "Three years," she whispered.

"What?" I jerked, knocking over the water glass.

Fede shrieked, knocking it off her sodden lap and onto the floor. "Just kidding. You bitch, you got me all wet!" She stood up and brushed her lap.

"Serves you right. How long?"

"I don't know, like twelve hours. A little more," she muttered and sank down on the bed. "Don't ask me to get you anything

else.”

“Where are we?”

“St. Katarina, uptown.”

I looked around, alarm filling me bit by bit. “Shit. I’ve been admitted? There go my paychecks for the foreseeable future. I’ll never be able to pay it off.”

Last night came rushing back. The Blue Rabbit and the men in suits. Laughter and dark eyes fixed on me.

It’s Molly.

I sat up straighter and reached out to grab Fede’s arm, my fingers digging into the row of gold bracelets she wore. “The man from last night! Where did he go?”

“How should I know? He brought you here. That’s all I know for sure,” Fede said, wrinkling her nose at me. “Best not to get involved with people like that.”

“People like what?”

She blinked at me. “Made-men. You can’t tell me that guy didn’t give you mob vibes. Not even mob. Bratva. They’re the worst,” she muttered and gave a delicate shiver.

I raised an eyebrow, curious for her to continue.

“In the hierarchy of organized crime, there are different families, cultures, and traditions. Each one has its own code, except for the bratva. They do what they want,” Fede explained.

“How do you know all that?”

She seemed lost in thought for a moment. “I’m a New Yorker. It’s mandatory to know who to stay the fuck away from.”

“Well, interesting as that is, he’s not bratva or whatever. He’s my friend. My best friend,” I said with utter conviction.

Fede pouted. On her, the petulant expression even looked cute. “I’m offended,” she complained.

“Please. I’d take a hundred Kirill’s over you and your sarcastic ass any day. Can I leave? I don’t want to rack up any more

debt.”

“Right, I meant to tell you. It’s your lucky day. Your bill is paid. I asked about it when I came in. And yes, you are free to go.”

I pushed out of bed and reached for my clothes piled on a fancy leather armchair. I paused. “My bill is what?”

“Paid. You have nothing left to settle,” she said, shrugging when I looked at her curiously. “You said your friend’s name is Kirill?” she asked suddenly.

I pulled on my Blue Rabbit shorts and tried to cover the inappropriate outfit with the jacket she handed me. “Yeah, Kirill. Kirill Lewis.”

My mind drifted to the security guy who’d pushed me around. What had he called him? I couldn’t remember. My mind was like a melted marshmallow.

Fede chewed her lip pensively. “I suppose he took care of the bill.”

I snorted at that. “I doubt it. Kirill’s the only person I’ve ever known with less money than me.” I left my hair tucked in the jacket and shoved my boots on.

“Don’t be dumb, Lori. You saw him last night. Maybe you don’t remember, but that guy isn’t poor. He’s powerful and rich as hell.”

I tried to remember, but all that came back to me was his eyes and the way they fixed on mine. “I don’t remember. I guess it has been seven years since I last saw him.”

“Seven years? I thought he was your best friend. You mean he used to be,” Fede said.

“No, I mean he is and always will be,” I corrected her. Energy flowed through me, and a grin hit my lips that nothing could wipe away. “He’s the reason I came to New York. Maybe my luck is finally changing.” My excitement radiated from me like a supernova.

Fede stepped back as I approached. “What’s wrong?” I asked, noticing her marked lack of enthusiasm.

“Nothing. Don’t forget that people can change. You need to get to know him again. It’s been a long time. He could be anyone now.”

“I know him. I know what kind of person he is. He’d never hurt me,” I said confidently as we stepped from the hospital room.

Kirill’s friend was waiting in the hall. I hung back as Fede nodded toward him.

“Poor guys don’t have bodyguards,” she muttered.

“Bodyguard? It’s his buddy,” I replied furiously.

The man in question peeled himself from the wall and approached. It was the same man from last night, Kirill’s friend. He was dark and dashing in an enigmatic way, and the scar across his eye somehow only added to his rough hotness.

“Ladies, I’m Max. Kirill wanted me to make sure you had a ride home from the hospital,” he said smoothly, giving Federica a wide grin.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “We’ve got it covered.”

She made to pull me past Max when his arm shot out and stopped her. “I insist. It’s against the guy code to let Kirill down. He’s detained at work and worried about Lori. That’s not so difficult to understand, is it, Federica?”

“How do you know her name?” I asked.

Max turned and gestured for us to go ahead of him. “I’m sure your friend can figure it out for you,” he said with dark amusement.

I raised an eyebrow at Fede, but she avoided my eyes. We took the elevator down to the lower level of the building, and Max walked toward a shiny black SUV that looked straight out of a VIP motorcade.

“Yeah, this is a poor guy car, for sure,” Fede muttered as she got inside.

I slid in after her, running my hands across the buttery-soft white leather. She had a point, but I couldn’t help the raging

excitement that I was sitting in Kirill's car. My Kirill.

"I've been charged with passing on this gift for you," Max said, twisting in the front passenger seat to hand me a slim black box.

I stared at it. It was the newest model of the hottest brand around. "I already have a phone," I stated dumbly.

Max chuckled. "I'm not sure I'd call that brick you carry a phone. You'll like this one better. I took the liberty of setting it up for you and transferring your info from the old one."

"Invasion of privacy much," Fede snapped at him.

She wasn't vibing with Max's cocky, playboy personality. I didn't mind too much. He was Kirill's friend, and that made him all right in my book.

"I bet he unlocked your phone with your fingerprint while you were passed out in the hospital," Fede muttered, crossing her arms over her chest, and staring out the window.

I guessed he had, which did feel a little invasive, but complaining seemed ungrateful. "Where is Kirill?"

"Work. No one works as much as him, but you'll see that soon."

We drove slowly through afternoon traffic, working our way downtown toward the shitty area where my fifth-floor walk-up lurked on a dilapidated street.

Max whistled when we pulled up. "He isn't going to like this neighborhood."

"Why not? You look like you'd fit right in," Fede snapped at him.

He turned in his seat and gave her a wolfish grin. "You have a sharp tongue on you, *kotenok*. Be careful someone doesn't teach you how to curb it."

"Who? Someone like you?" Fede challenged.

"Maybe. I like pretty things with sharp tongues," he muttered, his eyes running over my friend in a way that made *my* skin heat, and I was just sitting next to them.

“Thanks, Max. Um, I’m going,” I said, starting to open the door.

Fede opened her door. “I’m coming too.”

“See you soon, ladies,” Max called as we reached the sidewalk and watched the SUV pull out into traffic.

“Well, that was something,” I muttered, turning the phone over in my hands and wondering how much it had cost.

“Nothing good,” Fede muttered and linked her arm through mine. “Let’s go upstairs and order takeout. My treat. You can tell me all about your best friend, the mysterious Kirill.”

KIRILL

Viktor ran the business out of an office at the far end of Brighton Beach. The *bratva* operated several different fronts, and I preferred the glass monolith uptown in the heart of the city for my business needs that didn't involve bodily fluids and murder. Viktor was old school. He liked to smell the scent of old blood with his morning coffee.

I strode through the building, seeing the familiar faces of men loyal to my father above all others and all else—even money. These men would turn their backs on fortunes to follow Viktor wherever he commanded them. Nikolai trailed behind me, his soft laughter dogging my steps. Given Nikolai's bombshell, I'd found time to come and see our father. Was Niko trying to irritate me, or had Viktor finally put his son up on the auction block?

"Kirill, Nikolai, to what do I owe this pleasure? It's Saturday, and I'd have thought young bucks like you would be out getting your balls emptied instead of coming to visit your father." Viktor's voice was heavy with scathing amusement.

I swept into his office, ensuring my mask was firmly in place. I couldn't let Viktor see how Niko's bombshell had rocked me.

"I remember those days, being young and strong and full of cum and spit." Viktor barked a rusty laugh as he rose and came to embrace his sons. He kissed us on each cheek.

As always, the touch of the man who had created and damned me made my skin crawl.

“Kirill didn’t know about his engagement,” Nikolai said immediately.

Viktor sighed as he turned away. “And you couldn’t wait to tell him?” He turned and shot me a challenging look. “And so? What’s the problem?”

Viktor Chernov was utterly confident in his ability to crush his opponents. He challenged me with his stare to disagree with him now.

“Who am I marrying?” I finally asked.

“Sofia De Sanctis.”

Shit. Sofia De Sanctis was the mafia princess of the Italian mob in New Jersey. They controlled Atlantic City, and a hell of a lot of wealth that flowed there, both legally and not. Underworld royalty. It was a match my father would be interested in at all costs.

“Why me? She and Niko have history,” I pointed out.

Niko touched his cheek with a dark look. “A history? She scarred this pretty face better than any man ever managed to.”

Viktor sighed. “Sofia doesn’t like Nikolai. She won’t have him, and for some reason, her father is inclined to listen to her. For now, at least. You are the only other option,” Viktor said.

“I’m not looking to get married.”

“Not my problem,” Viktor turned away. Just like that, the conversation was over. “But now we’ve spoken, you can meet your bride tonight. I arranged a dinner with Antonio De Sanctis to discuss the Richardson situation.”

“That’s my deal,” I cut in, irritated in a whole new way.

“Then it’s good that you’re attending, isn’t it? See you later. Niko, you come too.”

I knew Viktor, and it was clear I’d been dismissed. There was no point arguing with him. Besides, I needed to be at that dinner if the deal I’d worked on would be discussed. When Viktor tried to cut me out of my business, it didn’t bode well for the future.

I turned and nodded to Niko.

He was staring at me with an unreadable expression. “Are you done?” he asked quietly as if he’d expected more from me.

I had plenty more, but now wasn’t the time to discuss it. I couldn’t decipher that look from my unpredictable brother. Was he annoyed he didn’t get the fireworks he’d wanted? Or was he annoyed I might marry Sofia De Sanctis, the woman he’d fixed his sights on in some twisted way? I couldn’t tell. I never could with Niko.

I strode from the warehouse and got into my waiting car. Ivan pulled away as soon as I’d sat down, and I stared out the tinted window at the warehouse.

I had plenty to say about the prospect of marrying a De Sanctis, but it didn’t matter. I wouldn’t be marrying some stranger. I’d spent seven years looking for Mallory Madison, and if I were marrying anyone, it would be her, even if I had to hold a gun to her temple to achieve it.

My father would find out about that soon enough.



I ENTERED MY COLD, sparsely furnished penthouse in a pensive cloud of anger. Viktor was persistent, and he didn’t like being defied. Despite that, there was no way I’d marry someone other than Mallory. I’d kill us both before it came to that.

Outside my home, my guard stood watch in the corridor. Surveillance cameras covered the building, and there were no blind spots—or so I’d been told. There were seventeen floors between me and anyone trying to kill me. To access this floor, you needed a key to press the button on the elevator. My most trusted, elite guards stood outside the doors. They were the last line of defense, along with the multitude of weapons hidden inside the apartment. If someone did manage to get through all those layers, I’d go down swinging.

As I stepped through the doors, I looked around my foyer. There wasn’t a lot of furniture. I preferred it that way. This

wasn't a cozy resting place or somewhere to let your guard down. It was the cage I shut myself into at night. It was a reminder of what it took to survive in my world. I knew Mallory would hate it, but I genuinely didn't know how to infuse warmth into the place. I needed her to do it. Without her, I was a lonely husk.

A steady red light shone down at me from the new camera, discreetly installed in a light fitting. I'd had the entire apartment covered in cameras, the feed from which went straight to my phone and laptop.

Soon, I would have a little bird in my cage, and I would watch her rail and cry to my heart's content when she realized the walls of this prison constituted the limit of her world. Soon, I would bring Mallory here and lock her inside with me. I felt like a kid before Christmas.

I kicked my shoes off, enjoying the sharp cold of the Italian marble tile on my skin. I padded through the long corridor that branched in five directions and headed for my office. Inside, I turned on my computer and left the lights off. I preferred the dark.

My computer sprang to life, and I typed in my password, pulling up the last thing I'd been looking at—the video feed of Mallory's apartment.

Molly.

She was lovely on film. Captivating. I could admit I was biased because she'd always captivated me from the day we'd met—the bratty, spoiled little rich girl so taken aback by meeting me. The girl who had taken a chance on me. The only one I'd let inside.

And I'd certainly paid for that weakness. My hand dropped to my knee. It made me feel like an old man. I'd been feeling weary in my soul and body—wary, used up and done. But not anymore.

I watched as Mallory got ready for her shift at The Blue Rabbit. She would need feeding up on nutrient-dense food packed with vitamins and minerals. I wanted her hair shining

again and her eyes clear. Moreover, I didn't want to worry about breaking a rib while I broke her will. I needed her healthy and robust to bend and pound her into submission.

I palmed my dick, moving in long, languid strokes up and down as I freed myself from my pants. I was always hard lately. Since the day I'd heard that she'd been found—the day my ownership of her began. She had no idea she had a new owner. She had no idea she was a possession now, but she would. Soon.

I stoked myself, rubbing across the mushroom head of my dick and spreading the sticky precum that drooled from the crown at the thought of Mallory. Jerking off took the edge away, but the ache in my balls would never truly subside until I was deep inside my little obsession. Until I was pumping her empty cunt full of my spend, filling her up, and hopefully, planting my seed deep inside.

The best way to keep Mallory by my side forever was to tie her to me in every way possible. Nothing was off limits when it came to breaking her will. A brood of kids would be a nice addition to my plans to enslave her heart and break her free will. In my mind's eye, I saw her swollen with my kid, too heavy and dependent on me to run, even once she knew the truth of who I was.

I erupted to the fantasy of making Molly pregnant. Breeding her.

Ropes of cum shot across my hand and the desk. Thick and white, it striped the edge of the monitor, landing on the video beside Mallory's face as she brushed her long hair. Soon, I would see that sweet, precious face striped with my spend in real life, along with every other body part. I tugged my balls, making my cock leak the last few drops of cum into my palm, and stood to shower. It took the edge off, for now, but it wouldn't last long.

Soon, only the real thing would suffice.

MOLLY

NINE YEARS EARLIER

The day after I met Kirill, the weird boy loner, I drifted through my usual classes and wondered how he was fairing.

I needn't have wondered. As I slouched out of my English class at the end of third period, I saw a crowd gathered in the hallway. Kids lined the halls, pressed against the lockers. I pushed to the front through the hushed whispers and laughter.

Kirill was picking up his books with a straight, unamused face as Kap Holmes hung over his head, a taunting grin on his face.

"You should get used to your position at this school. On your knees before us," Kap said, looking at the crowd as they laughed. He grinned harder, clearly enjoying the attention.

He kicked the books out of Kirill's reach as he went for them. Kirill said nothing, only shifted to grab them.

Anger boiled up in my chest. Kap Holmes was like all of them. Like my father. Powerful, privileged men who thought they ruled the world and didn't care who they stepped on to do it.

"I thought that was your girlfriend's job, Kap. I didn't know you played for both teams," I called, stepping into the ring.

Students skittered back from me, not wanting to be seen supporting me in any way.

I strutted up to Kap. He watched me with narrowed eyes. I hadn't been lying when I'd told Kirill that no one messed with

me. My dad's powerful reputation guaranteed my loner status. It kept me above the rest and prevented me from being dragged down by the rabble. Henry Madison ruled this town, and no one wanted their parents on his wrong side. Despite being teenagers, boys like Kap knew not to cut off their gravy train.

"I didn't know you'd taken up charity causes, Madison. Getting some volunteer hours for college applications?" Kap sneered at me.

I smiled at him, channeling my father's stone-cold expression. Kap flinched an inch. He folded his arms over his chest to hide it, but I'd already seen it.

"Not charity, but career guidance. I'll give you a little tidbit for free. Stay in your lane, Holmes, bullying your sycophant friends and desperate girlfriends. Don't get in my business," I told him, angling my chin at him obstinately. It didn't matter that he was so much taller than me. It was all about the attitude. My father wasn't a tall man, but I'd never seen anyone look down on him.

"And this loser is your business?"

I wasn't about to justify that with a response. Kap stared at me for a long moment, a muscle ticking in his jaw as I failed to respond. He stepped closer, an angry flush working over his pale skin. I was humiliating him, and there was nothing he could do about it. His chest bumped mine, and he looked so angry, I wondered if he would lose his head and hit me. If he did, he was as good as dead in the water—him and his family.

A strong, long-fingered hand slapped Kap's barrel chest, stopping him before he could push me. Kirill stood beside me, towering over both of us. He was looking at Kap with that eerie blankness. "Don't touch her." His voice was deep and solemn.

"Seriously? This is such—"

"Are you hard of hearing, or do we have to repeat ourselves?" I cut across him.

Kap's bluster faded, and he narrowed his eyes at me, dropping any pretense that he wasn't a bully. His usually handsome face looked piggish and pinched. "You're brave when everyone is watching, aren't you, Madison? I'm not someone you want to pick a fight with. I'll make you regret it."

"Looking forward to it. Now fuck off and stop boring me," I said in a flat tone.

The assembled crowd was silent. Kap glared at us before he slapped Kirill's hand away, turned on his heel, and pushed through the crowd.

"And I thought I was bad at making friends," Kirill said quietly as we were finally left alone.

"What are you talking about? I'm a natural, clearly," I muttered and looked him up and down.

"I don't want you to get yourself in trouble for me. I can handle it. I don't care what he does."

Those words felt weird as they sank through my chest like stones, settling deep inside. This stranger, this boy without money, influence, or status, didn't want me to make his life easier if it cost me. I wasn't sure what to do with that kind of consideration. It was alien to me, and it was an uncomfortable weight on my shoulders before finally settling around me like a warm blanket.

"Don't put yourself on his radar. Guys like that ... they might seem harmless, but sometimes, they can snap," he said, staring down the hall where Kap had disappeared. There it was again, that warming feeling. I couldn't remember the last time someone had cared about me selflessly. Everyone in my life wanted something from me: money, power, influence, control.

"How about you watch my back, and I'll watch yours, weird boy?" I suggested quietly. I'm not quite sure why my mouth suddenly felt stuffy, and my heartbeat echoed in my chest uncomfortably. Kirill's full mouth tilted up at the corner. It was barely a smile, but it felt like sunlight on a neglected flower for a moment, and I drank it up.

A smile from this boy who wanted nothing from me.

“Deal.”

And just like that, I had a friend.

KIRILL

NOW

“Sit, Kirill, and let me introduce you to your fiancée.”
Viktor’s voice scraped across my nerves.

I drew out a chair at the table where he sat, squatting like a vicious toad, warning me with his eyes not to protest. Niko sat on his other side, his expression pure amused malice.

The other people at the table rose when I approached. Sofia De Sanctis and her father, Antonio. Antonio was old school. The De Sanctis’s base of power was New Jersey, and it was rare for them to venture out of the playground of Atlantic city and the surrounding cities. I’d heard that they held influence in Philly lately, and now, it seemed that Antonio De Sanctis was turning his attention to my city. The temptation to make inroads into the fat pie that was New York was turning Antonio’s head. Little did he know I had no intention of marrying his sacrificial daughter. I wouldn’t abide by Viktor’s wishes or make waves for the Chernov bratva in New York by helping another family enter the market.

“Good evening,” I said, shaking Antonio’s hand and turning to Sofia. She met my eyes curiously. I sensed reserve in her as I took her cold hand and shook it impersonally. “Please, sit.” She was stunning, but her looks left me cold.

As soon as we were all seated, servers descended with drinks. Niko was watching Sofia and me with rapt attention. His dark, rakish eyes fell on Sofia often. I’d heard something had happened between them years ago. I knew she was responsible for the thin, white scar on Niko’s handsome face, slicing from his eyebrow down to the corner of his mouth. It was invisible

in certain lights, but the mark was clear in daylight. Somehow, it gave him a more roguish air, like he was a swashbuckling pirate. Now, he glowered at Sofia across the table as if he'd love to get his hands on her, and he probably would.

I took a long swallow of the champagne that had been served.

“*Saluti,*” Antonio said, raising his flute in a toast. “To mutually beneficial partnerships and expanding the family.” His Italian accent was still thick despite his many years ruling Chicago.

“To family,” Viktor agreed. He knocked back his flute and downed half the contents as Antonio sipped at his. They looked a world apart, my Russian ex-con father and the De Sanctis distinguished-looking patriarch.

“Not drinking, Kirill?” Niko was quick to point out.

“Surely it’s too early to celebrate unions.” I placed my glass on the table. “I’m sure this is the preliminary discussion, seeing as Sofia and I are only now getting involved,” I said calmly.

Viktor shot me a dark look. “Whether you have been involved or not, it doesn’t mean this deal is only beginning. Antonio and I know what is best for our families.”

Nikolai grinned, enjoying the tension. “I don’t know. I still think Sofia should change her mind about the groom. Kirill is dull... dead inside.”

“And you’re a psychopath,” Sofia said with a viscously sweet smile. “I’d rather die of boredom than be cut into pieces by you when you felt like it.”

Niko’s playful expression hardened in an instant. His hand lashed across the table and grabbed Sofia’s slim, tanned wrist. “Only one of us has had the pleasure of cutting the other’s flesh, *dorogiya*. I’m still waiting for my turn.”

“And you’ll be waiting a long time after I marry your brother,” she murmured.

“Children, behave,” Antonio rumbled, seeming completely unconcerned that someone was threatening to cut up his

daughter.

At my expression, he chuckled deep in his barrel chest. “Don’t worry, Kirill. Sofia isn’t some pampered little princess. She’s tough, and she can protect herself. She’s lived in a house full of *famiglia* men and been the only woman her entire life. She doesn’t need me to defend her.” He flicked his hand dismissively at Nikolai. “Your brother has seen this firsthand.”

Viktor and Antonio fell into conversation.

Niko smirked, his attention never wavering from Sofia. “One day, tough little mafia daddy’s girl, I will return the favor. Then, you’ll call me your daddy and beg for your life.”

His dark eyes flashed, and I knew I was seeing a rare glimpse beneath the charming mask my brother wore. He looked deadly and obsessed.

“Whatever keeps you warm at night, Nikolai,” Sofia said, tugging her wrist from his hold. Nikolai sat back and glared at her as she turned to me. “So, what’s your story, Kirill? I never hear anything about you.”

“Because he lives like a monk. You won’t have any fun with that one. He lost his dick to some girl a lifetime ago and forgot how to use it,” Niko muttered.

His swords sent alarm prickling along my nerves. It wasn’t much for Nikolai to know, but considering who he was, it was too much. I didn’t want my brother to know anything about Mallory until I was ready. Preferably when I had chained her to my bed by the ankle, she was pregnant, married to me, and he and Viktor were seven feet under.

“That’s enough, Nikolai. I’m sure Sofia has better things to do than sit around and listen to your adolescent ramblings.” I turned my attention to the woman beside me.

She was stunning. She had that air about her that chic Italian women often do, a hint of amused mystery like she’d just heard something funny, but you couldn’t know it. Her dark shining cap of hair looked more playful than her serious expression would make her seem. She wore blood-red lipstick

and held carried an effortlessly expensive chic look. Like a painting in a museum, I saw all her attributes impersonally. She wasn't my type. Over the years apart, I'd come to understand that I didn't have a preference in hair color, body type, or anything else so pedestrian. I had one type—Molly. Other women might as well be an end table for all the interest they elicited in me.

Sofia De Sanctis looked elegant and pampered. Too rich for my blood by far. The De Sanctis' dripped money and luxury wherever they went. The Chernovs were a world apart. We had no class or elegance. We were hard, bitter, and brutal. Sofia De Sanctis had no idea how brutal. I suspected that despite her upbringing, she had no idea what brutality meant in the hands of uneducated men like the Chernov bratva.

Poor Mallory would soon find out. Mallory with her cheap and tattered clothes and rail-thin frame. Mallory, with her rebellious nature. Even when she'd been rich enough to wear the pampered princess styles of Sofia, she had opted for ripped fishnets, black nail polish, and goodwill jeans. A middle finger to her father and the wealthy elite of Woodhaven.

Her beauty didn't burn any less bright because of it, though. Mallory Madison had the kind of beauty that didn't require adornment or gilding to shine. Her face was a sucker punch to the gut, and it winded me every time. Nikolai wasn't kidding about me living a monkish, austere life. Maybe I was a religious zealot of a deity of my choosing. Mallory Madison was the only altar I'd kneel at. She was mine to worship, mine to protect, and mine to destroy.

"I'm also sure she has better things to do than get engaged to a man she doesn't know," I continued.

Sofia raised an eyebrow at me. "Go on," she prodded.

I sipped my drink. The sweetness of the champagne curdled my stomach, and I ordered a whiskey neat instead. I looked to Sofia for her order.

"The same," she told the waiter before fixing me with a non-nonsense look. "Elaborate."

“There’s nothing much to add. Your father dotes on you. I’d imagine if you were unhappy with the engagement, it wouldn’t go ahead,” I explained simply.

The easiest thing for me would be if Sofia backed out and convinced her father to forget the whole thing.

She smirked at me, but the expression held a hint of pain and vulnerability that hadn’t been there before. “I’m flattered you think I could influence him that much. You overestimate me, Kirill. My father might like to dress me up and trot me out before his men at parties, showing off his clever, tough little girl, but I’m a puppet.” She sipped her drink, tasting the harsh, warming alcohol without a twitch. “He’s the master.”

“Fuck, do you know how many men I’d kill to have you call me master, *dorogiya*?” Nikolai muttered across the table.

“Don’t know. Don’t care,” she snapped at him before returning her attention to me. “I’m sorry. If you don’t want this to happen, the ball is in your court.”

MOLLY

Two days. It had been two days since I'd left the hospital, and Kirill hadn't called. I couldn't stop thinking about him. "Thinking" was putting it mildly. Obsessing was more accurate. I tried to put it out of my head as I went to meet Theo and his friend, the musician. I needed money, and this could be a well-paying gig.

The café on 5th was a favorite meeting spot locally. It was as authentic as you could get to a dive bar in an area that was soon to be gentrified. I didn't look forward to those days as it would mean moving again.

A bell rang out my arrival as I stepped into the open plan space. The light inside was a mix of bright neon and sunlight flooding through a wall of windows. Smoky-sounding electronica played from somewhere, and the walls were an eclectic mix of local art, graffiti, and song lyrics.

As soon as I stepped into the incense-smelling atmosphere, Theo stood up from a table in the middle of the open, leafy space. "Lori! Over here!"

I waved and tried to gather my confidence as I approached the table. I was feeling like shit and not sleeping well, and I probably looked it too. I was fully prepared for Theo's friend to be put off by my roughness, but instead, he smiled broadly as I approached.

"Okay, I get it now," he said, giving me a charming grin and holding out a hand to shake mine.

I took it, and his warm palm enveloped mine. His hands were calloused like only guitarists were.

“See, I told you,” Theo said, laughing.

“Told you what?” I asked, sitting down.

I felt awkward, all dressed up in my best effortlessly casual-but-took-me-an-hour-to-choose outfit. A short dress with a flirty hem, ripped tights (that part was accidental), boots, and my leather jacket. It wasn't a “me” outfit, but jeans seemed too uncaring of the fact that I needed a job.

“Theo has been talking my ear off about having the perfect girl for my video... aloof and intriguing. I didn't believe him, but I'm pleased to say I was wrong. I'm Austin, by the way.”

“Lori,” I muttered, flattered and a little awkward. I didn't know if I'd ever get used to my appearance being my only saleable work skill.

“Look, I might have given up on pussy in fifth grade, but that doesn't mean I don't recognize beauty when I see it.” Theo grinned.

His warmth made me relax a little. Theo was here, and Austin was his friend. Everything was okay. Actually, it wasn't because the new phone Kirill had given me had remained silent all day. Why wasn't he calling me?

“I'll never doubt you again, man,” Austin agreed, and the two friends smiled at me.

Concentrate, Mallory, you need the fucking money.

“So, can I ask what the music video is about?”

“Sure, so...” Austin launched into the concepts he'd come up with for his video.

I tried my best to concentrate. I really did. The problem was Kirill and his radio silence. It kept pulling my focus from Austin and Theo.

“I'm sorry, what did you ask?” It dawned on me a few minutes later that I'd completely zoned out.

Austin smiled, not unkindly, and I forced myself to pay attention. But all the while, I was listening for the electronic chime that would make my entire fucking year.



AFTER THE COFFEE shop meeting and writer group, I rushed home to change and dragged myself into The Blue Rabbit. I still had the strange feeling of being watched, and I could swear some of the things in my apartment were in different places than I'd left them. The worry that Henry was snooping around dogged me. What did he want? Probably to steal the rent money before it was due or convince me to sell a spare organ or something.

I sighed, sticking my hand into my apron and pulling my phone out. Checking it every two minutes had become an addiction, and I'd given up fighting it.

"Evening," Fede called as she joined me behind the bar to prep.

I forced a smile, but it didn't quite reach my eyes.

"What's up?"

"Nothing. I met Theo's friend, Austin, today. He said to say hi to you." I vaguely remembered to relay the message. Honestly, men were trying to pass messages to Federica constantly, so it was no big deal.

She nodded, clearly uninterested. Theo always teased me about my lack of love life, but he gave Fede a free pass, and she dated less than me.

"He's sweet and nice. You should go on a date with him," Fede said.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "It sounded like it was you he was interested in. Why didn't he ask you to be in his video?"

"He did," Fede quipped and laughed at my disgruntled expression. "I don't do that sort of thing."

"What? Make easy money?"

“Put my face out there,” she muttered. Oh, right, she didn’t even use the most basic of social media, so it wasn’t a surprise. “Anyway, you should ask him out yourself. Take the bull by the horns.”

“Why would I do that?” I asked, growing a little annoyed by her insistence. “You know that Kirill is back in my life. I’m not going out with some random.”

“Oh, are you going out with Kirill?” Fede asked, her big brown eyes wide and curious. Her guileless look only sparked more annoyance.

“I will when he calls me,” I murmured, fighting the urge to check my phone again. “What?” I demanded when she shrugged and moved away along the bar.

“Nothing,” she called. “You know best.”

I turned my attention to the glasses I was polishing, my heart heavy in my chest. Why had Kirill not been in touch? Wasn’t he as desperate to see me as I was him? What was with the distance? Why did he pay for my hospital stay, send his assistant Max to drive me home, and give me the cell phone?

Maybe he feels sorry for you. That voice in my head needed to shut the fuck up. *Maybe he’s moved on?* Fuck you, voice. *Maybe he’s married.* I slammed a glass down so hard that the stem broke, scattering glass in all directions. I took a deep breath and forced myself not to panic.

“Evening, bitches,” Theo called as he hurried behind the bar.

“You’re late,” I snapped at him, feeling miserable.

He sighed as he put on his apron. “I know, but I have a good reason. Austin was mugged on the way home from coffee today.”

“Is he okay?” I dropped my cleaning rag and threw the glass in the bin. “Fucking New York.”

Theo shook his head, bracing an arm on the counter. “He’s in intensive care.”

“Intensive care? From a mugging?” Fede appeared, looking concerned.

Theo nodded, looking exhausted. He was worried about his friend. I felt wretched when I remembered Austin earlier in the coffee shop, all easy charm and handsome smiles.

“They took his wallet, but the rest – I don’t know. Who beats someone to a pulp and fucking knifes them for a wallet? He probably had an old condom and a twenty in there, total.”

“Knifed him?”

Theo nodded. “Pretty bad. Punctured lung and some other shit. He’s going to be in the hospital for a long time.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, leaning in to wrap my arms around Theo. Fede did the same on the other side. “That’s so awful.”

“Yeah, it is. So, you losers be safe out there. This city is a fucking menace,” Theo said weakly.

Fede nodded, looking upset. She glanced over my shoulder and rolled her eyes. “Talking of menaces, that guy is here again.”

Excitement fired through my veins as I twisted and looked toward the doorway, hoping to see the powerful form of the man I was beginning to think I’d imagined.

Kaplan Holmes strolled in with his lackey at his side. He tipped his head to me in a mocking salute, and my hopes were dashed hard against his greasy, entitled face.

“Great. This week just keeps getting better.” I moved away from Theo and Fede, trying to summon my game face. I’d need it if I were going to get through tonight.

KIRILL

That night, I entered the Blue Rabbit through the back door and went directly to the Elite VIP section. In clubs like Rafael's, discretion was highly valued, and the VIP section had a second tier that few knew about. The entire area was split into small, private booths with a wall of one-way mirrors looking out over the stage and dancers.

The dinner had been endlessly long, and by the time it was over, I was filled with the need to get the fuck out of the restaurant and hurt someone. Since hurting my brother and father wasn't an option, I found myself outside the Blue Rabbit. The call of Molly was irresistible.

As I settled in the booth, flanked by my men, my eyes weren't on the stage. All my attention was zeroed in on the bar.

Mallory was working, and this would be my nightly position until I took her. She would no longer be free to wander around, captivating all she passed. She still had no idea of her appeal. There could be an orgy on stage, and I would only have eyes for Molly serving drinks and smiling at patrons. The sweet smile she gave the greasy, presumptuous men who ordered from the bar annoyed me. They were too poor to order table service, which was a blessing. The poor ones were less pushy and arrogant and less likely to lose a hand for touching what was mine.

My eyes fixed on Molly, and everything else fell away. My men were enjoying the show and drinking and partying. The burlesque routines were a bit high-brow for most Chernov men, but they were enjoying themselves regardless.

Watching Mallory when she had no idea was my idea of a party. If I'd been alone, I'd have my cock fisted in my hand all night. But that was risky—far too risky. The urge to call her up to see me, bend her over the table, and fuck her senseless would be too great. Besides, with Niko around, I had to be careful. I was under no illusion that my name was at the top of the list of people he'd like to see dead, and Mallory was my greatest weakness.

So, I watched Molly because I couldn't stay away. I wanted her desperate. I wanted her wild with it. Her apartment owner was easy enough to pay off, and I had my men watching Henry, her father. I was keeping tabs on everyone else in her life, from her co-workers to the overly interested pastor who ran her writing group. I was slowly weaving a web around her, waiting for it to knit together into something that wouldn't simply snare her but break her heart. I wanted nothing left for her except me.

At the bar, I saw her lift her head and look up at someone approaching. Every line of her slim frame stiffened. I followed her gaze, incredulous at what I saw. A man approached the bar, stumbling a little on the expensive carpet. I recognized his features with a slight thrill.

Kaplan Holmes, the original bully asshole, in the flesh. It was a Black Hall Prep reunion tonight. I cracked my knuckles under the table and pictured beating Kap's preppy, arrogant face into a meaty pulp. Hmmm, something to look forward to.

I'd known of him, of course, given his father was still trying to achieve his pathetic senate ambitions, but our paths hadn't crossed. Kap hadn't turned out to be important enough in any aspect to run into a man like me.

Tonight, that changed.

He approached the bar, and Molly tried to escape to the other side, but he reached out and grabbed her wrist.

Fury filled me immediately, and my hand moved to the knife in my belt. I was going to gut him slowly.

No one offended or scared Molly except me. She was mine to toy with.

“Trouble at the bar, boss?” Ivan asked, following my gaze.

He pointed to the end of the bar, where three water bottles with bar staff names sat. I’d seen Molly drinking from one often. One of Kap’s friends had his hand on it.

So, more than one person would be dying tonight. It was every single fucker who had come with Kap, knew him, or even thought for a second that messing with Mallory Madison was on the cards.

Mallory was mine.



IN THE END, I didn’t stop Mallory from drinking the drugged water. She should learn to be more careful. There were worst things than Kaplan Homes out there in the city at night, me being one of them. I hoped she’d remember the lesson she was about to learn. I sent men down to control the situation and sat back and watched it unfold.

Mallory drank. It was getting hot in the club, and she’d stripped off her plaid overshirt. Now she only wore a tight black vest and black jean shorts that showed far too much of her long, shapely legs to the rabble.

I saw the moment when she swayed and put out a hand to steady herself as the drug took effect. I wasn’t the only one watching. As Molly staggered away from the back of the bar toward the staff area, Kap Holmes stood and followed.

Blood lust and the need to hurt him burned inside me. The monster that fed on the excitement of inflicting pain had awoken. My men were spread throughout the club, and I knew Ivan was following Kap. I rose, left the VIP area, and headed where Molly had disappeared. A hunter on the prowl.

I followed my men’s path down a side hall to the staff room. Max stood in the doorway with his arms crossed. He stepped back as I entered. Mallory was flopped on the floor near the

door, and Kaplan Holmes was pressed against the wall with Ivan's gun at his temple.

Mallory looked up at me blearily as I entered. Broken glass crunched under my shoes as I walked. It was quiet. Only Kap's boorish mouth-breathing filled the space, along with the scent of Mallory's vomit. She clutched a waste bin to her chest and tried to catch her breath. My heart beat strangely as her hazy eyes focused on me and fluttered closed. She looked pale and wretched. It seemed Kap had a heavy hand with his date rape technique.

I turned my attention away from her and to the man struggling in the corner. His meaty face turned red from exertion as he tried to break Ivan's grip.

"What the fuck? Are you guys cops?" he grunted.

"Cops? You wish." Ivan chuckled, pressing harder against Kap's windpipe to silence him.

"We aren't cops, Kaplan. Don't tell me you don't recognize your old classmate. I'm not so different, surely?" I drawled.

Kap's attention fixed on me, and his brow scrunched as he tried to place me. I was lying. I *was* different. Very different.

"But we didn't run in the same circles, did we? Why would you remember the poor charity case whose life you tried to make hell?" I ambled toward Kap and saw the exact moment he recognized me. His face went white with shock and something else. Something delicious. Fear.

"You know me. I'm surprised," I murmured, withdrawing my knife from my belt. I twirled it between my fingers with ease, and his eyes fixed on it. "Few people connect charity chase Kirill Lewis with Kirill Viktorovich Chernov. Not as dumb as you look, Kap."

"My father told me. He said Viktor Chernov was your father, and I shouldn't mess with you. I didn't realize what kind of man Viktor was ... or you. But I found her for you ... I found her and told people about her." Kaplan's voice was desperate.

I turned and raised an eyebrow at Max, who nodded in confirmation. Now I thought of it, I'd been so eager to see

Mallory that I hadn't asked many questions about how Max had finally found her. Kaplan Holmes was why we'd met in the first place, and he was the person who reunited us. The consequences of that small act would be the end of him. The kismet of it all was beautiful.

"I suppose I should be thanking you. Why didn't you tell her about me?"

"What was I supposed to say? That you were ..." he trailed off, clearly struggling to put into words the kind of monster my reputation made me out to be without offending me. Little did he know my reputation was tame compared with reality.

"Now, now. That isn't judgment I hear from the man who drugged a woman at this bar and followed her into a quiet room, is it? People in glass houses shouldn't throw bricks, old friend."

"I'm nothing like you," Kap spat, showing more nerve than I'd expected. Then again, there was a fine line between brave and fucking stupid.

"That's right. You aren't. You drug women and take them back to your stinking adult frat house of a place and fuck them when they're too out of their minds to consent, but you've never killed a man, have you? You still think some lines are worse than others, don't you?" I asked him quietly. I'd heard all about how the son of Holmes Corporation got tail. His struggle stopped immediately as the severity of his situation became apparent. He shook his head. "So, you've never watched the life drain from someone's eyes or flayed open their chest to see the exact moment the heart stops."

Kap was shaking now, and Ivan laughed, still holding him.

"Two pissers in a week? What's the world coming to?" Ivan chuckled.

I didn't have a chance to respond as a scraping noise from the floor signaled that Mallory had joined us again. She pushed to her feet, swaying wildly. She stumbled and sucked in a breath. Her eyes turned to Kap with a look of confusion and loathing. She held out an arm and pointed to him.

“You motherfucker,” she slurred and stepped forward.

She stumbled again, and I couldn't stop myself from stepping forward to catch her. Her weight fell against me, and her scent filled my nose. Everything else fell away. The smell of the dank room, the vomit in the bucket, and the acrid smell of a man pissing himself in fear. There was only Molly and the perfume of her skin.

“He's a motherfucker,” she grunted, her eyes struggling to focus on me.

I saw the moment they connected. Her dark green eyes widened, and her pupils dilated. She tried to speak but seemed incapable of it at that moment.

“Shh, Princess. I know, don't worry.”

I guided Mallory against the wall, and she slid down without moving her eyes from mine. Kap took advantage of my distraction and tried to shove Ivan away. At my signal, Ivan let him go. Kap tried to get past me like he'd be able to escape a room full of my loyal bratva. I caught him by the throat and slammed him into the ground. He landed with a loud thud. I moved my foot to stand on his chest, pressing down until something inside cracked. He squealed like a pig in pain.

“Class isn't over yet, Kaplan. Don't be rude,” I barked at him, pressing harder and cracking another three ribs.

He curled up in pain, and I returned my attention to Mallory. She was crouched in a little ball, her forest-green gaze locked on me with an intensity only she could manage, drugs or not.

“You look like you've seen a ghost, Mallory.” I approached on silent feet and crouched, blocking her from view and keeping her for my eyes only.

She stared up at me, her head tilting to the side. “Kirill? You're here? I started to think I'd imagined you the other day.”

I shook my head and reached out, failing to contain my need to touch her. I rubbed my thumb over the apple of her cheek. The velvet plush of her skin felt like the most expensive material, luxurious and rare.

“Do you want to know a secret? I’m not your Kirill. Not anymore,” I said quietly.

I didn’t know why I felt the need to warn her. She was defenseless and wouldn’t remember anything in the morning. I felt safe enough to let her see beneath my mask for a moment. She was still my greatest weakness.

“You’re not?”

To my utter shock, a tear formed in the corner of her eye and splashed down on my hand. It felt like acid. It burned. I shook my head. “He died, and I’m what was left.”

Confusion furrowed her brow as she tried to make sense of my words. Her head rolled as the effects of the drugs took hold. She blinked her heavy eyelids. “I thought you were him,” she muttered and waved her hand toward Kap. “But I should have known you weren’t. He’d never savage someone like this.”

“Savage them? Sweetheart, I’ve only just started. When I’m done with this man, his own mother won’t be able to ID his body,” I said in an intimate whisper.

Kap was snuffling on the floor. I didn’t particularly feel like shooting Mallory’s co-workers if they came looking for her, so I had to get moving. I needed her friends for later, as leverage.

As I rose, a soft hand tugged on mine, and I stilled immediately. Mallory had taken my hand in hers. Her eyes beseeched me, and if I’d had a working heart, it would have hurt at that moment.

“Kirill ... don’t leave me again,” she muttered.

“Princess, we both know who. Don’t try to rewrite the past,” I murmured.

She knew. She had to know it was she who had left me broken and alone. Her eyes started to drift close. My presence wasn’t enough to fight the drug.

Her grasp on my hand failed, and her arm slumped to her lap. “Kirill ... what happened to you?”

Her small, plaintive voice sent ice across my nerves. I leaned in, letting my mouth move over the skin of her ear as I spoke.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart? Don’t you like what you made?”

I knew she could no longer hear me, but I was unable to keep the words inside for one more moment. She was gone, sound asleep.

I stood, missing her already. “I’m taking her home. We’re done here.”

I snapped commands as I hauled Molly into my arms and moved toward the hallway.

“And this guy?” Ivan called, kicking Kap in the side.

“Take him to the warehouse along with his friends,” I said as I strode away.

Molly was a slight weight in my arms. I clenched my fist. The hand that had touched her skin was throbbing, and the tiny stain of her tear felt like a brand.

It was time for our game to end. I was tired of pretending. Every second Mallory spent out in the world was a second when she could be taken from me before I’d had a chance to closet her away. That would be simply intolerable. I’d have lost my reason for living in one simple moment. It was a risk I couldn’t afford to take.

MOLLY

I woke from dark and confusing dreams, bolting upright, and struggling for air. My ribs felt like they were cracking and clamping down. I could hear the dream-like crack of ribs snapping. I gulped down a lungful of cool air as my eyes adjusted to the light shining in the window. It was bright outside, and I was at home. I had no memory of getting here.

I groaned as a headache slammed into the side of my head like a bus when the sunlight pierced my foggy brain.

What the fuck happened last night? It was all a blur. Had I got sick before work? How? Who brought me home? I'd had the strangest dreams. I flopped back to my bed, covered my aching eyes with my arm, and pulled air into my tortured lungs. I had dreamed of faceless men and the sound of pain. I'd dreamed of Kirill wearing a devilish mask, his voice filled with dark emotion that sent shivers down my spine. What a trippy dream.

I grabbed my phone from the stand where I usually charged it and quickly pulled up Theo's number.

"Hey," he answered quickly. "You're alive?"

"Barely. What the hell happened last night?"

"Girl, I barely know myself. You weren't feeling well, took a quick break, and didn't come back. Then there was a fight between the VIPs upstairs and some regulars. It looked intense. A guy got carried out by some seriously scary-looking dudes. Rafael didn't call the police or anything. I called it

once, and I'm calling it again—Rafael is mob. I know it," Theo said. "Anyway, your boyfriend sorted it out for you, so I guess he smoothed it over with Rafael."

"My boyfriend? Kirill was there?" I couldn't get my head to focus on anything in particular.

"He sure was. And sweetie, let me tell you, he even sounds hotter than he looks when he speaks."

I pressed my hand to my forehead and tried to push the memory of yesterday back into it.

"You should stay off tomorrow if you're sick," Theo advised.

"I can't. I need the money."

"Just ask Daddy Warbucks for a loan."

"Very funny. I can't do that."

"Well, I can lend you something," Theo started.

"No, don't be silly. You need to make rent as well. I'll figure something out."

"At least let me buy you dinner later. Come on, take out and gossip. You can't beat that for a night-off plan."

"Okay, sure, go wild." I hung up and flopped back onto the mattress on the floor. Staring at the watermarks on the ceiling, I tried my damndest to recall yesterday, but it was a blur, and it only made my head hurt more.

I checked the time. If I hustled now, I could visit my mom before Theo came over. Kirill had been at the club? He hadn't come to say hi to me, but he had helped me when I was sick? I rubbed my hand over my face and let out a short scream of annoyance. I'd been waiting days to see him, and when he showed up, I'd been out of it somehow and missed it. I guessed getting too sick to finish work made sense when I'd been woozy and lethargic all week. Maybe now, I'd get it out of my system and feel better.

I heaved myself out of bed, feeling nauseous and weak, but forged on. I pulled a hoodie over my sweatshirt, shivering in the cold air of the room, with its cracked windows and

permanently malfunctioning radiators. I opened my door and stiffened as I saw a man standing outside—a very unwelcome man. Suddenly the feeling of being watched and the odd way things had moved in the apartment made sense.

Henry stood outside leaning on the wall, his arm raised to pound again. “Where’s the rent? I ran into the landlord on the way up, and he wants it,” he grunted.

I let out a long sigh and went back into my room. I picked my way over the clothes on the floor and fished out my hidden stash.

“You know, there was a time when it was the parent’s job to pay the rent, not the kid’s,” I muttered. I counted out the exact money and handed it to Henry, who looked a little too interested in where I kept it. “Don’t even think about it,” I warned him.

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry. I’m not interested in your little stash. I’ve got big things coming.”

“Right, like you always do. That’s why our lives are a fucking dream.”

My father’s hand lashed out and gripped my hair, pulling it hard. “Shut your mouth, Mallory, or else.”

“Or else, what? Get off me,” I ground out and shoved him back.

My father’s hobby of slapping me around when he was annoyed had worsened when we’d left home and run, but I was big enough to fight back now. One night, when I’d turned twenty, he’d hit me hard enough to split my lip. I’d gone for a knife and managed to cut his hand. He’d been shocked like it had never occurred to him I’d had enough. I’d warned him to sleep with one eye open, and it had helped a little, but he was still an abusive bastard.

“You’ll see,” Henry eventually said before turning and storming off.

I closed my door and turned the lock. Since my journal had been left out, I always locked my bedroom door before going to sleep. I must have been too out of it last night to manage it.

I turned to survey my disaster of a room, ignoring the crippling migraine building inside my head.

First, get dressed. Second, feel like a human.



MY DINING ROOM table groaned with food a couple of hours later, and Fede had joined the party. We rarely got a night off together, so this was a night to celebrate. Thankfully, I was feeling much better and more than ready to eat everything in sight. Theo was hanging on my every word, on a mission to get the insider scoop, as he called it, on Kirill. He didn't seem to care that I had no insider scoop to give him. I hadn't seen Kirill in seven years. Regardless, he was taken with the story of how we'd met again.

“So, let me get this straight. You run into an old friend who happens to have the hottest big dick energy I've ever seen. He has a coterie of tattooed friends, enough money to pay upfront for a private room at St. Katarina, a top-of-the-line phone ... and you're sitting here with us instead of sucking his dick somewhere. You're such an idiot sometimes, Lori,” Theo deadpanned.

“I'm going to ignore that because you're drunk,” I said, reaching out and pinching his kung pao chicken. “But I'm taking this to punish you. He hasn't called me.”

“He showed up last night and carried you out of the club like a fucking knight in shining armor with a neck tattoo. It was hot.”

“What I want to know is where he's been all this time?” Fede wasn't in the same great mood Theo was. She'd been pensive all evening. “I mean, how did he find you now?”

I couldn't explain it to them without revealing that I was lying about my identity. I trusted them but letting something like that slip around Rafe or Tanya might get me in trouble at work.

I shrugged. “I don't know. I'm not on social media.”

“Don’t I know it? Both of you suck,” Theo complained.

He was always trying to tag me, and I could never keep up with it. Of course, the socials I had were all under my false identity.

“Tell us the story again,” he said, smiling dreamily.

“It’s not romantic. We were high school sweethearts, I guess. But we lost touch. I had to move unexpectedly, and my life became the glorious thrill ride you now see.” I gestured expansively around the crappy apartment. “Fast forward nearly seven years, and we’ve met again.”

“Now it’s time for the happy ever after,” Theo said, smacking the table hard. “First, though, the I-can’t-believe-we-found-each-other sex. Lots of it.” His dark eyes were round with amusement. I could also see something else in them—happiness. Theo might tease me constantly, but he was happy for me.

Fede was another story. “But what happened to him after you left? You said he moved too.”

“I don’t know. I’m going to ask him, though. We have a lot to catch up on when he finally calls me.”

“You could call him?” Theo suggested.

I shied away from the idea. I knew I wouldn’t. I needed Kirill to call me to prove he wanted to see me and didn’t just feel sorry for me.

A buzzing sound distracted me from demanding Fede tell me what had crawled up her ass. It was my new phone, and Kirill’s name flashed on the screen.

“Oh, my god, it’s him, isn’t it? We made that happen! Maybe he could sense us talking about him. Is he a demon or something?” Theo squealed behind me.

I shushed him violently. My heart pounded. I was nervous, which I hadn’t expected. I answered quickly before it went to voicemail. “Hello?”

“Mallory? How are you feeling?”

His voice was so deep I wanted to squirm against the chair and hug the phone. “Better. I can’t believe I got so sick,” I said, grateful my voice sounded steady.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better. If you’re up to it, shall we have dinner?”

“When?” Hope and happiness exploded inside me. He wanted to see me. We were going to have dinner. I couldn’t contain my excitement.

“Now,” he said immediately. He still carried that confidence he’d always had, but now it was another level. It wasn’t a command, but I felt compelled to comply regardless.

“Now?” My voice was a squeak. My heart jumped into my mouth at the thought of seeing him again tonight. I found myself nodding. “Okay, I just need ten minutes to get ready.”

Theo raised his eyebrows at me, clearly as excited as I was.

“Max will pick you up. He’s outside now,” Kirill said.

“Okay, see you soon.”

I hung up and let out a tiny scream, my only allowance for how fucking excited I was before I collected myself. I pushed back from the table. “I’m going out, so you guys need to leave or lock up behind you.”

Fede frowned. “You’re going out now?”

I nodded. “Max is waiting downstairs,” I said, rushing toward my room.

“Already? Before he asked you? He was confident,” Fede complained.

I’d had enough of her negative attitude. “So? Confidence is sexy, baby,” Theo said airily, clearly not sharing her concerns.

I listened to them with one ear as I dressed in the room next to them.

“Or he wasn’t planning on taking no for an answer,” Fede said. “Anyway, weren’t you the one warning her about the Brighton Beach crew last night? What happened to that concern?”

“She knows him, Federica. He’s her high school sweetheart. He’s not some stranger. It changes everything. You know, you need to dial it back. You’re starting to sound like a bitter, jealous hag. I mean, more than normal,” Theo snapped at her.

“Yeah, I’m jealous of seeing my friend teetering on the brink of falling in with dangerous people. Some of us have worked hard enough not to live like that, thanks very much,” she muttered, nearly out of Theo’s earshot.

“What are you on about? Stop, okay? It’s not a good look. Now, let’s go and see what Lori’s putting on. Knowing her, it’ll be some Gwen Stefani reject outfit that does nothing for her,” Theo muttered.

I smiled. I knew he hated my style. I’d never quite outgrown the rebellious emo teen princess phase, and he teased me constantly about it.

Tonight, it didn’t bother me.

Tonight, I was seeing Kirill, and he wouldn’t care what I wore.

MOLLY

*K*irill was rich.

I couldn't get my head around it. The boy who had lived on the wrong side of the tracks and eaten white bread PB&J sandwiches every day for dinner all through high school was rich. Max took me to an apartment east of Central Park. There was a discreet nameplate outside the building that read, "The Tower." We went up in the elevator, which needed a card inserted to make the penthouse button pop up.

The fucking penthouse.

The elevator opened onto an opulent hallway. It had a minimalist, restrained look that screamed wealth.

Kirill walked toward me wearing a sharp black suit and crisp white shirt. I couldn't take my eyes off him. He murmured something to Max in Russian before turning to me. "Good evening, Mallory Madison," he said in that deep voice that made my toes curl.

"Good evening, Kirill Lewis, if that's still your name?"

He placed a hand on the small of my back and urged me forward. I felt awkward. I couldn't help it. Should I hug him? I wanted to, but it felt weird. He was too remote, a beautifully sculpted statue of a god, while I was a mere mortal in a printed swing dress and leather jacket.

"I might say the same to you, Lori Wilson." He raised an eyebrow at me.

We passed through another door, with security guards armed to hell and back. I couldn't stop staring around the building as we walked toward a door at the end of the hall.

"I took my father's name a few years back," Kirill explained. "It turned out my mom never registered Lewis, so I started using my legal name."

I nodded, distracted by the luxurious penthouse apartment. I couldn't wrap my mind around the casual wealth in every direction. "Looks like we had different trajectories when we parted ways."

"You have no idea," Kirill murmured.

He walked with a slight limp as I trailed alongside him. It wasn't too pronounced, but it was enough to change his gait. He stopped in front of an enormous steel door at the bottom. Yep, it was an intimidating door for a residential house.

"Expecting the army to try and break in?" I asked as he unlocked it with a fingerprint.

"This is New York. You can't be too careful." He pushed open the door and stood back so I could precede him.

"The key is not to have anything worth stealing. That's my strategy, and it's working," I muttered as I went inside. The space was huge. Cavernous. Considering New York property prices, it must have cost millions upon millions. It was also as cold as hell and weirdly empty. "Did you just move in?"

He kicked his shoes off at the door, and I copied him, remembering the first time I had followed him home at sixteen.

"It's been a few years," he said noncommittedly.

He was so quiet and uncommunicative. It was driving me crazy. His steady gaze stayed on me as I looked around his house appreciatively. This place didn't feel like him, but there was no denying he'd done well for himself. I was proud of him. One of us had made it, after all. I was glad it was him. That's how fucked up I was over this guy.

We stared at each other until I noticed a drop of dark red landing on the pale marble floor. “You’ve hurt your hand! Do you have a first aid kit?” I seized on something practical to focus on rather than the awkwardness.

He looked down at his hand, seeming surprised to see blood dripping from his fingers to the floor. “It’s fine.”

I folded my arms across my chest and shook my head. “Tell me where the kit is, or I’ll go and look for it.”

He narrowed his eyes at me for a moment, and I wondered if he was going to argue. Luckily, he merely nodded. “I’ll bring it,” he said, turning down a dark hall.

I lingered, not sure where to go. There was a light at the end of the hallway, and I headed toward it, hoping to find the kitchen. Bingo. Pools of light illuminated a huge island in the middle of the state-of-the-art kitchen, all white and black marble with gold shot through it. One wall was floor-to-ceiling views of New York at night. I drifted to the glass, pulled by this vision of the city from above.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

I turned to see Kirill leaning against the wall with a first-aid box in his hand. He was studying me, not the view.

“From up here, it is beautiful, even if I know it isn’t up close. It’s full of rotten parts,” I muttered and held my hand out for the first-aid box.

Our fingers touched, and a shiver of pure, liquid heat went through me. My throat tightened, and my skin flushed. Kirill had been my first kiss and only the guy I’d ever wanted. He didn’t let go of the box, stroking his thumb gently over my finger where it touched his until I shuddered. He finally released it, a secret smile appearing on his lips.

“What is it?” I asked as we sat at the island.

“You haven’t changed.”

I busied myself with the contents of the box, starting with the disinfectant. “You have. And I have too. You just can’t see it,”

I disagreed. “This might sting,” I warned him as I dabbed the disinfectant on his skin.

He shrugged and didn’t flinch as I cleaned glass from the wound.

I winced the entire time and was relieved as hell when I was done. “That’s some injury. How’d you do it?”

He shrugged. “I forget.”

“There’s a glass splinter in it,” I fretted, looking for tweezers.

I started rummaging in the box when he shocked me by bringing his hand to his mouth and closing his lips over the cut. He pulled away after a moment and wiped the blood from his lips before flicking the splinter from his mouth and onto the floor.

I stared at the red stain on his lips. “Didn’t that cut your tongue up?”

He stared at me for a moment and shrugged.

Okay, then. “I can’t believe you’re here,” I muttered as I taped his cut closed with a bandage.

“Believe it. I’ve been in New York a long time.” His eyes never quite met mine.

Did he feel awkward? Was he uncomfortable? Was he married? Involved with someone? What was his life like now? Why did he lie to me? The questions rushing through my brain wouldn’t quiet.

“I haven’t. We only moved back a few months ago.” I wondered how honest I should be with him. He was different from before, but it made sense. Years had passed, long, painful years. I was different too.

“Where were you before?”

“Upstate New York, New England for a while. Boston briefly. We moved around a lot,” I confessed. “I looked for you after it all went down and when I could get away from Henry.”

“Ah, Henry. How is he?” Kirill asked, ignoring my confession.

“He’s still alive if that’s what you mean. Other than that, he’s still the same, and I still hate him.”

Kirill nodded but didn’t comment.

“What happened that night—”

“I’d rather not speak about it,” Kirill said bluntly.

His quiet words knocked me. How could we not speak about it? How could we pretend none of it happened?

“I don’t like looking back. Sometimes the past needs to die. It’s better that way,” he stated.

I nodded slowly, unsure how to respond. All Kirill and I had was the past.

I glanced down at his leg when I finished taping up his cut. “What happened to track?”

He froze. He didn’t fidget or move much as a rule, but right now, he had a deadly stillness. “I got injured and had to give it up,” he said after a long pause.

I brought my eyes to his face. It was so incredibly dear to me. I couldn’t process how handsome he was now. His awkwardness melted away into striking features, ruggedly male and thoroughly unforgettable.

“I’m so sorry. I know how much it meant to you.”

“We all lose things that mean a lot to us,” he said cryptically.

I nodded, those damn tears that hadn’t threatened me in years suddenly pressing against my eyelids. I was an emotional mess around this guy. “That’s true. I lost you,” I said, breaking the unspoken rule between us that we wouldn’t delve into the past.

Kirill tensed again, and his eyes were dark and unreadable.

A tear slipped down my cheek. “I’m sorry. It’s just ... that night was the worst of my life—” I stopped as Kirill tugged me closer and cupped my cheek. His bandage felt scratchy against my skin.

“Don’t look back, Mallory. It doesn’t matter. Nothing that happened before matters anymore.” His words were strange and hardly comforting, but the sensation of his skin against mine was strengthening. It was everything I had waited for so long.

I looked up at his face. All those pieces of his mismatched features had come together perfectly as a man. He was striking yet serious, and I wanted to see him smile.

Impulsively, I leaned in and pressed a kiss to his lips. His muscles tensed beneath my touch. He didn’t move, but he didn’t push me away. I pressed my mouth more firmly against his and tentatively stroked my tongue along the seam of his lips.

I hesitated as Kirill remained still. The optimistic balloon inside my chest punctured, and hope rushed out. I’d waited so long for him, wanted him, thought about him, pinned all my lonely, desperate hopes on one day seeing him again, and he wasn’t into it.

He didn’t feel the same for me. He’d moved on.

“I’m sorry. That was random.” I pulled back, but Kirill’s hand grabbed the back of my neck and held me close.

His breath heated my skin as his lips captured mine. My body responded immediately, pressing into his arms as he bore me back against the counter. Desire, white-hot and urgent, leaped inside me. I couldn’t get close enough. I wanted to tell Kirill everything that had lived in my heart since our last night together, but I would show him instead. I would show him with my body. I loved him then as I loved him now, and suddenly, the future seemed brighter than it had in seven years.

He picked me up, hefting my weight effortlessly and placing me on the counter. Pressing my knees apart with insistent palms, he stepped inside. His mouth moved over mine, demanding, taking, making me shake. *This* was kissing. Every other time I’d tried to date and get past first base with someone other than Kirill, I’d failed miserably. There was no substitute for being touched by this man.

His tongue slid along mine as his hands rose to my chest. I was braless beneath my dress—I had little to support these days. I gasped as Kirill’s hands closed over my breasts and tugged at my nipples. His mouth moved down my neck, licking and biting, nearly to the point of pain. I cried out when his teeth closed over my earlobe, sucking it hard, and the warm, sharp sensation sent sparks across my skin. His hand tugged up my dress, and I moaned, not wanting to lose his lips. There was a ripping sound, and it fell away. Holy shit, he’d ripped my dress right off with his bare hands. He had always been strong, but damn, he’d grown into a fine specimen of male beauty.

“Christ, you’re still so perfect,” he growled as he lowered his mouth to my sternum and leaned back to look at my breasts.

I should have felt shy that they were barely a handful—bee stings with large, rosy nipples. But I didn’t. His eyes were too full of want for me to feel shame. I was beautiful in his eyes, and it was all I’d ever wanted.

His mouth closed around one nipple, and he pulled it ruthlessly into his mouth, lathing the sensitive point with his tongue and making me gasp. I arched my back, pressing my chest closer. I wanted nothing between us, no distance, not even an inch from this man who’d lived in my dreams for years.

He moved to the other nipple as his hand delved under my panties, finding me wet and slick with want. I was embarrassingly needy for him, and my panties were soaked. His fingers moved through my slippery folds, sliding inside and over my clit. He wasn’t gentle, but I didn’t want his gentleness in the face of my need. I wanted him raw and uncontrolled.

“I’ve missed you so much,” I panted in his ear.

He pulled me to my feet and ruthlessly stripped my panties down my legs. He tossed them aside before his hands went to work on his belt. His suit pants fell to his knees, and he turned me to face the counter. I braced my arms against the cold

marble, his body heat burning me like a furnace until I thought I would combust.

He pulled me back against him, and his cock brushed my ass. Now would probably be a good time to tell him I hadn't done this before, right?

I should, but the words wouldn't seem to come. How do you tell someone you're still a virgin at twenty-five?

I've never done this because the touch of others made me want to cry.

Yep, that was a real turn-on.

He rubbed his smooth, rounded head along my slit, pumping his fingers into me from behind as he stretched me.

"I-I haven't done this since ... you," I confessed.

Kirill's hands froze on my hips. "We've never had sex."

"I know." I let him connect the dots.

He was silent for a long moment, probably wondering what the hell was wrong with me that I was still a virgin. Great. That was a real mood killer.

"I want to, though. I'll die if you stop," I said, turning to look at him over my shoulder.

"I won't stop, Mallory. Just taking stock," he said quietly.

"Of what?" I asked as I bumped my ass against his rigid hard-on angled up his abdomen. It was longer and thicker than I'd imagined.

"As fate would have it, despite everything, I'll still be the only one," he said roughly.

He directed his dick toward my entrance and nudged inside. His hands moved to my ass, and he spread my cheeks wide, making me feel filthy and hot all at once.

"First and last," he said solemnly.

The words sounded like a dark promise as he pressed inside. He was big—very big. Despite my wetness, I felt every inch sliding into me, parting unused muscles without mercy. I cried

out but braced myself and breathed in and out, trying to calm the instinct to close my legs and force him out. Sex hurt the first time. Wasn't this to be expected? Although it was more of a burn than a pain, and seconds later, I was adjusting.

Kirill paused when his hips were flush against my ass. He was deep inside me. His thighs pressed mine against the cold marble, and his hands held me open so he could watch the place where we were connected.

We hadn't talked about protection, I realized. "It's okay. I have the implant," I reassured him.

"Relax, Molly."

It sounded more like a command than a request, but I was happy to comply. I tried to relax my legs and lost my breath with surprise as Kirill lifted my entire lower body, bending my legs around his waist behind me and wrapping a hand around my hip to circle my clit.

"Let me in," he demanded.

His fingers worked my clit, making me wetter and sending spirals of pleasure through my entire pussy. He started to move as my body relaxed. I was still braced against the counter, but it was easier to lower my upper body to the cool marble and press my cheek against it. I felt boneless as all my strength left me. There was only the steady thrust of Kirill's hips as he slid his long cock in and out and tweaked my clit.

I felt myself rising—my first orgasm not by my hand. It rushed over me, bursting like an over-filled balloon. I cried out as Kirill thrust harder, pounding into me. The sound of his flesh hitting mine filled the quiet room as I writhed on the counter, impaled on his cock. When he came, he pulled me up, and his hand circled my neck as his cock hammered into me. His fingers pressed into the sides of the tender column of flesh, and my breath grew thin.

"First and last," he repeated in my ear as his warm seed blossomed inside me.

Well, there went everything I'd learned about protection in the heat of the moment. I had the implant, something I'd saved up

for in advance, not because I thought I would get busy at any point, but because I'd seen first-hand how difficult it was to deal with an unwanted pregnancy. It had happened to several girls at the Blue Rabbit, and it was a difficult lesson to forget.

It reminded me that I didn't know when my implant needed changing—not that I had the money. Besides pregnancy, there was the threat of disease. But at that moment, I didn't care. I trusted Kirill like I'd trusted him as a teenager. The lonely misfit and the jaded little rich girl. My only friend.

Kirill came inside me, and I embraced every drop. He continued to thrust until he had emptied himself and my willing body accepted all of his spend. When he pulled out, it was on a rush of white, and he stepped back as it dripped down my legs.

I turned, shaken and awkward now that the heat of the moment had passed. His gaze was fixed between my legs, and he swiped his fingers through the sticky mess before gently pressing them inside me. It was filthy and oddly flattering, as if he wanted a part of himself to remain in my body.

“Here,” Kirill said, passing me a box of tissues before tucking himself into his trousers.

With that simple adjustment, he was fully dressed again, while I was bare ass naked with cum leaking down my legs. As I steadied myself, he took the tissues from me and wiped between my legs, mopping up his copious spend with a wad of tissues before tossing them on the table.

“How are you still so innocent?” he asked quietly.

I felt exposed, standing there naked and trembling. I reached for my ripped dress and pulled the sides on, crossing the ends over my chest. I shrugged. “Lack of opportunity.”

“Twenty-five years old, living in New York, and looking like you do, I find that hard to believe,” he said bluntly.

The strange compliment made my cheeks heat. It looked like I was going to have to rip the emotional vulnerability band-aid off. “I've never wanted to have sex with anyone other than you if you must know.”

Kirill studied me, and I fought to meet his probing stare. Nothing about this was going as I'd imagined.

"I must know." Kirill's words sounded dictatorial as hell, but he pulled me into his chest and kissed my forehead. "Sleep here," he said quietly.

"I'm not sure—"

"It wasn't a question."

I smacked his chest encased in his smart button-up shirt. His entire suit probably cost more than six months of my rent. "Still bossy, I see."

"Still rebellious, I see," Kirill replied, pulling back and looking me up and down. "I'm glad."

"You still like a good fight?" I teased.

I was finally rewarded with a dark chuckle. "You have no idea."

MOLLY

SEVEN YEARS AGO

G ravel dug through my sandals, slicing the edges of my feet as I ran toward the darkened trailer. It sat in an old junkyard on the wrong side of town.

Please let him be here. Please.

I burst inside the flimsy door and staggered down the hall.

“Molly, what’s wrong?”

Kirill’s scent surrounded me immediately as he crossed to me in two long-legged strides and pulled me against his chest. My panic receded slightly in his arms, like a muscle memory response too ingrained to deny.

“It’s my dad. It’s Henry. I think he’s done something bad,” I muttered, my throat full of steel wool.

Kirill bent his head, taking in my wild, roving eyes as he pushed my hanging hair out my face. “How bad?”

“He’s in trouble with some people, bad people. Something to do with money, losing everything ... my trust fund.” I finally met Kirill’s probing gaze. “It’s all gone. There’s nothing left. Everything my mother left me. Gone.”

He tensed. “Everything?”

I nodded miserably. It wasn’t even the worst part of the shit show tonight had become.

Kirill gathered himself like he always did and shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. There’s still time to apply for scholarships—”

“In what?” I cut in. “I have no talents, and I’m not smart. I wasn’t prepared for any of this.” My voice was ugly and pathetic. “And it’s not just the money he’s lost. There’s more. Borrowed money, loans, I don’t know how much. Huge amounts ... more than he can find to pay back. He’s got to give them something, or they’ll hurt him.”

“Karma’s a bitch,” Kirill said flatly, his tone unapologetic.

He’d hated my father since the first day I’d come to school with a black eye over two years ago, and their relationship hadn’t improved.

“It’s not himself he wants to give them.” The quiet confession was like a bomb detonating.

“What the fuck?” Kirill pushed away from me, a violet storm of energy collecting and exploding out of him.

My dull tone was at odds with the whirling dervish of Kirill’s anger. “He needs something to give them while he gets the money. Some time to make sure they don’t hurt him.”

He paused his pacing, his hand bunched into painful fists. “Who did he borrow money from? Did he tell you?”

“He said it was Russians. Gangsters or something. The mob, I don’t know. Mafia, out of New York. He said the name Viktor. He said Viktor would take me as a down payment. Who the fuck is Viktor?” I couldn’t breathe. It was as if an invisible noose was being lowered over my head. “I’ll run. I’ll leave tonight. Henry’s scattered, and he’s not thinking clearly. If I go now, I can be pretty far by morning. I need to borrow some money.”

I was pacing too now, and Kirill grabbed my arms to stop me. He guided me back to a seat, and I folded into it.

“They call themselves *bratva*,” he said quietly. “A brotherhood of bastards.” I was about to ask him how he knew when he let out a long sigh and scrubbed his hand over his face. “You’re not going anywhere, Molly. You can’t leave your mother.” He folded his long body and captured my eyes with his. “I’ll take care of it.”

“You’ll take care of it ... how?” I blinked at him, confused.

“My father. I’ll go to my father. Ask him to help.”

Ice washed through me at his words, and I shook my head. I didn’t know much about Kirill’s father, only that they didn’t speak. I knew his mother had taken him away when he was young, and they’d eked out a hardscrabble existence in Woodhaven, across the tracks from where I lived.

My house on the hill and my father, Henry Madison, local investor and millionaire, had all been a lie. He was a crook and a criminal willing to toss his daughter to the wolves to buy himself time to run. Kirill had never had a penny to his name, but his life was honest.

I blinked away tears of shame. “No. You can’t. I won’t let you,” I said, knowing I was fighting a losing battle. There were few people as stubborn as me, but Kirill Lewis was one of them.

We should never have been friends—the rebellious rich girl and the track star scholarship kid. Somehow, despite that, we’d become more than friends. We were family. If I knew anyone in this world, it was Kirill, which was how I knew he wouldn’t listen.

“It wasn’t a question, Molly.” He knelt before me and wrapped his long arms around my legs.

I craved his touch. “You shouldn’t ever go there, even in your mind. That is not happening.”

“What isn’t happening is you paying for your father’s crimes. No one will lay a hand on you, Molly. No one. Nothing matters more than that,” he said, meeting my distraught eyes. “Don’t you know? You’re mine, Mallory, and mine only.”

“He’ll use this as an excuse to get back into your life. All this time you’ve been resisting will have been for nothing,” I said, clutching his shoulders.

The grief in his eyes matched mine. There’d been a terrible loss. Something had been stolen from us in the dark while we weren’t watching—the bright and shining future we’d been planning.

“It doesn’t matter. We have no other choice. I’m going now. No point putting it off.”

He stood, and I jumped up. He looked resigned and so much older than nineteen as a strand of moonlight illuminated his face—a face so dear to me. His too big nose and high cheekbones. His pale skin dotted with beauty marks. His slashing dark eyebrows too regal to belong to a teenager. All those disjointed features were precious, every single one.

He was so tall, but his body hadn’t gotten the message. He was too lean, a reed in the wind. His face was severe, his dark eyes too knowing for his age. He was a teen caught between boyhood and the future, his body trying desperately to catch up. Every now and then, I caught a glimpse of the man Kirill Lewis would become, and it made me shiver.

I couldn’t wait to spend my life with him.

“I’m scared. I have this terrible feeling I’m never going to see you again,” I blurted as he turned from me. I clung to his hoodie, trailing after him.

He stopped at the door and pulled me close. Leaning back, he slid a hand around my jaw and cupped my face, stroking his thumb across the apple of my cheek. It was a testament to how jumbled my thoughts were. I couldn’t quite understand everything he was saying, but I clung to him, nonetheless.

“You’re mine, Molly. Only mine. And I’m yours. We are two parts of a whole. No power in this world can change that.” His lips touched mine, and I clung desperately to him as he kissed me.

It wasn’t pretty, and it certainly wouldn’t make its way into any romantic movies. Our noses bumped, and our teeth clashed. I swayed against him and lost my balance. He caught me deftly, and I realized it was what he always did. I wobbled, and he was there to catch me.

His tongue slid between my lips and stroked mine tentatively, setting my body on fire. I shivered in his arms as he latched onto my fuller bottom lip and sucked it into his mouth. The gentle sucking made me gasp, and I pressed my body against

him, rubbing my growing breasts against his hard chest, wanting more friction. Wanting more of everything.

He pulled back with a growl as though parting was painful. I understood how he felt—trying to separate two magnets that wanted to snap together. I was breathing hard, and my tears were lines of dried salt against my cheeks as my heart pounded in my chest.

Kirill stroked my back, and I knew I'd never forget the look on his face. It was tender and protective. It was love, and I knew I looked the same. All the broken and scarred pieces of my heart fit perfectly into the missing pieces of his. A puzzle finally made whole only when we were together.

Kirill sighed, a long, sad sound, and leaned his lips against my forehead. "I am going to take care of you, Molly, but you need to let me."

I nodded. "What should I do?" I needed to help somehow, however small.

"You don't need to do anything. Wait with your mother and comfort her. She'll know something is wrong. I'll take care of everything. Just wait for me," he said gruffly, pressing a kiss to my forehead again, though this time, the sensation sent sparks of pleasure sinking into my skin. "Just wait for me."



I WAS GRIPPING my mother's hand and staring at my phone when Henry barged into the room. He was white-faced and sweating, and his eyes were wide like a wild man's.

"Pack some stuff. We're getting out of here," he grunted, grabbing a bag from under my mother's bed and shoving things into it.

"What do you mean, getting out of here? I told you Kirill was getting the money," I protested.

"Right, and I'm going to put my fate in the hands of some punk. All he's done is buy us time while they beat him. Get

your stuff or stay here and wait for them to come and take you,” he snarled at me.

I watched him whirl around the room, shoving Maura’s medications into a bag. Everything else spiraled away from me. Hurt Kirill? I felt sick to my stomach.

“I won’t go,” I said firmly.

Henry crossed to me in a flash and grabbed my phone out of my hand as I swiped it open. He turned and dropped it into a vase full of water. It sank around the rose stems. I gaped at it before reaching in and grabbing it. As I turned it in my hand, going for the card inside, he snatched it out of my hands again, and it clattered to the floor.

“No calls, no warning anyone. We go now,” my father said flatly.

“I won’t leave before I speak to him,” I insisted, going to pick up the phone again.

My father brought his heel down on the glass repeatedly, viciously smashing it into pieces.

“No!” I cried as I pulled his foot away and grabbed it.

The shards of glass dug in a long line down my palm as my father put his foot on my hand, crushing it mercilessly into the floor.

I cried out as he pulled me up, and I dropped the ruined handset from my bleeding hand. “You’ve lost your mind!”

The first slap stung. The second hit my ear, and the sounds in the room felt far away. I was no stranger to my father’s fists, so I recovered quickly. I heard my mother’s strangled yelp and turned to see my father ripping her out of her wheelchair.

“What are you doing?” My voice was hysterical as I scrambled after them.

He carried her down the long sweeping staircase and out to a waiting car. “I’m not waiting around here to be cut up and murdered. Stay if you want, but say goodbye to your mother,” Henry barked at me, rounding the car to the driver’s side.

My mother was crying. Tears tracked down her cheeks as she reached for me, her weak hands grasping in the air. My tears joined hers as the shock wore off. Everything was suddenly too real. I couldn't stand it. And I couldn't leave her with my father. I couldn't leave her alone.

As soon as I got in the car, my father floored the gas, and we shot off down the gravel drive. I twisted in my seat and stared back at my house. The only home I'd ever known. The lights were all on, and the door sat ajar. Everything I owned was inside. Everything I knew.

My mother grasped my hand and gave it a weak squeeze. I turned to look at her, my heart breaking at the terror on her face. I wrapped my arm around her fragile shoulders and pulled her into me, comforting her with the only thing I had left.

We drove too fast through town, going north. Kirill filled my mind, stealing my every thought. Where was he? Was he hurt? He was going to his father. His father wouldn't hurt him. His father wanted a relationship with him. I had to hope he was okay. My heart broke with every mile we drove away from him. Like a string tied from my heart to his, it pulled taut with every second of distance between us until my chest was shattered and broken.

I'd thought I'd known hell.

I had been naïve.

I'd had no idea what hell was. Until now.

KIRILL

NOW

Mallory didn't stir when I left the bed.

It was late, and she had to be exhausted. She was malnourished, overworked, and poor as dirt. She was right where I wanted her.

The door to my office was locked with a fingerprint scanner. I opened it and entered, flicking on my computer. My blood buzzed around my veins like I'd spent the evening on a coke-fueled bender. It was Mallory. Her presence was my drug of choice, and I was high from her proximity.

I should be worrying about how I would divert Viktor from the idea of this arranged marriage. It was another test. He had pitted Nikolai and me against each other enough times to recognize it. He wanted to see how far I'd go for him, how committed I was. I was damn committed. I had nothing but the Chernov bratva. Viktor himself had made sure of that.

But the organ housed in my cold, dead chest? It was committed to something else—my obsession with Mallory Madison.

I flicked through the camera footage waiting for me on my computer and settled back to watch the scene in the kitchen.

I never imagined in a million years that Mallory would sleep with me so quickly. And for her to be a virgin? I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen her blood on my dick.

There's no one other than you I've ever wanted to have sex with.

Her words stroked against the icy barrier of my heart, wishing to be let inside. She was going to be a handful. Almost immediately after reuniting, she tried to slip under my barriers and pry off my cool mask to see me. She thought I was her Kirill. Soon, we'd be like we were once the awkwardness was over.

She had no idea how I'd changed.

It felt like a triumph to know she'd never been with another in all this time. She'd been tighter than a vice, milking my cock with strong muscles I could have lost myself in for weeks—and planned to. It must have been uncomfortable. I hadn't been gentle, but she hadn't complained. Mallory could take a hit—her father had trained her well. She'd be tough to crack.

And I'd enjoy every minute.

I picked up my cell and called Ivan.

"*Bratan,*" Ivan answered. Quiet music played in the background, and I had the impression he was somewhere outside.

"How did it go with the frat party?"

Ivan laughed. "It went well. They'll be found slowly, and the coroner can have a fun day matching body parts to make them fit. A bloody hundred-piece puzzle." He chuckled, pulling a grin from me. I did appreciate a man who enjoyed his work, even when it was hacking arrogant Wall Street trust funders into fish food.

"How about Holmes?"

"He'll be found sooner rather than later."

"Perfect. You did great work, my friend."

"Does that mean it's time to ask for a raise?" Ivan joked.

We chatted another minute before I hung up. Killing Kaplan Holmes had been a truly pleasurable activity. Sure, I'd killed a lot of people, but I never enjoyed it. That was Nikolai's domain. Kaplan Holmes was the first. His friends, I hadn't cared about and dispatched the job to men in training. But my high school bully? I'd listened to his screams long into the

night. Now, Kaplan was dead, and my long-held lust for revenge had finally been sated. I could turn my mind to the far fairer and more enjoyable target for sating my need for control.

I returned to my room. The scent of sex and pure, undiluted Mallory hung in the air. It made me feel things, fierce and primal. This woman would stay in my home as long as I willed it. All her smiles and tears would be for me. I had seven years to make up for.

I didn't sleep beside her. That was altogether too familiar. It was risky. She would be soft and smell good. Her skin would feel like silk, and her hair would tickle me and make me feel things. I couldn't afford that.

Instead, I sat next to her on a chair and watched her for a while as she slept. Then I closed my eyes and let myself rest. I was well used to sleeping wherever I got the chance, and tonight it was watching over Molly. My lifelong obsession was finally within my reach. No power on this earth would take her from me.

MOLLY

I woke feeling sore in new places. It was a weird, clichéd feeling to be suddenly aware of my non-virgin status, but there it was. I wasn't changed in any groundbreaking way, but I was sure I had a few bruises and some tender places. The most important fact of the night was finding Kirill. The back of my hand itched and annoyed me where the IV had been inserted in the hospital, and between my legs felt vaguely like one giant bruise, but the ache made me smile.

I rolled around in his vast, black-sheeted bed for a little while. The walls were white, sterile almost, with a couple of black and white photographs on the wall. I got up and padded over to them. One was a church, Russian orthodox, I judged, from the onion domes. The other photo seemed like a graveyard, which was more than a little creepy.

I turned away from the photographs—I never got modern art—and stared at the city. Central Park stretched away, only separated from the building I stood in by one street of low houses. It cut a huge green rectangle in the gray jungle around it. Sunlight was shining in the window, cool and pale, but still, it was the sun.

It wasn't cold in Kirill's apartment, but I needed something to wear. There was a dark doorway to the side of the room next to the ensuite bathroom. Venturing into the dark room, I found a well-stocked dressing room and borrowed a large pair of sweats and a t-shirt that hung to my knees.

I didn't want to snoop around further—it felt wrong—so I made coffee in Kirill's high-tech machine and drank it

overlooking the city. I couldn't get my head around the last few days. I'd fainted for the first time in my life. I'd found Kirill again. And I'd had sex. A day of monumental events. My brain was tired of trying to process it all, but a deep rightness filled me despite that weariness. I'd found Kirill. Nothing else mattered.

I found my phone and called Theo.

"Girl! What happened last night? I need all the details," he said. "You went to that sexy beast's house and didn't answer my texts."

"I know. I got caught up reminiscing. I'll see you later and give you all the juicy details."

"Wait! There are juicy details?"

"Speak soon." I laughed as I promised to fill him in later and hung up on his questions.

I stared at Kirill's fancy kitchen. I had no idea what had happened to him since I'd last seen him. I had no idea what he did for a job, how he'd made his money, or what had happened with his father.

I twisted my phone in my hands, and my mind strayed back to the moment Kirill's friends had walked into The Blue Rabbit. Theo had called the men with Kirill a Brighton Beach crew and claimed they were the mob which seemed utterly ridiculous.

In short, there was far too much I didn't know. I needed answers, and whatever they were, I knew with certainty that I'd accept them. Whoever Kirill was now, I loved him. I couldn't stop. Loving him was my fate.

I changed and prepared to leave, a little self-conscious in the ripped dress. I tied the top together and covered the most indecent parts by zipping up my jacket. I was about to leave Kirill a note when my phone rang.

"Mallory, you're up." Kirill's voice met my ears.

I immediately stilled, and a stupid smile floated to my lips. "Well, calling me would have achieved that if I weren't."

He was quiet. We hadn't gotten the hang of banter yet, it seemed. "How are you today?"

"Good. I can't believe last night was real. I was starting to think maybe I'd hit my head and imagined it."

"What are your plans today?"

I leaned against the counter, my ridiculously happy smile stretching further across my lips. "Why? Do you miss me?" My heart thudded in my chest as I asked.

"Yes," Kirill said flatly, thrilling me with his certain tone.

"Well, I guess I could stick around a little longer if you wanted me to." I'd have to find someone to cover my shift, but I suddenly couldn't care less if Rafael was angry with me.

"I want you to," he said. Muffled talking reached me in the background. "I have to go. I'll see you later." He hung up abruptly.

Huh. It looked like I wasn't leaving after all. I set down my bag and went to stare out the window. In the bright light of the early afternoon, the city beyond the windows looked shiny, new, and full of possibility. It was a feeling I hadn't felt for a long time. The last time was when Kirill was in my life. Something warm and soft filled my chest, expanding and making me giddy. Hope flourished inside me after so long.

Kirill was back in my life. Everything was going to change.



THE FRONT DOOR let out a series of electronic beeps, and the confident stride I'd been waiting for echoed through the apartment. I rushed around in the kitchen, lighting a candle and putting the finishing touches to my masterpiece. I poured wine—ruby red and achingly expensive—into crystal glasses and turned to wait for him. I'd spent all day waiting for Kirill and had finally decided to make a game of it. I'd cooked for him with the only stuff I could find in the cupboards. Ironically, it had been the perfect find and the only thing I

could make, though I fully expected him to order takeout after he saw it.

“Good evening,” I called when he turned the corner and entered the kitchen.

His confident gait faltered slightly as he took in the scene. My borrowed sweatpants were rolled several times at the waist, and the t-shirt swamped me. I’d showered and brushed my hair into a long waterfall of gold around my shoulders. Kirill had always loved my hair. The table was set, and two plates were covered with cloches.

Who had a twin set of cloches in their cupboard? Kirill, that’s who.

I wondered why he had them. Did he cook for a lot of women here? I brushed the troubling thought aside. The past didn’t matter. The future was all I cared about. Now that I’d finally found him, I suddenly felt like I might have a chance at one.

He made an arresting sight as he stood in the doorway. He was clad in black again, a designer suit and black shirt, buttoned up so high I could only see the tendrils of his neck tattoo. I longed to see it all. I wanted to know the story behind it and every scar and bruise on his body. I wanted to know why he limped. Once, I felt like his body belonged to me, and I longed to feel that ownership again.

“Evening. What’s all this?” Kirill asked, his deep voice low and unemotional.

Last night, I got the impression that he’d wanted to say something but bitten his tongue. There was a world behind his eyes I wasn’t allowed to see. But I understood. He needed time. It made sense, even if it hurt.

“Well, since I’ve been here all day playing housewife—”

“Housewife?” Kirill interrupted, arching an eyebrow.

For some reason, I was embarrassed by his quiet amusement, like it was presumptuous of me even to imagine he might marry someone like me. “Fine. Since I’ve been here all day like a one-night stand who doesn’t know when to get lost, I thought I’d make dinner for you.” I forced a grin to hide my

awkwardness. Christ, we'd been intimate last night, and it was already tense as hell.

"You made dinner. Am I to assume your culinary skills have improved since high school?"

"You shouldn't assume that at all. I had to make do with what was in your cupboards, so I feel like this is on you. That being said, you should know this is probably my favorite meal," I said blithely.

Kirill approached a cloche and lifted it. A perfectly cut triangle of peanut butter and jelly on white bread sat in the center of the plate.

He stared at it and turned to me. His eyes met mine, electrifying me. "Your favorite meal?"

I nodded. It felt like an oddly solemn moment.

Kirill tugged me close, surprising me with the sudden movement, and the discarded cloche fell to the floor with a loud clang. He held me in place, his hands circling my wrists and keeping me still as he lowered his mouth to mine and kissed me. He was rough and demanding, his tongue forcing entry and feasting on mine like he wanted me for dinner, not the lame sandwich I'd made.

He walked me back against the table until my ass bumped into the smooth wood. "Why is it your favorite?" he broke the kiss to ask, his voice strained.

"You know why ..." I stilled as his hand came up to cover my mouth.

"Yeah, I know why, Princess. But like to hear you say it," he grunted.

His hand went to his fly and unzipped himself. Feeling brave and horny as hell, I brought my hand to the front of his pants. I palmed his rigid length, rubbing up and down and feeling my body grow damp and soft in places.

"It's my favorite because you always made it for me," I whispered.

His eyes were bright with a glowing darkness as he took me in. I felt everything in that look. Possession and hunger so fierce, it stole my breath.

“If you want to do something nice for me, get on your knees,” he said quietly. His subtle challenge thrilled and scared me. “I’ve been missing you all day.” His eyes narrowed at my hesitation. “Too far, Princess?”

“No, I just don’t know what to do. Teach me,” I breathed, lowering to the hard floor.

It felt wicked, kneeling before him as he unsheathed his huge member and rubbed his hand along its length. He looked at me with a veiled look I wished I could break through.

“Are you sure? I’m not a gentle man,” he said quietly.

Nerves and something dark and twisted coiled inside me. “I trust you.”

His lips curled at the edges. It wasn’t quite a smile, but it was the closest he came nowadays. “Good girl.”

KIRILL

*A*fter the day I'd had, I returned home, certain nothing could shake the dark mood from my shoulders until I saw Molly and the damn dinner table. The sandwich. How could something so simple make me feel so much? With my mood perilously close to free fall, only the sight of Molly, the object of my obsession, sinking to her willing knees before me could save it. My girl never did what I expected.

Still, I couldn't allow the feelings she was stirring to soften me. I had waited so long to have her in my hands again, and she'd immediately tried to dismantle my defenses. Molly was tricky. She was the only person in the world who had ever known me, which made her dangerous. I had to keep her in her place, and kneeling on the kitchen floor after making me dinner was a good start. If I softened now, I'd never be able to keep her when she tried to run from me.

"Open your mouth," I told her thickly.

She licked her lips first, looking at my hard-on as if she wasn't quite sure it would fit. Maybe it wouldn't. I'd make it fit, I thought grimly as I rubbed the head across her lips. She swallowed, the narrow column of her throat bobbing with the motion, and parted her lips. I slid inside without another word and pushed in deep.

She moaned, her eyes tearing up as I slid in and out, stretching her lips wide whenever my stomach came near her nose. The amount she took was laughable, less than half, yet it was the best blow job I'd ever received. Her hand flexed on my thighs, and I heard her suck in her breath through her nose, closing

her eyes to focus with typical Molly-type determination. But that wouldn't do at all.

"Eyes up here, Molly. On me," I told her roughly as I gathered the silky spill of her hair in my fist and held her head in place.

I couldn't fuck her as hard as I wanted to, not yet. I couldn't choke her while she still looked at me all starry-eyed. This wasn't how I wanted her to discover what she'd willingly walked into. But soon, I'd be allowed to be as rough with her as I wanted once I had all the cards on the table. The truth was, I was enjoying myself. I enjoyed her pure happiness and her relief. And I'd enjoy bending her to my will, breaking her desire to run, and training her to live in the dark beside me.

My free hand cupped her chin and tilted her head so I could slide deeper as the hand in her hair kept her in place. I was close. The sight of Mallory's face was sending me spiraling toward a hard release. Tear tracks of strain made their way down her hollowed cheeks, and she blinked rapidly, the effort of taking the hard pace I'd set kicking in. Her mouth was growing looser and sloppier.

When I glanced down, I saw her hand making its way down the thick band of the sweatpants she'd borrowed. My twisted girl was getting off on my roughness. Knowing that fucking her mouth was making her horny sent me over the edge.

"Fuck, I'm going to fill your belly so full of my cum that you won't want dinner or breakfast," I muttered as my balls drew up.

She moaned around me, nodding despite my thrusts making her head shake. I couldn't stand it for one more second. *Fuck*. Her innocence and lack of skill were melting me and making me into a new person.

I came hard, my hand on her chin holding her in place as I pumped a heavy load down her throat.

"Swallow every drop, Princess. Don't waste any," I warned her, pushing in as deep as I could.

Molly tapped at my thighs for me to move back, and I took my time complying. She was so beautiful, choking on my pulsing

cock. Only when I was empty did I pull back, immediately missing the warm cavern of her willing mouth.

“Let me see.”

She opened her mouth and showed me her tongue, painted white.

I rubbed my thumb over her shiny lips, smearing the last of my spend. “Swallow it down, beautiful.”

I stepped back, tucking myself back into my pants. I was careful not to be naked in front of Mallory yet. It would be impossible to explain my body to her without the truth.

“Now, get up, take off those ugly pants and sit on the table. There’s only one thing I’m eating tonight, and it’s you,” I told her roughly. I watched as she complied, tutting when she kept her knees shyly together. “Open wide for me, Princess, or I’ll make you.”



I ONLY RELENTED when she was a sodden, boneless mess. I carried her down the hall to my room. After lowering her onto the bed, I made to leave, thinking she was asleep.

She grabbed my hand, stopping me. “Won’t you hold me?”

Hesitantly, I sat next to her on the bed and slipped my arm around her. She burrowed against me, and my dead heart lurched in my chest. She had no idea who she’d asked to hold her. She had no idea how dirty and bloodied these hands were she welcomed on her skin. If she did, she’d run and hide from me.

Soon she would know, and it would be easier. What was meant as a punishment for Molly was turning out to be a trial for me. I held her until her breathing eased before letting my arm slip away. If I weren’t careful, I’d lose control of this situation. And I couldn’t afford to do that.

MOLLY

Grateful Dawn nursing home wasn't the best place for the care my mom needed, but it was the best I could afford. The place always smelled like overcooked cabbage, but the staff was friendly, and my mother seemed happy. Although it was hard to tell these days as she retreated further into herself. Her injuries and life's disappointments were pushing down on her.

"Morning, Gladys!" I called to the nurse dispensing the many medications Mara took daily. Each of those little pills equaled a night bartending at the Blue Rabbit. It seemed crazy to pay so much and take so many tablets for the effect to be so unnoticeable. But the nurses assured me she needed them, and what she needed, she got. Expense be damned. I had nothing else in this world to spend money on.

"Morning, love. Mara will be excited to see you," Gladys replied.

Excited was probably an overstatement, but I liked to think my mother knew I was here and valued my consistent visiting schedule.

"I hope so. I brought you your favorite – coconut macaroons," I said, hefting the duck egg blue box.

"Now you're talking!" Gladys made a beeline for me and my bag while I looked for my mother.

She was sitting in a wheelchair, staring out the window. It was a little high for her, so she couldn't see the gardens—not that they were much to look at in the middle of the city, but she

could see the sky. I was unsure if she could see anything now, but I liked to imagine she could.

“God bless the Blue Rabbit and Rafael’s diet for his dancers,” Gladys muttered.

She pulled out the expensive packet of La Duree macaroons and opened it. I snagged one before sitting on the bed.

Rich men showered the dancers at the Blue Rabbit with gifts. It ranged from expensive chocolates and beauty products to fine wines and lingerie. Little did they know it all ended up in a bin at the door, where staff members, male and female, could pick through it and take what they wanted. Dancers were discouraged from eating the fattening stuff.

“Hi, Mom. How are you doing today?” I pulled a chair up to sit beside her.

Mara Madison, once the wealthiest woman in Woodhaven and heiress of a massive fortune, was now reduced to a penniless invalid in a nursing home her equally penniless daughter could barely afford. How the mighty had fallen and fallen hard. Sometimes life did that. Scratch that. More often than not, life did that. We’d all seen the photos and inspirational stories online of people who’d lost it all and, with a bit of luck and hard work, managed to claw their way back to where they were and even surpass it.

Hallelujah, it’s a miracle!

Whether those stories were real or not, the downtrodden usually stayed down in this world. If life punched you hard, the follow-up was a kick to the face that knocked you out cold.

I stroked the papery skin of my mother’s hand. I pulled a moisturizer out of my bag. It was an expensive brand and only for faces, but today, it was a hand lotion for my precious mother. I doubted that was the intention of the man who’d gifted it to one of the dancers, but I didn’t care.

“How’s the job going?” Gladys asked.

“It pays the bills for now. I’ll find have to find something extra for the increase. You know how it is,” I muttered, feeling

guilty for complaining about the cost when Gladys was on minimum wage.

“I do know, sweetie. I swear, one day, with that face, you won’t have to worry about money anymore. I’m sure of it, Lori. If nothing else, you’ll find some rich guy to marry, and he’ll adore you so much, he’ll take care of all your worries.” Gladys smiled, no doubt believing she was reassuring me, but it had the opposite effect.

“I met someone. Or, rather, reunited with him. An old friend,” I confessed, rubbing the hand lotion into my mother’s skin as she sat silently beside us.

“Don’t tell me, the one and only Kirill?”

“Yes, the very same,” I confirmed.

Gladys whooped and slapped my knee. “See? I told you, Lori. Your luck is changing.”

“It might be a bit early to decide, but I hope so. Sometimes love can make everything better. And sometimes ... so much worse. My mother loved and trusted my father,” I pointed out.

Gladys was quiet. She knew enough about the whole, sordid story not to press the point. Happy endings were not for everyone. They were rare, but it didn’t mean I wasn’t hoping for one of my own.

“Anyway, I wanted to stop in. I have to get across town for four.” I pushed myself to my feet.

“Honey, that’s so short a time. Take a cab,” Gladys said.

I raised an eyebrow at her, and we both laughed. It was sad that to Gladys, a hardworking medical professional, taking a cab was out of the question. For me, it was probably about right. I had little to bring to the table, so it made sense that I couldn’t find a job that paid anything.

Nothing to give, nothing to get.

Gladys walked with me to the door. “Stay safe out there. I worry about you, a young girl, pretty as a picture, all alone.”

“I’m not alone. I live with my father, remember?” My tone was bitterly ironic, considering I was in more danger from my father’s fists than anyone else.

Gladys nodded, her dark eyes sad. “Oh, I know, honey. I know.”



I JERKED to a stop as I hustled out the door and saw Max’s car at the curb. He stood as I made my way toward him.

“Don’t tell me I have a chauffeur again?”

“Nope, just me. The boss thought you might like to skip the subway today. Rumor has it there are long delays.”

“You keep calling Kirill boss, but I don’t know what you guys do,” I said, getting into the car beside Max. This time he drove, and I sat in the front seat.

“Investments mostly. Trading, that sort of thing.”

“Finance? Weird, he was never interested in any of that before,” I observed.

Max merely nodded, a smirk playing around his mouth. “It’s a family business. His father got him into it.”

“He still sees his father? They didn’t get on in the past,” I mused, thinking about that night and how reluctant I’d been to let him go to his father for help.

“I don’t know if they get on any better, but they work together. Any more questions, and I’m afraid I’m pleading the fifth. Take it up with Kirill,” Max said, holding up a hand like he was surrendering.

I watched the city blur past. “How do you always know where I am?” The niggling question finally forced itself to the front of my aching brain.

“It’s my job to know. Did you have a good night off?”

His question distracted me and forced a hot red blush to my cheeks.

Max grinned. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Stop. You're embarrassing me. Yes, I had a good time. A very good time, but my boss won't be happy."

"Do you know who he is? Your boss?" Max asked suddenly.

I shook my head. "He seems like an arrogant millionaire playing at being a club owner."

Max laughed. "You'd better not let him hear you say that. You're wrong, just for the record."

"Really? I'm not surprised. I'm not known for being able to read people. I've always trusted the wrong ones, except Kirill."

Max fell quiet. "Who are you trusting mistakenly now? Rafael? Or your friend, Federica?"

"What's your problem with Fede? Does it bother you that she isn't falling for your hard, tattooed beast act?"

"Hey, who says it's an act? I'm all beast, baby," Max said with a straight face.

I laughed. "I wish your boss would remember he used to have a sense of humor. He never laughs anymore. Did you notice?"

Max was quiet for a long while. "Maybe he doesn't have anything to laugh about?"

"Fuck, that's the saddest thing I've ever heard. My life is depressing and utterly miserable half the time, but I can still see something funny in it, now and again."

"Maybe that's a rare talent. There are different levels of misery, Mallory. One day you'll see that."

With that cheerful statement sitting between us, the rest of the drive passed in silence.

"Thanks for the ride. Pull over here. I can't be late again, or Rafael will fire me," I fretted as he pulled up.

"Let him. You've got Kirill now. You don't need to work here," Max said, pulling in and killing the engine.

I rolled my eyes. “Right, and I can count on him to pay for everything for me. He’s my old friend and someone I’m seeing, though we haven’t talked about it. I don’t even know if he wants more.”

“I think I can safely say he wants more,” Max’s voice was full of amusement, like there was some joke I wasn’t in on. “If I come in there, will Federica be inside?”

“Yes, so don’t bother. She’s got a stick up her ass about you.”

His eyes pinned mine in the mirror. “Tell her I’d love to replace that stick with something else.”

My mouth twitched. That was a comment I wouldn’t be passing on. “Enough. I’m going. Thank you very much for the ride.”

I slammed the door and made my way toward the club. Inside was the usual chaos before opening. Theo waved to me across the bar.

As I got there, his eyes fell on my hand. “Woah, that looks nasty. What is it?”

I looked at my hand, not realizing I’d been scratching it again. “I don’t know. Eczema?” I scratched the hardened, inflamed skin. When I angled my hand, it felt like something was under there.

“You’re falling apart. You need to see my naturopath.”

“Great. Maybe when I win the lottery. I paid Mom’s bills today ... well, half of it, and I have about ten bucks to live on for the rest of the month.” I tied my apron and shoved my hair back in a half-assed bun.

“That’s fine, honey. You’ve got dark and dangerous bankrolling you now if you play your cards right.” Theo nudged my side. The thought of Kirill in any capacity made me smile, but Theo picked up on the muted quality of my grin. “What is it? Spill?” Then he clapped his hand dramatically over his mouth. “You finally got laid!”

“Shhh, keep your voice down,” I hissed at him, my cheeks flaming again.

“I knew it! You wouldn’t swap shifts unless it were something important.” Theo propped a hip against the bar, holding his hands out like he was measuring something imaginary. “How important was it in inches, just ballpark? This important? This?” He kept moving his hands further apart, and my amusement overcame my embarrassment.

“It was more than averagely important. A lot more,” I told him and wiggled my eyebrows.

Theo clenched his fists together in a sign of victory. “I knew it. He’s got that energy about him. There was no way he wouldn’t be packing an extremely advanced-use weapon down there.”

A pang went through me at Theo’s phrasing. Advanced-use? I was undoubtedly severely underqualified to handle Kirill’s advanced-use equipment, though he hadn’t seemed to mind. Still, how thrilling would it be to surprise him with being good at the stuff we did together, not just enthusiastic?

“What is it?” Theo asked, catching how my expression had turned pensive.

I chewed my nail. “It’s just weird. It’s not like I imagined it would be when I saw him again. He’s so much more experienced than me, worldly and grown-up. And yes, I’m aware I’m twenty-five when I say that. I sound like an idiot.”

“It has been seven years,” he reminded me. “People grow up. I’m sure you have too.”

I chuckled. “I’m not sure I have. Not like he has. He’s so guarded. I catch him watching me sometimes, and he’s not smiling or frowning. He’s just – watching. I can’t explain it.” I shivered as the words spilled out. I hadn’t acknowledged that I felt that way until this moment.

“Sounds like boss daddy has it bad.”

“Boss daddy?”

“Max, his sexy sidekick, calls him boss. So, he’s Boss Daddy. What do they do anyway?”

“Finance or something,” I muttered.

“Finance or something,” Theo repeated. “Geez, don’t let anyone say you’re not an interested girlfriend.”

“Shut up. I’m not his girlfriend.” I sighed, my heart tugging painfully in my chest.

“No? What are you?”

“I don’t know. We’ve not talked about it. I can’t get a read on him anymore. I used to be able to tell what he was thinking by the tone of his voice, but now he’s a maze, and I can’t find the center. I can’t get close.”

“You can’t rush these things,” Theo said. He straightened as Rafe paced past, opening the joint for business. “Let’s talk later. You better act like you’re feeling bright-eyed and bushy-tailed after last night, or you might get the axe, and then who would I nag at work?”



KIRILL MET me at the door after my shift ended, but my excitement was dimmed by the feeling that something was off between us. The radio chattered on as he drove through the lavender-gray morning. I wasn’t listening until a familiar name caught my attention.

“Wait, what did that say?” I asked, reaching out to turn it up.

“ . . . the body was found this morning, washed up on a shore near Brighton Beach in Brooklyn. He was identified at the scene as Kaplan Richard Holmes, the son of Senator hopeful, William James Holmes. Police will release a statement later with their initial findings, but sources in the department hint that a homicide investigation will soon be opened into death ... ”

“JESUS, I can’t stomach that this early in the morning,” Kirill said casually, reaching out and turning the radio off.

I stared at it in horror. “What the hell?”

“What is it?”

“Didn’t you hear? Kaplan Holmes has been murdered. Kap Holmes – from Woodhaven.”

Kirill barely reacted. “The bully?”

“Yes, the bully. He used to come into the club sometimes. Still being an ass.”

“Well, someone decided to teach him a lesson.”

I turned my horrified gaze on him.

He raised an eyebrow. “What? You expect me to be upset about a high school bully I haven’t seen in seven years who tortured us?”

“No, not upset, but ... shocked or something.”

“I am shocked. This is me shocked.” His tone was so flat and unemotional that my heart tremored.

Why was there this wall between us? Why could I not recognize the boy I’d loved in the face of this handsome, reserved stranger? As if sensing my discomfort with his reaction, he picked my hand up and pressed a kiss to the back without taking his eyes from the road.

I cleared my throat and turned to look out the window. Light rain had started to fall. It was time to change the subject. I couldn’t stand this distance between us.

“What did you do after you left Woodhaven?” I asked as he drove me uptown to his apartment. I took it we were going back to his again. I didn’t mind. My apartment was hardly anything to boast about, but it felt weird not to be asked.

“Molly, what did I tell you about the past?” Kirill sighed as if I’d broken a promise to him.

“It’s a question! Why is it such a big deal?”

“I worked for my father.”

“Max said you guys work in finance.”

Kirill nodded. “It’s the family business, and it pays the bills.”

“It more than pays the bills,” I observed as we pulled into the underground parking of his building, The Tower. The car that always drove behind him parked beside us, and his men got out. “I never knew bankers who had security entourages.”

Kirill turned the car off and spread an arm along the back of my seat. His hand fell into my hair, sifting through the strands. “I never said I was a banker,” he pointed out, as elusive as ever.

“What else do finance guys do?”

“Whatever makes money. You’re asking a lot of questions tonight, Molly. A man might think you need something to keep your mouth otherwise occupied.”

Heat flared in my belly at his suggestive tone. His eyes fell to my lips as I became aware of how turned on he was. My need roared to life. It was like he held the keys to my body and could turn me on at command. He understood my desires better than I did, leaving me vulnerable and wet as hell.

I was also relieved. I didn’t want these worries about our relationship or news of Kaplan Holmes’ grisly fate to intrude on my time with this man.

I lowered my hand, running my palm over the hard length pressing against his zipper. I was content to play and be distracted from my worries for the evening. The car windows were darkly tinted so that no one could see in.

Kirill wound my ponytail around his hand. “Shall we keep your mouth busy another way? Practice makes perfect, after all.”

Heat flooded my cheeks. I licked my lips and tugged his zip down. Words crowded against my lips in a weird panic response. It felt like everything was slipping through my fingers, no matter how hard I tried to hold on.

“You know I love you, right?” I stammered, driven by some unknown force to get the confession off my chest.

Kirill tensed, and his hand curled hard around the wheel. “Show me,” he muttered in a guttural tone that shook my bones.

The hand holding my hair like a rope led me down to his cock, already bare and glistening in the dawn light.

Just tonight. I would ignore the tiny voice in my head screaming at me that something was wrong for one more day. Tomorrow, I'd demand we talk. I just needed another day.

KIRILL

SEVEN YEARS AGO

I drove my wreck of a car into the city. It was late, but there was still traffic. Woodhaven was the wealthiest suburb of New York and so highly priced because you could be in city limits in an hour. Tonight, I cut that in half.

The night seemed colder than usual when I made my way to the warehouse my father used as a stopping point for his various unsavory businesses. Gravel crunched underfoot, and my breath fogged the still night air.

Inside was colder, if that was possible, and smelled dank and lifeless. I slipped quietly past gaping black doorways and made my way along the hall toward the sound of male voices. Tension cramped my guts as I reached the threshold of a barren room, empty except for a desk in the middle with a metal chair.

My father sat behind it.

My father, the man my mother had run from when I was a child. The man she succeeded in hiding me from for years. But he'd found us.

My father, the criminal.

The killer.

The kingpin.

Viktor Chernov, head of the most brutal Bratva New York had ever seen. The ruthless brotherhood ruled their domain with an iron fist. Woodhaven was a little outside their playground, yet Henry Madison liked to gamble with the big boys in the city.

His men stood around him, like always. Since I'd been away at college, he'd started coming around. The sudden appearance of his men had been the first sign of his arrival—thugs with knuckle and neck tattoos and dead eyes showing up on campus, watching me. Always watching. I'd known Viktor Chernov had finally decided to pay attention to me.

The first time we'd met in person a few months back had been like meeting a stranger. In my memory, he had been so big and frightening. A bear of a man. He was still tough-looking, with his shaved head, tattoos, and massive shoulders. But he'd lost the enormous proportions my childhood eyes remembered. He was just a man—one who was growing older.

“Kirill. I'm happy to see you, son.” His accent was thick.

He was first generation Russian, coming to America when Moscow's lawless 90s had been in full swing. It was a time when the most violent and cruel had used their natural abilities to rise to the top, and my father was well-suited for that kind of chaos. Now, he used the same strong-arm tactics.

“Do you want something from me, or have you finally decided to consider my offer and become the Chernov man you were born to be?” he asked with a mocking tone to his voice. He held all the cards and I, none.

“It's Lewis. My last name is Lewis,” I said quietly. It felt important to cling to the parts that belonged to me, not him. I'd known for a long time that Lewis wasn't the name on my birth certificate, yet I couldn't bring myself to accept my father's ownership of me. “You said I could always come to you if I needed help,” I said stiffly.

Viktor nodded, his shrewd eyes narrowing. “Of course, but first, greet your father, Kirill.”

There was a quiet command in his voice. I could argue about the name, but tonight, I needed something from him. I'd learned to pick my battles carefully when interacting with Viktor Chernov.

I moved forward under the blank gazes of the men standing around us. They wore identical, unreadable expressions.

Viktor stood as I approached and ran his eyes over me. Weighing. Assessing. He calculated my worth with that look. He clapped his hands around my cheeks and turned my face to press a kiss against one cheek and then the other. His heavy hands made my skin crawl. There was something horribly dominant about his touch—a reminder that he could do what he wanted to me, and there was nothing I could do about it.

He slapped his hand hard on my shoulder, and his thick lips curved into a smirk. He was so close that his fetid breath blew in my face. “Tell me what brings you to my door, son.”

“There’s a man I think owes you money. Henry Madison,” I said in a rush. I needed to get it together. My father scented weakness like blood in the water and wouldn’t hesitate to go in for the kill. His eyebrow raised. He nodded for me to continue. “I need you to forgive his debt.” Viktor whistled.

“A big ask. A big ask indeed. For whom have you indebted yourself to me? You know this man?”

“Indebted myself?” I repeated hollowly. Of course, it would come to this. I had known it would. Men like Viktor Chernov didn’t do favors for anyone without expecting repayment.

“Nothing is free in this world, Kirill, and Madison owes us a substantial sum.”

“I’ll pay you back. I’ll find a way. I just need time.”

Viktor chuckled darkly like I’d said the funniest thing he’d ever heard. “I do not need your money. You know what I want.”

I shook my head firmly. “I would be grateful for your help, but I don’t want this life. I have other plans. Things I’ve worked for—”

“I care not about this,” my father cut me off, turning away from me.

“I care. I have a life, a scholarship, I’m ... I don’t want this,” I ground out.

Viktor paused and turned back to look at me. His dark gaze was assessing. No one spoke back to Viktor Chernov. No one

who expected to live. “That’s not my problem, and don’t forget who you’re speaking to. If you don’t want it, don’t ask me for a favor. Sit. Let’s talk.”

“You said I could come to you. That if I ever needed anything, you were there,” I said, folding my arms over my chest. My voice sounded empty, like my heart in my chest.

“And I am here. But I never said I’d ask nothing in return. The rule of this world is that the strong will take and take from the weak. If you aren’t the predator, you are the prey. You, my dear son, are weak. I will make you strong. You will thank me one day. Sit.” Viktor gestured to me, and the men beside me sprung into motion faster than I could defend against.

I swung a couple of punches, but they failed to land. These men were hardened criminals. Violence was their job, and I stood no chance. They dragged me into the metal chair before the desk and pushed me into it. My whole body vibrated with tension. I’d expected this when I’d come, yet I was still disappointed. How pathetic.

Viktor moved around to lean against the desk in front of me. “Tell me, Kirill, what are these brilliant feats you are achieving to make the wonderful life you’ve imagined for yourself? Your little running competition?” He leaned down, getting in my face, and I fought the urge to press away. “I thought your mother would have prepared you better for the real world than this. You’re my son. My blood. You are not destined to be prey. You’re destined to be the king of the heap, and I’ll see you crowned it, even if you hate me for it,” he said thickly.

I shook my head. The men who’d pushed me down now held my shoulders in place.

“So, it’s your choice. Do you need my help or not? You still have that option, Kirill. Save Henry Madison and join me, or let the man answer for his stupidity. He and his family will pay for his arrogance,” Viktor said.

Something inside me broke at that ultimatum. There was no choice. There had never been. Between Molly and me? I’d choose her every single time.

Viktor smiled as he saw my face, resolute, bitter, and grim.

“Forgive his debt. That’s my choice,” I said.

Viktor nodded and reached out a hand to cup my cheek roughly. “You’ve made me happy, Kirill. I’ve waited a long time to have you by my side. I’ve so much to show you and so many people you’ve yet to meet. Family you couldn’t have imagined, but I understand that too many choices can torture the soul. I understand it well, and I don’t want you to suffer like that.”

His words made me nervous, as did the heavy hands of his minions pinning me in place.

Viktor released my face and gave me a look I knew I’d never forget. “I’ll free you of that burden, son.”

Before I could wonder what he was going to do, he pulled a heavy-looking handgun from the back of his belt and cocked it. Before I could move or kick, he gripped my leg and brought the pistol to my knee.

The shot echoed through the warehouse.

MOLLY

NOW

*A*n hour later, even though I could still taste him, the distance remained between us. I felt it every time he pulled his hand from my touch or turned away when I smiled. I felt it when he failed to meet my eyes or respond to a joke. There was a wall between us with a deep, cold moat around it, and I had no idea how to cross it. Kirill wasn't the man he had been becoming when we were two lonely teens falling in love. He was different. It made sense because I was also different, but the realization made me panic.

What if the man I had been looking for no longer existed? The thought made my throat tight, and tears burned my eyes. A well of deep, fathomless loneliness opened in my heart. He couldn't be gone. He had to be in there, somewhere.

Worries swirled in my mind long after both of us had grown still and morning had moved across the room, the sun chasing shadows up the walls until they disappeared. I'd never get used to working nights and sleeping days.

With the sleek precision of a big cat stalking prey, Kirill suddenly moved.

I'd lain there crippled with doubt for so long that I'd assumed he'd fallen asleep. He rose and left the room without a backward glance. Something inside me whispered not to call out to him or let him know I was awake—something cautious born of a life of fearful running and hiding.

He must be going to the bathroom down the hall so as not to wake me. Either that or he had to work like a normal person

during daytime hours, which made him collecting me from work in the small hours a terrible idea. My mind smoothed over my ruffled nerves. I shut my eyes again and took a long breath, willing myself to sleep.

A soft buzz intruded on my muddled thoughts. I pulled my phone off the charger and squinted at the screen. An unknown number was calling.

I regretted it the second I answered. “Mallory, I need you to talk to Grateful Dawn and tell them I’m allowed to move your mother.” Henry’s voice seeped into my ear like poison.

“What the hell? Why would I do that?”

Henry sighed as if he had no patience. “Because we need to move her. We need to leave New York altogether.”

“I’m not leaving New York, and neither is Mom.”

“Fine. Stay if you want, but I’m taking Mara.”

“Why?” I sat up in bed, agitated by Henry’s aggressive urgency.

“Because he’s found us. Viktor fucking Chernov and his men. We aren’t safe here, and we should never have come.”

“I don’t know why you think the man you stole from seven years ago cares about Mom or me, but I’m sure he doesn’t.”

“Don’t be naïve. There is no one Viktor won’t touch to revenge a slight. No one and that includes you and your mother. Please, Mallory ... I know you don’t like me and probably wouldn’t care if I turned up floating in the east river tomorrow like Kaplan Holmes, but I don’t want you or Mara to get hurt. I may have been a shit dad, but you two are the only family I’ll ever have.”

My hand was frozen in an icy grip around my cell phone as my mind caught up with his words. A sense of foreboding filled me, ripping through me like wildfire. It was the first time Henry had told me the last name of the man we’d been running from for so long.

“Who did you say?” I asked, my voice muted.

“Viktor Chernov,” Henry said. “The Chernov bratva. Now, he’s got his sons looking for us too. Rabid watchdogs are even worse than their father, I’ve heard. Soulless psychopaths.”

My breathing sounded too loud inside my head as everything closed in around me and the world stopped turning.

Chernov.

Chernov.

Kirill Chernov.

I ended the call with my father as a lock clicked into place inside me. I saw Kirill walking with the arrogance of a prince. His bulletproof car and tattooed criminal-looking entourage. Federica’s warnings and The Tower penthouse. His distance and the memory of the burning cold in his eyes. Cold enough to drown a man in the East River?

No. This was Kirill, who I had been waiting on for so long. I could trust him. I trusted him so much that I hadn’t even wondered what his dad’s name was. The only time I’d heard his last name had been from his friend at the Blue Rabbit.

Well, go and ask him now.

I couldn’t deny that instinct.

I slid out of bed and followed him.

The penthouse was a bit clinical but felt barren and creepy in the early morning. The freezing tiles met my feet, reminding me this wasn’t some weird dream I had fallen into—this was happening only days after finding Kirill again. Maybe it was the years between us, but there was something I couldn’t put my finger on, and I had to get to the bottom of it.

I tiptoed down the hall after Kirill. I’d expected the bathroom or kitchen light to be on. Instead, I saw the light blue of something electronic slipping through the inch-wide crack in a doorway I’d never seen open. Kirill’s office? The door had been locked earlier. I knew because I’d checked out every room in the palatial airline hangar he called home while waiting for him days earlier.

My heart thudded in my ears, and a terrible sense of dread clamped down on me. My instincts screamed at me to turn and go back to the warm bed.

Don't look.

Yet my feet continued to carry me forward. I stopped outside the door and gently pushed it open. It swung in another few inches. Not much, but enough.

Kirill sat at his desk facing me, staring at a huge monitor. The desk was covered in them. He looked up as I pushed the door open. The only sign I'd surprised him was his fist curling into a tight ball on the desk.

"Princess, you need to sleep."

"My dad called," I confessed. "He wants to move my mom from the nursing home." I leaned against the doorjamb, watching the man I had run headlong into the unknown for without once considering my safety.

Kirill frowned. "Why? If it's about money, you don't need to ask me. I'll have the bills transferred to my account."

"No, it's not that. He thinks the man he was running from all those years ago has found him. Viktor," I said slowly. I waited for Kirill to look at me blankly, to wonder why I was telling him this so solemnly. Wetting my lips, I steeled my nerves and leaped off a cliff into the unknown. "Viktor Chernov ... like you."

Silence fell, heavy and oppressive. Kirill kept his dark gaze on me, his eyebrows lowered. He seemed confused and uncertain. Good. It reassured me.

He sat back, his fist loosened on the desk, and the pinch between his eyebrows smoothed. Then he smiled.

I forgot how to breathe.

"Fucking Henry. That guy knows how to make trouble," he said silkily.

I blinked at him as he held his hand out to me. "Come here, Princess. Sit with me."

I moved toward him instinctively, confused and desperate not to let my mind go where it was going. I took his hand, huge and warm and so fucking comforting, I nearly forgot what I was worried about.

Then I settled on his knee and looked at the screen.

Yep, I wouldn't forget what we were talking about any time soon.

Black and white camera feeds showed the apartment. I recognized the rooms. There was a couple in one video. It was the kitchen a few days ago. I knew because the tall, dangerous man had grabbed the woman and crushed her to him with a vicious kiss as a cloche fell to the ground with a loud clang.

She should run, poor woman.

I watched how she clung to the cruel man with sweetness while he watched her with calculating eyes. She smiled. He smirked.

Get away from that man, I cried inside my hollow chest, but it was too late.

I hadn't left. I was here with the man I loved watching a replay of himself furiously fucking my mouth in his kitchen. My eyes shied from the scene. Maybe it was a weird kink? Sure, it wasn't cool to make a sex tape of someone without asking, but I wasn't entirely against the idea. If Kirill liked to watch us together, I was sure I could get into it for him.

Then I saw the top screen, and the video was different. It was the back door to the Blue Rabbit, and another was Grateful Dawn. I saw my mother sleeping soundly in her bed.

I clamped my hand over my mouth to keep a cry inside. Recriminations crowded my throat or vomit. Who knew? Confusion edged with fear skidded through me as Kirill brought his long fingers to my hair, hanging in a loose hank beside my ear, and threaded his fingers through the strands.

“What is all this?” My voice sounded strange like it was coming from far away. My entire world was playing out on these screens in Kirill's office, even while I'd walked around

humming and smiling and making plans for our future on the other side of the door.

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’ve been following me,” I said, injecting some lightness into my tone, but it sounded hollow.

“What’s wrong, Molly?” Kirill’s quiet voice was taunting, amused almost. “Don’t you like what you made?”

I peeled my eyes from the evidence of his stalking and twisted to meet his dark gaze. His casual tone was a lie. I saw it immediately. He looked at me expectantly, like he was hungry for my reaction. Dark intent scorched a path between us, setting the air on fire.

His words poked at some hazy, half-memory inside me. The night I’d been drugged. The night I’d imagined Kap and Kirill and whatever the hell had happened. I’d rationalized it as a weird nightmare, and now my brain screamed at my stupidity. I’d wanted to believe it was a nightmare, even though it defied logic.

“What I made?” I repeated. “How did I make this?” I raised a hand toward the screens of intrusive surveillance.

“I didn’t sell my soul to the devil for my benefit. It was for you, Molly,” Kirill said, his light tone wearing a little. “It was all for you.”

He was too close, his hands too strong as they curled around my arms. It was like stroking a sleeping feline, only to discover you had a tiger by the tail.

I attempted to stand, but he dragged me back to his lip, banding an arm across my middle hard enough to wind me. He moved with the sudden, lunging strength of a predator. Like someone I wouldn’t want to come face to face with in my shitty neighborhood. How had I not seen it?

Kirill caged me with his strong, tattooed arms and leaned his head into the crook of my neck, his teeth grazing my skin.

“Kirill – what is happening?” I asked, trying to sound calm. “I think I should go.”

“Go? But, Molly, sweetheart, we’re just getting started. I thought you loved me?” He chuckled, and the twisted quality of it dug into my heart.

“This isn’t funny. Is it meant to be a joke?” I pushed at his arms. “Let me up,” I demanded.

Kirill didn’t move an inch. He merely shook his head slowly and tutted. “The joke was thinking we could find each other and there wouldn’t be a price to pay for the last seven years. The joke was thinking I’d let you go once I had you again.”

“Why? What did I do?” I cried, pushing harder at his arm. I couldn’t see his face, and I needed to.

He gripped my wrists with one huge, menacing hand to stop me. I twisted as best I could to see his face. Where he had been controlled and cold since we’d met again, now he burned. Anger made his face alive. Crushing, terrible hunger radiated from him. He wasn’t cold anymore—far from it.

“You know what you did. You left me after I gave everything to save your innocence. But in the end, I was the only one instead of a long line of Chernov made-men, so that’s something.” He tutted at my expression. “You never did know the bratva your father owned money to, did you? Spoiled little rich Molly, living on dirty money with no clue where it came from. It came from me, my family, my father ... my legacy. Because of you, I returned home,” he said roughly. “My father would have sent you a thank-you gift if only I could have found you.”

“I didn’t want to run away! I fought my father—”

“Henry Madison will pay for what he did, like you will, Molly. Loving you cost me a future – but I’ll still have you till the end of your days,” he said darkly.

He was so close I could feel his blood pulsing. I tried to pull from the manacle he’d made of his hands but didn’t move him an inch.

A shocked, wild laugh left me. “What are you going to do? Kill me? Is that the kind of thing you do nowadays?”

I immediately regretted the question when Kirill's grin darkened. "If killing you is the worst thing you can imagine, Molly, darling, you're more naïve than I thought. But you're not wrong ... killing is very much the kind of thing I do nowadays. Don't worry. I don't want to kill *you*."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want to rewrite my name right here. Ink it so deep you'll never get it out," he breathed, tapping a finger over my heart and making it leap under his fingers. "I want to own you, but don't worry, I take good care of my possessions."

I didn't have a single word to counter his statement.

He suddenly let me go, and I sagged to the floor halfway beneath his desk as my knees refused to hold me. I rubbed at my wrists where he'd gripped them as he leaned back in his chair and stared at me, kneeling by his feet.

"I like you on your knees, Molly. Although, I might prefer you cowering and begging for your freedom more than your blow job skills. But I'm not complaining. What you lack in experience, you make up for in enthusiasm, Princess," he said with a smirk.

An incredulous laugh left me. "You think I'm going to feel bad because I'm not good at giving you head? I wish I'd bitten it off," I spat, eyeing him as if he were crazy.

A loud, booming laugh filled the room. He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. "Fuck. I missed you, Mallory Madison. I'm glad your shitty life hasn't broken your spirit too much. I want to be the one to do that."

He stood suddenly, and I tensed. My head was swirling, and I couldn't catch my breath. The stunning U-turn had left me reeling. "Why are you doing this now? Why pretend at all?"

"Because I'm not the man you loved, and I couldn't risk you running from me again. Besides, it was amusing to see your elation at finding your long-lost love again ... and best of all, he's rich and powerful. You thought you had it made, didn't you?"

"You're sick," I muttered, flinching as he crouched beside me.

He reached out to touch my hair. "I am what you made me," he said quietly. "Don't worry, you'll have plenty of time to get to know exactly what that is. All the time in the world. We are going to have so much fun together."

I gulped cool air and tried to think, watching him cautiously as he stepped over me and headed for the door.

"You can stay in here today if you want. Familiarize yourself with all I know about you. Don't try to phone anyone. All calls go through the front desk, which my men run. You're living in my world now, Princess."

He opened the door, and I watched, dumbfounded, as he stepped into the corridor.

"I don't understand any of this," I called out to him, my voice imploring. "What do you want from me?"

Kirill stopped shy of closing the door and met my eyes. Contrary to his twisted smirk, his eyes were so dark I felt like they were pulling my soul out through my eyeballs. Waiting to devour me.

"Everything."

MOLLY

I couldn't sleep once I'd checked that Kirill really had locked me in the study.

I opened the blinds and wandered around, absorbing what had happened. It seemed so obvious now that something had been off. The cold, distant way he'd treated me. His remoteness when we were intimate. I thought it was awkwardness because we'd been apart for so long, but it was anger. Fury.

Whatever had happened to Kirill that night, he blamed me for it. He blamed me for running, and he was looking for payback. I swallowed down the memory of clinging to him only hours before, telling him I loved him and trying to find a way through his walls. I thought of my ridiculous happiness in finding him again. I'd been such an idiot. Kirill Lewis, the boy I'd loved, the only person in my life guaranteed to make me happy, was gone. A cold, vicious stranger had stolen his face and memories.

I cried alone in the dark, where he couldn't see. Kirill used to hate my tears, but this incarnation of him might enjoy them. I cried for his cruelty and the crushing disappointment filling me. I cried for myself, like the selfish bitch I could be. Most of all, I cried for him, the boy I'd loved so much. My bright and shining future. What had happened to that boy? I stuffed a blanket in my mouth and screamed into it.

I'd used up all my tears by early afternoon and finally fell asleep. Luckily for me, the office had a private bathroom, or the potted plants would have gotten a different kind of watering.

I was sound asleep when he returned. The first thing I knew was the feeling of weightlessness and then the softness of his bed beneath me. In my groggy state, reality came slowly.

“Kirill? I had such a horrible nightmare,” I murmured, inhaling the scent of his neck. The nook behind his ear smelled amazing. The whole bed smelled amazing.

I turned my head into his pillow and breathed it in. The motion made me realize I couldn’t turn as I wanted. My eyes jerked open as his weight caused the bed to dip. Reality crashed into me, and I tried to sit, only to slump back as my arms threatened to pull from their sockets.

My hands were bound to the bedposts, holding me tethered like a captive. Kirill sat on the edge of the bed, watching me with an unreadable gaze.

“What are you doing?” I asked, pulling against the ropes.

Kirill ran a finger along my wrist. “Pull too hard, and you’ll cut yourself.”

“Like you care if I get hurt,” I hurled at him.

He shrugged and stood. “Your choice.”

“Where are you going?”

“Work. I’ll be home later to check on you. Why don’t you take this time to come to terms with what’s happened,” he said quietly.

“You can’t leave me here like this! I have to go to work, see my mom—”

“You have no job as of this morning. I took the liberty of quitting for you. And your mother doesn’t know you’re here. Your father will run away and leave you behind to save himself, and you barely have any friends. You’re still the same anti-social loner you were when we were kids, which will make it so much easier for me.” He gave me a humorless smile.

“To do what? Kill me?” My voice came out in an incredulous scoff. This couldn’t be happening.

“To keep you. I told you I would never kill you,” he said with an irritated sigh, as if my slowness to accept his demented plan was a mere inconvenience.

“Have you lost your fucking mind? You can’t keep me against my will. I’m a free person—”

“Not anymore.” Kirill’s dryly sardonic tone stilled me, and my heart jumped to my throat. He seemed amused by my fear. I stared at him, real fear flickering in my belly.

He released a long sigh and picked an invisible speck from his sleeve. “You are mine, Molly. Get used to it.” He delivered the last with a devastating calm before turning toward the door.

“Did you kill Kaplan Holmes?” I demanded. I needed to know what level of insanity I was dealing with.

He turned back and grinned at me. It was positively wicked. “Don’t play coy, Molly. You know I did. You knew it this morning when you heard the news. Admit to it yourself.”

“I didn’t know.” I shook my head resolutely.

Kirill let out a long sigh as if I was a difficult child he had to humor. “Very well. Stay in denial. Yes. I killed Kap and had his friends killed. According to Ivan, they will take a little longer to identify. And yes, I enjoyed it, if that was your next question.” He confessed without a flicker of shame.

“Why?”

Kirill tilted his head. “Kap and his friends touched something that belonged to me, so I killed them. Kap had it coming. The last seven years were a gift he didn’t deserve. Enough questions.” He started back toward the door.

“Wait! What if I need to pee?”

“Not my problem, Princess.”

I heard the front door slamming and the electronic beep of his prison-quality alarms settling into place. Holy fuck. What now?



I LOST track of time as I cycled through disbelief, anger, and fear. This couldn't be happening. Kirill, *my* Kirill, wouldn't treat me this way. How dare he? What was going to happen? The cycle went round and round until I was dizzy.

I was thirsty, and I needed to pee. The apartment was as quiet as a grave. Maybe it *would* be my grave. Maybe this was it. All these years of running from scary men, and the one who ended me was the only man I'd ever loved.

Kirill was right. No one would miss me. If I died here, no one would know except him. As soon as I thought it, a vehement denial sprung up inside me. *No*. Kirill would never kill me. *Of course, he wouldn't*. Something had happened, something terrible and dark and scarring, but I knew in my bones he wouldn't kill me.

I cried a bit more and then fell asleep. Feeling so much was utterly exhausting.

I woke up sensing something different in the air—a stirring in the stillness of the apartment. I was no longer alone. A loud whistle cut through the air, and goosebumps erupted over my skin. That wasn't Kirill's voice. I'd know his voice anywhere. The melody was haunting and eerie and growing closer.

"Well, well, what have we got here? Maybe Kirill isn't as boring as I thought," a deep, slightly accented voice said.

I twisted my neck to the doorway. A man stood there, not quite as tall and broad as my kidnapper, but close. He was dressed in black—a t-shirt and a leather jacket. There was something lethal about the way he smiled at me. This man was dangerous. I knew it in my gut, with the same instinct that had failed me so badly with Kirill. His skin was tanner than Kirill's, and his face was traditionally handsome. He didn't look brutal in the way Kirill could, but there was a deadliness to his features. His eyes looked like black pits.

"Who are you?" We asked simultaneously.

His laugh filled the room up. He looked totally at ease, finding a woman tied to a bed. “Jinx. Ladies first,” he said, moving further into the room.

I tried not to flinch away. “I’m Lori. Lori Wilson. I’m being held here against my will.”

The man raised an eyebrow, his dark eyes perusing my body from head to toe. “Kinky. I like it. I’m Nikolai. You can call me Niko.”

“Well, Niko, can you call the police for me?” Was I going to call the police on Kirill? Fuck yes, I was if I got half a chance.

Niko tutted and shook his head. “The police don’t tend to investigate Chernov wrong-doing. We pay them too much. My brother is the keeper of secrets in this city, and no one will get in his way if he wants to tie a woman to his bed or cut her up and eat her.”

I paled at his statement. “You’re his brother? I didn’t know Kirill had a brother.”

“Stop. Now you’re hurting my feelings,” Niko said in a jovial tone. The man was unsettling. He approached the bed. “The question is, Lori Wilson ... why would my brother care enough to tie you up? As far as I know, he doesn’t invite women here. You must be something special.” His eyes raked me from head to toe, and he frowned. “But I don’t see it. Maybe it’s under the clothes.”

“I know him ... *knew* him from before,” I blurted before this lunatic could look under my clothes.

Niko stilled, and an incredulous look crept over his handsome face. His hotness only made him more disturbing. “Don’t tell me you’re *her*. The one who got away. The one he’s been looking for. Now, that does make you special ... *Lori Wilson*.”

“Can you untie me? I can’t feel my arms.”

“Let me think about it,” Niko said, sitting on the bed beside me. “I met Kirill shortly after you left him. Poor thing. He was injured. On crutches and pathetic. He tried to look for you, not that Viktor would allow it. Personal connections outside the family are weaknesses, blah blah. That didn’t stop him. I lost

count of the times he tried to run away and find you. I bet he still has a scar for every time. Father doesn't spare the stick when teaching his sons how to mafia."

My curiosity overcame my fear for a moment. "Your father is ..." I already knew, but accepting it was proving to be more difficult.

"Viktor Ivanovich Chernov. The don of the Russian bratva in New York. The head of the snake, and twice as mean. Kirill never told you? He must have been pretending he could be an ordinary Joe. An all-America track star." Nico barked a laugh.

"Head of the bratva," I repeated, trying to get the new reality to sink in. "What did he do to Kirill?"

"Nothing. He just awakened his true self. He has the blood of great men and natural-born killers in his veins. Viktor showed him that. He made him the man he was destined to be."

"So – what about you?"

"Me? I'm the competition. The black sheep." Niko chuckled. "I might be the only person to hate Viktor more than Kirill."

"You both hate your father?" I couldn't keep up with this conversation. There was too much I didn't know. Too much I didn't get. Huge blank spaces where I needed information.

"Doesn't everyone?" Niko asked and pulled a small sharp-looking knife from his pocket. He started to clean under his fingernails.

I stared at the blade, transfixed. "How do you feel about your brother?"

"If you're asking am I going to hurt you and carve you up for Kirill to find, the answer is ... I haven't decided yet," Niko said with devastating calm.

"Please don't." I stilled as Niko brought the blade to my lips and sealed my words inside. "Shhh, don't beg. If you knew me, you wouldn't tempt me so."

I swallowed my protests and pleas and stared at him.

"To fuck up Kirill's little toy or not, decisions, decisions ..."

“I vote for not if it counts,” I muttered.

Niko laughed. “I’ll allow it. But I can’t leave you here if I don’t hurt you. It’s no fun.”

The knife was moving before I could flinch, and the material around my wrists was gone. “What are you doing?”

“I’m freeing you. I can’t leave you here for Kirill, and I’m not ready to kill you yet, not when your existence could serve me so well. But I suggest you give Kirill a run for his money. Don’t go easy, little one.”

I dragged my arms down and waited as the blood rushed back. I sat up warily, watching Niko for the slightest sign he had changed his mind.

He lounged there and watched me. “The door is open, and the guards are incapacitated. Kirill already knows and is on his way. I’d suggest you get out of here if you want to stand a chance of getting away from him.” Niko nodded toward the door. “Here, you’ll need this.” He tossed me the elevator key card.

I caught it, stumbled away from him, and grabbed my handbag, forgotten on the dresser. Backing away from Niko, I made it to the hall and sprinted down it. My shoes were on the floor by the door, where I’d left them. I shoved my feet into them and ran out the open door. In the hall, three men lay still on the ground. I couldn’t tell if they were dead. I didn’t stay to find out.

I turned and ran.

KIRILL

Shit wasn't going my way today. Luckily, I was too hyped up to notice. A morning of torturing information from a potential mole who had a heart attack before he spilled the info was a minor annoyance. Finding out the latest shipment we were awaiting from Russia was delayed was a hindrance, nothing more. My good mood was all thanks to Molly. Knowing she was precisely where I wanted her, in my home, in my bed, bound and captive, was all I needed to keep a cheery smile on my face. From the startled looks of my crew, it was more disturbing than heart-warming.

Max strode into my office when I returned from Brooklyn.

"What is it?" I could tell from his expression that he'd come to tell me something serious.

"Your brother went to your apartment. Attacked the security guys. He's still there. I think he's waiting for you," Max said, his complexion ashen.

Cold worry and dread lodged in my throat as I thought of Molly. "And Mallory?"

"Gone. He let her out."

Twisted relief and annoyance filled me as I grabbed my keys and phone and headed out. Letting her out was better than killing her. I'd caught her once, and I would catch her again. With the truth out between Molly and me, the games could begin. When I hunted her this time, she'd know what waited for her in the dark. I looked forward to catching her.

I got into a town car, and we pulled away from the curb. Max was beside me, waiting to hear the plan.

“Collect Henry Madison immediately. I have to speak to Nikolai, then find Mallory, wherever she may be.”

MY BROTHER WAS SITTING in my lounge when I got home, calmly drinking my best whiskey and watching TV. I resisted the urge to smash his damn face through the balcony window.

“Finally, you’re home,” he said, switching off the TV and smiling at me.

His shit-eating smirk dared me to say something about finding him in my home, not to mention how he’d fucked up the guards. Thankfully, none of them were dead. Good men were hard to find, and those who protected my apartment were among my most trusted.

“Why are you here?”

“Can’t a guy visit his brother?”

I didn’t bother answering.

“Straight to business, then. I found your little toy tied up tightly like a fucking Christmas present. Who is she?”

“Didn’t she tell you?”

“Right, *Lori Wilson*. I’m intrigued as I’ve never known you to play with your food before,” he teased.

My mask of indifference was beginning to itch. “Maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

“I think I know you pretty well. She was delicious, by the way,” he tossed at me.

Violent anger ripped through me, coupled with the need to shed Niko’s blood, but I pushed it down. I couldn’t let it show. My mask of cold indifference had been honed during my father’s brutal lessons, and it was crucial to my survival.

“She’s gone now, so I don’t care,” I lied.

“She’s gone, and you’re not going to look for her?”

“Why are you here,” I interrupted, needing to steer this conversation back to safer ground.

Niko smiled and relaxed back. “The job I asked you about. I want to move forward with it, and I need introductions.”

Fuck. This again. I shoved a hand through my hair and sighed. “It’s messy. I told Viktor as much. I don’t like it for the Chernov name.”

“But he does, so you don’t have a choice,” Nikolai pointed out.

“Because of this fucking business, the Romanians are causing trouble. They put one of my men in the hospital.”

Niko raised his glass, making the ice-cubes clink inside. “Glad to see you’re unscathed, brother. Like a cockroach to the end.” He cocked his head, focusing on the window. “What’s that noise? Oh, right, the sound of your little childhood crush escaping. *Lori Wilson* is good at disappearing, isn’t she? Be a shame if she got away so quickly after you’ve looked for her for so long,” he said, leaving me in no doubt he knew far more than I wanted him to about Molly. “It’ll make it easier to marry Sofia De Sanctis if your little captive is gone. I’m doing you a favor.”

“It bothers you that I’m engaged to Sofia and not you, doesn’t it? Maybe if you were less of a loose cannon, it would have been you,” I sneered at him.

My every thought was fixed on Mallory. I couldn’t wait to get out and find her, but first, I had to get rid of Nikolai. It was unfortunate that he knew so much about her, but I’d have to deal with that issue when it came to it.

“Sofia De Sanctis will never be your wife, Kirill. We both know it. The only person who doesn’t is Viktor.”

“Or so you hope. Maybe if my captive runs too far and too fast, I’ll have to marry Sofia for the business after all,” I warned him.

His eyes flashed at me, warning of fire too terrible and violent to resist. I saw that line constantly in Niko. He walked it with a deadly calm that could explode into a sudden blaze at any

moment. He was a dangerous man, but I'd yet to meet a Chernov who wasn't.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do. Why don't you do something useful before Viktor wonders why he bothered to bring you over here."

I tossed the words at Nikolai as I strolled from the room. My body moved slowly, but my mind was racing. It wasn't my security's fault that my brother had disabled our backups. Nikolai was dangerous. Molly would never have gotten away on her own.

I pulled my phone out and checked the info I'd gotten so far. Mallory's phone location showed she was somewhere in the middle of the Hudson, so my clever little cookie had tossed her phone the first chance she got. I'd expected as much. Molly was smart, and she'd been hiding for a long time. She was cunning too. She got that from her weasel-like father. Too bad for him that his number was up today. The tracker I'd had implanted under her skin showed a different location. My phone rang in my hand, and I ensured I was in the elevator before answering.

"She's at her old apartment," Max said quickly in my ear.

"I know."

"What do you want to do?"

Relief and satisfaction soothed my anger at my brother. The plans I'd put in place remained effective. I had an advantage over Mallory. I knew her, the *real* her, not the bullshit fake identity stuff. No matter what happened, I knew there was one place she'd go. There was one person she'd never leave behind. The one arm I could twist that Molly would never risk.

Love made people weak, and Molly was no different. I left the building and got into the waiting car.

"Did you leave the phone there?"

"I did. I can't believe she went there." Max said incredulously. He'd grown up in the bratva, and the idea that anyone could be innocent like Mallory was foreign to him.

“She won’t stay long. Keep eyes on her at all times, but don’t engage. She’s mine to collect.”

MOLLY

I went to the apartment first and crept inside. I had a go bag in there with some cash and clothes. Without the bag, I had nothing to my name.

I sensed eyes on me as soon as I left the subway, not only from the disinterested ticket officer who had watched me jump the turnstile. It was like it had a week ago when invisible eyes seemed to follow me wherever I went. The surveillance camera feeds of my haunts lingered in my mind. It was him. There had been eyes on me, his eyes, waiting and watching.

Maybe I was being paranoid. Surely Kirill couldn't have someone following me already? His brother had taken out his security. I had maybe half an hour before he came after me.

Hunting.

I went upstairs to my doorway. All I could do was try to jiggle the loose lock and hope to get it open. My heartbeat thudded in my ears as the door swung open. I expected Kirill to know where I lived. He'd been stalking me, but I'd thought I could outrun him. I never expected him to be so far ahead.

The apartment was empty, dust motes dancing in the light streaming through the windows. It was bare and impossible to imagine this had been home only a few days ago. A shitty, unsafe wreck of a home, but a home, nonetheless. *My* home. Everything I'd owned had been inside these thin, stained walls. Now it was all gone.

The sound of plastic vibrating on soft wood floated to me. I wandered toward it, feeling like I had entered a Twilight zone

episode. A phone, the same make and model I lobbed into the river ten minutes ago, sat on the floor. I picked it up, my finger flicking the answer symbol before I could decide it was a terrible idea.

“I see you met my brother.” Kirill’s rich, warm voice said in my ear.

I clamped my hand to my head and turned, expecting him to suddenly be looming over my shoulder like a demon all in black. “Yeah, good to see psychotic tendencies run in the family.”

“What can I say? The apples didn’t fall far from the tree,” Kirill said. “Now, if you haven’t realized yet, you don’t live there anymore, Molly. Come back now before you piss me off. You won’t like me when I’m angry, Princess.”

“I don’t like you now,” I stated flatly.

Kirill chuckled. “And I thought you loved me. You’ve become mercurial with age, Mallory.”

“And you’ve become deranged. You must be high if you think I’ll willingly come to you. Dream on. You’ve had your sick game. It’s over.” My voice was steady, even if my fingers were trembling.

“I don’t think so. I think the game is just beginning. You’ve no place to live, no job, no friends to run to, no money, no hope, no safe place that can hide you from me. I’m all you have left, Molly. And as for expecting you to come willingly ... how is your mother nowadays?”

Terror made me dizzy, and the urge to scratch and claw at something made me shake. “Don’t touch her. Don’t go anywhere near her.” I cut my words off, knowing they were futile. Of course, he was going for Mara. It was an instant win.

“Come and stop me. Better be quick. 10th and Park, right?”

“You’re wasting your time threatening me. I’m not scared of you,” I lied.

Kirill tutted in my ear. “Don’t be boring, Molly. Of course, you are.”

The dial tone sounded in my ear, and I stood there numbly for a long moment. The urge to flee and the urge to run to Mara were equally strong. But going to Mara meant letting Kirill catch me.

I gripped the phone hard and let out an ugly cry of frustration, wishing I could pound something into the ground, preferably his face. I blinked away tears and stared around the place I’d lived for nearly a year. Every single thing I’d owned was gone. I had nothing and nowhere to go.

He was right. I held the phone in my hand, hard and real.

A thought flickered around the edge of my subconscious, slowly forming.

I dialed the number for the Blue Rabbit with shaking fingers, praying Theo was there.

“Girl, what’s up? I heard you quit, and you haven’t been answering your phone. You left your last shift with the dangerous-looking hunk of beef—”

“Listen, I don’t have time to catch you up, but I promise I will. Are you still seeing that cop?”



I CREPT through the hallways of Grateful Dawn nursing home, jumping at every sound. It was after visiting hours, but I knew that wouldn’t stop Kirill. My mother’s room was up ahead, and the open doorway yawned darkly. Was he already there? Did it matter?

I couldn’t leave her alone with him.

Despite the last twenty-four hours, things still didn’t add up. I couldn’t accept Kirill Lewis’s father was the man Henry had been running from this entire time. I couldn’t believe the boy I’d loved so desperately had chased me, not to be reunited, but to take revenge.

I stopped by the door. A small flare of orange fire was the only sign I wasn't alone with my mother. The scent of smoky black cherry filled the room, and my eyes gradually adjusted to see his silhouette, seated in a chair beside Mara's sleeping body.

"Tell me what happened that night," I asked the shadowy specter.

He smoked, and only the soft sound of crinkling paper filled the silence. "I'd have thought Nikolai covered that."

"I want to hear it from you."

"Why? You think it'll change anything? It changes nothing. I went to my father for you. I agreed to his terms for you. He shattered my leg so I wouldn't mourn my change of direction. And then I dragged myself home to find you gone."

"Henry made me leave."

"It was seven years ago, Molly. What kept you?"

"And yet you only just found me too. You changed your name! I didn't want this long to pass—"

"But it has, and it's too late to go back." He stood suddenly, and I tensed. I was still too far for him to reach, but he was quick, and I needed to be ready to run. "There's no point in regrets. I'm tired of them."

"Are you going to kill me?"

"Why would I do that when I've just found you?"

"What do you want from me? If you wanted to break my heart, you've already succeeded. Bravo. Finding out the truth of that night would have done the trick without playing me along for a week."

"But I did so enjoy your excitement and pure, unjaded joy. I'm enjoying myself now, too," he said quietly.

It felt like a knife was digging into my heart. "So, you're a monster now? Is that it? You'll use it as an excuse to act however the fuck you want from now on because I deserve it?"

A slow clap filled the room. “You always were good at understanding terrible people, Molly, and thanks to you, I now qualify as one.”

“You think I haven’t suffered in those seven years?” I attempted to shift the conversation, but Kirill wouldn’t be put off. He was as stubborn as me.

“I’m sure you have, but that was your choice. Now, are you going to come willingly, or do I have to drag you kicking and screaming out of here? Easy way or the hard way, Princess?”

“I choose – the hard way, every time,” I said, tension licking up my spine. I wouldn’t lie down and let him run right over me.

Kirill snubbed his cigarette with a pinch of his fingers and tossed the unlit stub to the floor. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

He moved toward me so quickly that my heart slammed into my throat. I spun around and started down the long hall, knowing he was right behind me. I couldn’t afford to look back.

His fingers brushed my hair as I pushed through a revolving glass door. On the other side, I hesitated, opening my mouth to cry out to a passing nurse as he grabbed me. I smelled him before his arms crushed around me. Black cherries and bitter chocolate, edged by the tang of gunpowder and something undeniably Kirill.

His huge hand clamped around my mouth before I could cry out, and his other hand went around my waist, crushing me to him so hard I could barely breathe.

He hauled me down a quiet corridor and around a corner. I managed to dislodge his hand enough to sink my teeth into his fingers as I bucked and kicked wildly.

He chuckled in my ear. “That’s right, Molly, fight all you want. It only makes me want you more.”

“You psycho.” I twisted my face away from his hand as one of my wild kicks connected with his knee. He let me go for a second, but before I could run, he slammed me into the wall,

locking me in place with his hips. His hands pressed my wrists into the wall above my head, and I couldn't move.

His eyes stared into mine. "My blood on your lips looks beautiful."

"Good. I can't wait to draw more. You think you can scare me with all this, but you can't. I know you won't hurt me, Kirill Lewis."

The last statement left my lips before I could stop it. It was madness considering what I knew of him so far, yet the words tasted true on my lips. He wouldn't. He couldn't.

His mouth twisted in a smirk that would haunt my dreams. "Maybe you're right. Time will tell. Until then, you have friends and family who don't have protection. Henry first. He's got it coming. Then Federica. I don't even have to hurt her. I only need to tell the right people where she is."

What the hell?

Before I could ask, Kirill continued. "Then there's the lovely Theo, who's far too touchy-feely for my liking. And Pastor Jason, who stares at your ass whenever you turn around. I've been planning how to burn his eyes out for that. Last of all, there's Mara. No one would be surprised if your poor mother finally lost her decade-long battle with those injuries."

Tears stung at my eyelids as the net he'd woven closed in. "You'd kill innocent people to hurt me?"

"We were all innocent once," he muttered, pressing against me.

The smell of him and the feel of his hard body after the last few days of constant touching sent the memory of the last time we'd been in bed together through my mind.

"They're lucky they made it this far. Not many get the chance."

"Don't hurt them." Panic welled inside me. "Please don't hurt them."

Kirill wasn't a lone madman. He was the motherfucking heir to a bratva empire. He had more men than I could count

shadowing his steps. He could command and control a private army.

He tutted. “Molly, do you think I hurt people I’ve never met? Of course, I don’t. If they get hurt, it will be because of you. Don’t forget that.”

“So, what do you want from me to guarantee they don’t get hurt?”

A flicker of satisfaction entered his eyes. “How quickly you bargain, Princess. Still mercenary, I see. I want you. I want to do whatever I wish with you, to you, whenever and wherever I want. I want complete dominion over your mind, body, and soul.”

His words stole my breath. How could I respond? “Why?” My question landed like a bewildered accusation.

“Because you were mine from the start, Mallory Madison. You and your father stole seven years from me.”

“Kirill.” His name left me in a rush. “Don’t do this. It’s me. It’s Molly. I’ve missed you as much as you’ve missed me. You’re the only man I’ve ever loved—”

“Prove it.” His hard voice was dispassionate. “Prove it and surrender yourself to me.”

There were no words I could find in my desolate heart to answer his plea. It seemed to come from somewhere deep inside, and my heart ached. I’d thought of this man every day for seven years, missed him, and loved him from afar. Could I willingly abandon him now?

“Lori!” A male voice called up the corridor, freezing me mid-thought.

Kirill’s hint of vulnerability shuttered, and his face grew dark. “Is that a man looking for you?” he asked, his voice silky with danger.

I shook my head, suddenly remembering my oh-so-clever backup plan.

I turned my head to see my worst nightmare walking toward me: Theo, Federica, and Theo’s new boyfriend, Officer

Tucker. The cop had his hand on the butt of his gun as he approached.

“Are you Lori Wilson? Sir, please step away from the woman,” Tucker instructed.

“You called the cops on me, Princess?” Kirill murmured, looking intrigued but unworried.

“I didn’t mean to,” I fibbed.

The side of his mouth jerked up in a grin. “We’ll have to teach you some manners when we get home, Mallory. Like when we were teens, you need a firm hand to teach you how to play well with others.” He leaned in toward me, his lips brushing my ear. “I’ll be that hand.”

He leaned back, and I caught a glimpse of a shiny black weapon before he pointed the gun at Tucker. It all happened too quickly. The gunshot rent the air, and Tucker fell to the floor, cursing loudly. Theo and Federica cried out, hitting the ground and keeping low.

Kirill hadn’t taken his eyes off me. “Well, decision time. Who lives, and who dies? Or will you come with me?”

My hands were clamped over my ears, and when I removed them, they were ringing. I stared in horror at the scene in the hall, where Tucker was gripping his leg, and Theo was trying to apply pressure.

“Don’t hurt them. I’ll come with you,” I heard myself say.

Kirill grinned triumphantly. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Say goodbye. You’ll never see them again,” he muttered in my ear.

He shoved his gun into his waistband and bent sharply at the waist. He hauled me across his shoulders in a fireman’s lift and turned along the hall toward the fire exit at the end. The last I saw of my friends was Theo dialing an ambulance and Federica staring mutely at us as tears streamed down her face.

KIRILL

Molly didn't fight me when I bound her hands and pushed her into the backseat of my car. She was in shock. She lay along the leather, staring forward. I wasn't fooled. She might be down, but she was far from beaten. She was a survivor, and she was trying to outthink me. I couldn't lie. It was a fucking turn-on.

There wasn't time to dwell on that now, as someone must have called the cops. While getting in trouble wasn't likely, given the dirt I had on the officials in this city, being detained would be an inconvenience. I didn't need to instruct my men to make sure the security footage inside the nursing home was taken care of. It was a given clean-up task in our world.

Max approached as soon as he saw us. "Ivan has Henry Madison. Where do you want him?"

"The warehouse. I'll go there now. Take Mallory home and see she stays in her room. I'll be back to deal with her shortly."

I didn't want to leave Mallory, but I trusted Max to handle her as we'd discussed. I had pressing business to resolve with Henry Madison and wanted to get it over. I got in one car, and Max and Mallory left in another.

AS WE MOVED through the darkened city streets, I felt like the last man standing on a battlefield. The ultimate victor. Henry Madison had a lot to answer for. Not only was he the cause of the rift that had ripped Mallory and me apart seven years ago, but he owed a debt he had earned over the course of knowing

Molly in high school. Every time she'd come in with a black eye, poorly hidden by make-up or sunglasses, or she'd winced because her ribs hurt, I'd planned to inflict the same damage on him one day. In my powerless, teenage heart, I'd raged and plotted his demise, and finally, that day had come.

Now I was the man I'd always been destined to be, I understood the dark urges I'd felt back then. If I could have killed Henry and gotten away with it back then, with no harm or suspicion falling on his daughter, I'd have done it in an instant. I wouldn't have hesitated.

Traffic was light, and we got to the warehouse quickly. Anticipation bubbled in my veins.

"See, Henry? I told you he wouldn't keep you long," Ivan said, grinning as I strode into the warehouse room we used for particular dirty work. It had all sorts of interesting toys to fill the hours with a captive.

Ivan jerked Henry's head up to look at me as I shook off my overcoat and rolled my black shirt sleeves up.

Henry's eyes were dazed but quickly focused on me. Confusion creased his brow. "You – you were Molly's boyfriend. The punk from the south side."

"So, you remember me? I have to say, I didn't expect that, Henry. I really didn't."

Henry spat a mouthful of blood on the floor. It looked like Ivan had gotten handsy before delivering the package to me. "Are you kidding? Do I remember you? Like my idiot daughter would let me forget."

Those words sank through me like stones. "Henry, I didn't know you cared about your offspring enough to make up some pretty little fairytales for her." I crouched before him, my shoes settling in the patchwork of blood staining the tile. "But I should tell you, it won't help."

He lifted his head and stared at me with pained eyes. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, you can't save her from me, Henry. It's too late. I won't give her up at any cost."

“Save her? This is all her fault. If she hadn’t dragged her mother to New York and fucking insisted on trying to find you again and again, I wouldn’t be here. The stupid bitch ran away five times to find you. She never could take a hint.”

“If you hated having her around, why drag her back?” I asked out of mere curiosity.

“Who was going to look after Mara?” Henry challenged.

I didn’t ask him why he felt compelled to continue to take care of a woman who hadn’t been capable of interacting with him in years. There wasn’t any point. Nothing Henry did made sense.

“Do you know who I am these days?” I asked, changing the subject before Henry’s words left puncture holes in my chest.

“These days? Someone who works for Viktor Chernov.”

“Works for? In a way. I’m his son.”

Henry’s face paled. I pulled my favorite knife from its sheath and brought it to his hand.

“I was going to save you, Henry. I became this person to save you, Molly, and Mara, and you didn’t even say thank you.” My conversational tone lulled Henry into a false sense of security. “As the father of Mallory Chernov, mafia queen, you could’ve had all the money you wanted for gambling. But here we are.”

Henry licked his lips, and his eyes darted to my hand, where I was still playing with my knife. I dropped them toward his hands. “Thanks to you and Molly, I was reunited with my dear old dad, who taught me how to be great at my work. For example, nails are interesting, such a small area, with so many nerves. But you already know that, don’t you, Henry?”

I set to work on his hand, and Henry screamed. I enjoyed his screams much more than hearing him talk about his version of the past.

An hour later, with some of the hatred curdling my blood finally sated, I sat back and wiped my hands on a rag Ivan had provided. My forearms were stained red, and my clothes

would need to be destroyed. Henry was barely conscious, moving in and out of sweet oblivion. For the last half an hour, I had kept him teetering on the precipice, never allowing him to fall.

“All the time and effort you put into running and Mallory is the reason it ends. Figures,” Henry muttered, his head swaying like a stalk in the wind. “She never gave up on you, stupid girl. But now I see you, I get it. You died that night, didn’t you? The boy she loved. Some nobody track star she planned to run off and marry and squander her inheritance on. I knew all her plans, you know? She thought she was so smart, trying to hide her intentions. She never did know how to stop loving someone, even when it hurt her.” Henry swayed again, his eyes fluttering.

“Just like you,” I pointed out. “She never stopped loving you, even though all you did was hurt her.”

Henry grinned, and it was a macabre sight on his blood-soaked face. “Then it looks like we have more in common than you think, Kirill Chernov.”



A BLACK CLOUD of anger and bloodlust swirled through my head as I made my way to the penthouse. Henry’s words dug their claws into my chest and wouldn’t let go. I already knew they were going to fucking haunt me.

Inside, Max was sitting in the kitchen. “How did it go?”

“As expected,” I snapped at him. I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and took several long pulls.

His eyes fell to my hands, still bloody, gripping the plastic. “Is he alive?”

“For now. Where is she?” Max dropped my eyes for a moment, and tension tightened my gut. “What?”

“She got upset when we got back. I had to sedate her.”

I stared at Max, anger pulsing beneath my skin.

Max fidgeted. “I didn’t touch her except for that, and I didn’t give her a lot. She was upsetting herself.” I stared at him until he moved toward the doorway. “I guess you don’t need me anymore, so I should leave you alone.”

My ears perked at the sound of a door opening along the corridor. “Did you restrain her?”

“No, she was drugged,” Max said quickly. His expression told me he knew he’d fucked up.

Molly appeared in the doorway, looking disheveled as hell. Her clothes were rumpled, and her hair was a wild, tangled cloud around her shoulders. Her face needed a wash, and her eyes held a sleepy, recently drugged look. I felt a jolt down to my bones when her eyes met mine. It was the first truly honest look we’d shared in seven years. I knew I looked as hellish. Her gaze fell to my exposed forearms, still wreathed in blood, splashed across the ink that held my story tattooed on my arms.

“It’s your father’s,” I found myself saying. Tonight seemed to be the night for brutal honesty.

Mallory swallowed, and her delicate throat bobbed. “Is he dead?” Her voice was stronger than I’d thought. She didn’t cry or beg. She stood with her shoulders straight and her head raised like a queen.

“Not yet. I promised you one day I’d even the score with Henry. I did it for you like I always promised. Aren’t you going to thank me?” My dry sarcasm sent color back to her pale cheeks. Ah, there she was. My angry girl.

Somehow, she managed not to rise to that statement. “Are you going to kill him?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” I snapped. “Why? Feel like begging me to spare him?”

“Would you listen if I did?” Molly asked, tilting her head to the side.

I couldn’t meet those green eyes. They saw too much.

I turned to the bar behind me and poured a generous slosh of amber liquid into a cut crystal glass. “Why do you care? You hate your father, last time I checked.”

She shook her head. “I don’t hate anyone. Not even you.”

I couldn’t contain the dark chuckle rising in my chest. “Oh, what a shame for you, Princess. You don’t hate him, and you don’t hate me ... but you will.” I snapped my fingers at Max and the other men standing guard around the kitchen. “Leave us.”

MOLLY

*A*fter Max, the fucker, sank a needle into my arm and left me on Kirill's bed, my thoughts spiraled in a never-ending loop.

I saw Theo and Fede on the other end of a loaded gun. I saw Kirill, the boy in the trailer who'd given up his dreams for me.

In my drugged state, I fantasized I could see Kirill as I'd known and loved him, trapped inside this unpredictable, angry stranger's body, begging me to help him escape.

This wasn't a nightmare or a game. Kirill had shot someone in cold blood in front of me. I couldn't get the blast of the gunshot out of my mind. It echoed through the chambers of my heart. When he'd locked me in his office and tied me to the bed, I was pissed off. But in my heart, I hadn't understood how serious this was. I got it now.

I passed out for a while, drifting in and out of consciousness. I couldn't move. I could only hold on while wave after wave of memories washed over me. I was on an important precipice, and the wrong move would plunge me into darkness forever. I was being pulled between two extremes, my head battling my heart.

The real question was, did I want to live in the light if Kirill wasn't with me?

I couldn't ignore the pain in my heart at the thought. My head had never been stronger than the pull of my heart. The thought of what Kirill had suffered without me, *for* me, would haunt me for the rest of my life. I loved two people in this world.

One lay in Grateful Dawn nursing home, and the other was Kirill Lewis.

No, not Kirill Lewis. Kirill Chernov. Denying it was futile.

What if it's not too late? A voice of rare optimism whispered.

Maybe the real Kirill, the boy I'd loved, was still in there somewhere, alone and in the dark. Could I leave him there?

I already knew the answer.

KIRILL WATCHED me with rapt attention as his men left the room. I tried to ignore my father's blood on his arms.

I did it for you.

Once we were alone, he leaned against the counter and watched me like he was planning to devour me.

"What happened to Theo's boyfriend?" I had to know. The memory of Theo and Fede in the hallway was torturing me.

"He's in hospital, I presume," Kirill said, looking bored.

"He's not dead?"

"He'd be unlucky to die from a shin shot, but I suppose crazier things have happened. He'll live. I suppose you feel guilty he was hurt because of you?"

"I'm not taking the blame. You shot him."

"You called him," Kirill reminded me. "For future reference, think of it this way. From now until the day you die, calling another man will result in his bodily harm. Is that clear?" He looked so calm as he delivered his insane rule.

I took a deep breath and tried to maintain my resolve. Officer Tucker wasn't dying, thank God, and no one else had gotten hurt. "You know jealousy is a petty emotion, right?"

Kirill studied me with shrewd eyes. "Max said you were difficult when you got home. Do you regret saving their lives?"

When he put it like that, my options seemed stark. I shook my head.

The tightening of his mouth was the only sign he felt anything. “Are you going to try to run away again? Are you going to cry and beg me to let you go? Plead with me for your freedom?”

His voice was tight with something I couldn’t quite make out, but I already knew my answer.

“No.” The word left my mouth before I could second guess it. “But I am curious what happens now?” My voice was hoarse from screaming when Max had attempted to lock me in a spare bedroom, and reality had hit me like a truck.

“Now, you begin your sentence here as my esteemed guest.”

“You mean as your prisoner?” I raised an eyebrow at him.

His shrug was perfectly indolent. “Your words, not mine. You want to fight me on it, Princess? Go ahead. You won’t win.”

There it was—the truth. I couldn’t win anything going against him blatantly. He had too many resources. He was too rich, powerful, and physically stronger than anyone I’d met. But it didn’t mean I was beaten.

Resolve settled in my heart, iron-strong and bone-deep. “I won’t fight you. I have nowhere to go, and besides”—I took a deep breath and went for it—“I’ve been looking for you for seven years. I’m not leaving now that I’ve found you. You didn’t have to do any of this. If you’d asked me, I would have stayed.”

Kirill stared at me, a flash of emotion showing through the cracks in his indifferent façade. I’d surprised him.

He recovered quickly and chuckled wickedly, making my hair stand on end. “I didn’t care to test that theory. The odds weren’t in my favor, and I don’t play those games. But look at you, brave little Mallory Madison entering the pit with her eyes wide open and agreeing to my insane demands. What do you think you can accomplish with this act of self-harm?”

“I’m not trying to accomplish anything. You’re obsessed with me. You’re not going to let me run away from you a second

time. I don't want to live looking over my shoulder. So, I'm here. Get your revenge on me and get over it with." My voice barely trembled.

He approached me, circling me like a wolf homing in on its prey. "My revenge is no quickly sated desire, Molly. There's no getting it over with."

"Why do any of this? If you'd asked me, I'd have stayed with you forever," I muttered.

He stopped, towering over me.

"No, Princess, you'd have stayed until you realized what you were dealing with. Didn't you already have doubts? A niggling feeling something wasn't right? I don't want any secrets between us, and the time for acting has passed. It's more honest this way. It's just us now, fucked up, twisted, and raw. That's how I'll keep you, Molly. I don't want to have to pretend to be a better man around you. It's too late for that."

I tried to keep the hope and desperate disagreement out of my eyes, but he gave me nowhere to hide.

He tilted my head back with his finger, capturing me with his nearly black eyes. "You can't save me, Molly. Don't try. You'll be disappointed."

"I know. I know it's too late," I said, hoping he couldn't hear the lie on my lips. I didn't believe it, in my heart of hearts.

His mouth quirked as if he could see through me so easily. Maybe he could. If anyone had ever known me, it was this man. "I won't go easy on you because you've surrendered to me, Princess."

"I don't expect you to. Do your worst," I muttered.

His hand slid along my jaw into my hair, gripping a handful and twisting it like a rope. He tilted my head back and stepped closer, forcing me to look back to keep him in my sight.

"You no longer know what my worst is, Molly. But I won't hurt you. Not in any way you don't beg me to." His eyes almost looked apologetic, but I couldn't fall for it.

If I wanted to reach Kirill, I needed to play along and get to him when his guard was lowered. Tonight, he was looking for my surrender. He wanted to make sure I knew he was in control. I'd give that to him. For tonight, at least.

“Bring it on, weird boy.” The words escaped me before I could hold them back.

We were transported to Black Hall Prep hallway. Kirill was seventeen again, already a giant to little me, and he hadn't even reached half his potential. I saw it all so clearly. His bleeding nose and red dots on white cotton. His hazel eyes clear in the afternoon light as he gave me a lopsided grin.

“How about you watch my back, and I'll watch yours, weird boy?”

From the look in Kirill's eyes, I wasn't the only one reliving memories of our past selves. He looked haunted for a striking second. Then, his eyes flashed darkly. I thought he was going to kiss me, and it was going to hurt, but he stepped back reluctantly.

A blistering challenge replaced the flash of uncertainty in his eyes. “Get on your knees,” he rasped, “and show me you mean it.”

His hands went for his belt, and I steeled myself to comply. I sank slowly to the floor. It was a testament to how fucked up I was for this man that I felt a thrill of desire tug low in my belly, and warmth blossomed between my thighs.

He pulled his belt free and held it like a coiled snake in one hand. “Show me your surrender, Princess,” he murmured.

I shuffled forward and reached for his zipper. He was hard, pressing against his suit slacks and making it difficult to open his fly. I finally managed as he watched me without comment.

When he was freed, the tug of desire in my belly became a full-blown fire as he slid the end of his belt around my neck and slowly tightened it. I stared up at him, unable to break his gaze as he pulled my willing mouth down on his stiff length. The belt tightened around my throat, choking me a little as I struggled to fit him between my lips. One of his hands held the

belt, and the other fisted in my hair. He started to move, pushing in and out my mouth and halfway down my throat.

“You think you can embrace my darkness and give yourself to me, and it’ll fix everything? There’s no fixing me, Princess. There’s no healing me or saving me. The Kirill you knew is gone, and you’re going to find out the hard way. But the time you do, my darkness will live inside you, too deep to root out, and you’ll belong to me, soul deep.”

He was moving fast now, holding me where he wanted me, and I struggled to keep up. It should have been debasing, having my mouth used like that, but it wasn’t. It was turning me on, making me wet. I’d die if he realized.

He came abruptly, spilling down my throat. The belt squeezed tighter until spots danced before my eyes. “Take some evil inside you, Molly,” he muttered.

He watched me until he was empty before he pulled back, leaving me to cough as the belt unraveled from my neck. He pulled me up and kissed me deeply until I was trembling in his arms, uncaring that his spend still coated my mouth.

Then he returned to the bar, slugged back the rest of his drink, and tucked himself away. “Come on. I’ll show you your room.”

My sentence had begun.



HE WOKE me in the night, unlocking the door and entering quietly. He was keeping me in the spare room next to his. The bed was just as huge, but it was empty without him. I guessed sleeping next to him wasn’t part of his plans.

I rolled toward him, my eyes searching for his in the moonlight flooding in the window, but he turned me roughly so I was lying prone on the mattress. He bound my hands at the small of my back with silky rope, leaving me trapped. Being tied up in this context was a first and sent a shiver of heat across me. So far, sex between us had been restrained in a

way I wasn't experienced enough to understand. Now, as he pushed my shorts down my legs and spread them open, I sensed the difference in his touch.

He wasn't gentle as he slid his fingers between my legs and stroked me. Those blunt-tipped fingers pushed inside me, stretching me in a way that edged into pain. Why did it feel so good? His thumb found my clit, and he circled it slowly as I moved my hips against his hand.

I was getting wetter by the second. It seemed like those invisible walls between us had finally fallen, and though his blistering gaze might mean to bruise me, it was honest. This was Kirill in all his brutal glory, and my body knew it.

I rose until I hovered on the edge of a cliff only he had ever brought me to. Just as I reached for it, he pulled his hand from me.

“Hey!”

My protest was cut off by the smack of his wet hand on my behind. The sound of flesh meeting flesh sent my outraged thoughts flying from my head. *Holy hell.*

“You come when I say, or not at all,” Kirill said quietly. His deep voice still thrilled me every time I heard it. “Do you get it, Princess?” When I failed to answer, the other side received a sharp smack.

“I get it,” I burst out. “I come when you say I can.”

“Good girl,” was the last thing he said before the delicious pressure of him pressing into me stole my thoughts.

He pushed into me in two hard strokes, and his body came to lie against mine, fucking me into the mattress. He held himself on straight arms above me as his hips drove into me.

You should be scared, the voice whispered in my head, but I was too far gone for that.

He wrapped a hand around my throat, arching my back so I was utterly helpless. He was ruthless as he used my body, taking everything he wanted from me, bending me, and

pinning me down until he drove me over an edge higher than any I'd ever known.

"I should have known you like it rough, Molly. You and I are cut from the same cloth," he grunted as I clenched hard around him.

Spots danced before my eyes as he gripped my neck. It was like flying.

"Do you have any idea how wet you are for me? How turned on you are when I use you like my perfect little toy? My treasure?"

He came moments later, pumping me full of his release, and the heat of his seed blossomed inside me. Thank God I had an implant since Kirill didn't seem inclined to use any protection. But for some filthy reason, I liked him bare inside me. Maybe I was as nuts as him, after all.

He pulled out and wiped his dripping dick on my bare skin. He was quiet for a long moment, and I twisted to try and see his face in the dark, but it was impossible.

"I don't understand," I whispered in his general direction in the dark. "Do you love me or hate me?"

He untied my hands and stood. "Soon, Princess, you'll understand it's possible to do both at the same time. Rest now. You've had a trying day," was the last thing he said from the door before he left me.

I lay there trembling in my post-orgasm bliss, wet with his spend and as confused and turned on as I'd ever been.

KIRILL

The entire day, my mind stayed at the penthouse and the girl locked inside.

Mallory Madison, my obsession, my fucking reason to live, finally within reach, and all mine.

I nodded to my guards as I came home that night. I usually felt tired after a long day moving money, breaking skulls, and outmaneuvering my brother before he did something to kill us both. Tonight, my blood was racing in my veins.

“Has she attempted to leave?” I asked Max at the door.

He shook his head. “Not even once.”

Perversely satisfied Mallory was being a good little captive, I went in and shut the door behind me. I’d put Mallory in the room connected to mine. I wanted to be able to lock her in at night, and I couldn’t trust her enough to sleep beside her yet, so she got her own room.

I shook off my jacket and headed to her room, pushing the door open without warning. Mallory was sitting at the window, staring at the city outside. She was wearing the old, dirty clothes from yesterday.

She jumped when she saw me in the glass behind her. Standing, she turned quickly, folding her arms defensively over her chest. “You’re home in one piece,” she remarked, raking her eyes across me.

“Disappointed?” I mused as I leaned against the threshold and studied her. “What are you wearing?”

She flushed, knowing she'd been caught. She'd looked in the closet and decided to defy me by wearing her old, borrowed clothes. As part of preparing the penthouse for her captivity, I'd had the wardrobe filled with lingerie, soft, sheer dresses, and transparent robes. If I knew Mallory, which I did, they were exactly the kind of thing she hated.

"I don't have any other clothes," she said, staring mulishly at the floor.

I tutted loudly and strolled across the polished wooden floor to slide open the wardrobe. "I beg to differ."

"They aren't mine. I'm not going to wear stuff someone else has left behind," she said, red staining her cheeks prettily.

I paused. I'd merely thought she was defying me by refusing to wear things I'd picked out for her. *Mallory was jealous*. Whatever I'd expected, it wasn't that.

"Why should it bother you? Nothing that came before matters."

My words sent her shoulders inching up before she got a hold of her reactions. She tossed her hair, freshly washed and like a gleaming golden waterfall. "If you're suggesting I'm jealous, you're delusional."

My amusement grew, balancing my annoyance. Molly was still Molly. She couldn't help herself. Somehow, despite the life she'd led, it hadn't broken her.

I pulled a long, pale pink gown out of the closet. It was satin and backless with two high slits up each side. I laid it on the bed. "You're to wear this to dinner."

She grimaced at the material and color. "Why? Because you know I'll hate it?"

"Clever girl. Put it on."

Molly ground her teeth and stared holes through my head. "Fine, whatever." She watched me round the bed and settle into the leather armchair by the door. Her brow furrowed. "What are you doing?"

“What does it look like? Change,” I said, infusing my tone with a hint of the command I employed on a daily basis.

She flushed, a pretty pink color I wanted to remember forever. Turning from me, she reached for the hem of her t-shirt. Wiggling it off, she kept her back to me.

“Don’t tell me you’re shy now, Molly. I think we’re past that. You don’t have anything I haven’t seen before,” I said, sounding bored when I was anything but. There would never be anything boring about Mallory’s magnificent body. I had ownership over her skin as if it was my own, and now she was back in my clutches, my possessiveness was raging like wildfire.

As expected, she tensed at my mocking words and turned to face me, letting her arms fall to her sides. Mallory didn’t know how to back down from a challenge, and fuck, if I didn’t love that about her.

A pink blush lit up her face and trailed down to her rosy nipples. “You’re right. You’ve been there and done it all before. So, you should be losing interest any day now. What will you do with me when I’ve served my sentence?”

The thought of letting her go, or her wanting me to, sent a shot of black anger through my mood. Molly noticed, and her smirk was triumphant as she slid down her loose pants and stepped out of them. She was completely bare beneath. While my blood had already been surging south, the sight of her standing naked before me sent renewed energy flowing around my body.

I stood, and she crossed her arms over her chest like that could keep me from her. I stalked slowly around the end of the bed, and she took a step back and then another. The wall came up behind her, and I raised my arms to cage her against the unyielding surface.

“Let’s see if you’re desperate for me to let you go,” I murmured, placing one hand on her sternum.

She shivered beneath my calloused hand, and her nipples contracted into hard points. I slid my hand slowly down her

concave abdomen and between her legs. Her legs parted slightly as I burrowed my fingers through her damp curls, finding her as wet as I'd expected. I pulled my hand free before I could get carried away and brought it to her lips. Her eyes blazed, but she opened obediently for me. Fuck, it was a turn-on to have her capitulation.

“This is the taste of want, Mallory. This wetness is the taste of lies. You can't lie to me. It's too late for that. You love me, remember? And that simple truth is going to fuck you over for the rest of your days.”

She was breathing hard, her lips wet from my touch, and her eyes blazed with green fire. I rubbed my thumb across her plump lower lip before forcing myself toward the door. The truth was, I could spend all day tangling with Molly, but I shouldn't. She was already pushing me, looking for ways in, cracks in my façade. She wanted to burrow into my heart like a poisoned dart and destroy me all over again. I couldn't let her.

“Get ready. We eat in an hour.”



MOLLY ENTERED the dining room an hour and a half later. Thirty fucking minutes she kept me waiting. Molly was determined to push me. It seemed she hadn't gotten the message yet. Nearly killing her friends in front of her hadn't brought it home that I wasn't the teenage boy who'd worshipped the ground she'd walked on.

I'd become increasingly pissed off in the time she'd kept me waiting, and I'd almost finished a bottle of wine. I was wondering how to punish her for making me wait when she appeared wearing the gown. The expensive satin caressed her body, showing it to its full advantage. She wasn't wearing a bra, and her hard nipples winked at me as she walked toward the table.

“Well? I'm here,” she said, stopping beside the table. She narrowed her eyes at the setup. There was only a place setting

for one. Me. “Am I to stand here while you eat?”

“There was a place setting. It was taken away when you made me wait. If you want to eat, you can sit here,” I told her calmly, patting my lap.

If looks could kill, I’d be a ghost a hundred times over.

“Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack,” I deadpanned.

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me. Then she tossed her head and snorted. “Fine, whatever.”

She strode barefoot across the floor and turned, primly sinking onto my lap. The weight of her immediately pressed against my arousal. I couldn’t keep my head about this woman. I was painfully hard all the time.

“Happy?” Her voice was thick with tension and snark.

“Fucking ecstatic,” I growled in her ear, and she flinched. “I thought you were ready to play yesterday, Princess, to give yourself to me. What happened?” My lips whispered over the skin of her arm, and she shuddered, shifting delicately against me.

“Nothing. I’m just hungry,” she muttered.

It crossed my mind that perhaps she hadn’t ventured from her room to eat today. Now I thought about it, she was thin. She hadn’t been taking care of herself.

“Now, you’ll eat.” Reaching around her, I cut a piece of steak and brought it to her lips.

“Are you seriously feeding me?”

“You’ll eat it from my fork or not at all. Next time, don’t be late,” I told her.

I was a sick fuck, but my dick swelled against her ass as she sighed. She leaned forward, rocking her peachy ass against me as she opened her mouth and took the fork inside.

“Good girl,” I praised her, making her eat another mouthful. It wasn’t the feeding or punishment and control that got me off

with Mallory—it was overcoming her will. She was stubborn, strong, and willful to a fault. I liked it when she swallowed that fire to follow my orders. I *really* fucking liked it.

“Aren’t you going to eat more?” she asked.

“That’s not what I’m hungry for. Lift your skirt.”

As soon as she stood, I reached for my fly. It had been more than a day, and I ached to be inside her. I didn’t plan on going that long again. Her eyes widened as I unzipped my pants and pulled out my stiff length. Her eyes latched onto my cock, and she licked her lips involuntarily. I wondered if she knew how much hunger was in her eyes every time she looked at me. Slowly she parted her long satin skirt at the thigh slit, pulling it to one side. She was wearing sheer panties. I wanted to bite them off her.

“Lose them.”

She followed my instructions, and I patted my knee. “Sit down, and let’s finish dinner. You’ve not eaten enough today.”

Dark and dirty thoughts danced in her eyes as she positioned herself on my knees, and I shifted my hips to sink inside her. Her hands gripped the sides of the table, half sitting, half crouching, impaled on my shaft. I tugged her down until she was fully sheathing me. She was breathing hard, making tiny movements on my lap. Her tight pussy gripped me, and I could have lost myself in her warmth, but first, it was dinner time. I put my arms around her, cut the rest of the steak, and brought another piece to her lips. She leaned forward for the fork, much further than necessary, and sunk back with a sigh.

We continued in silence, only the sound of Molly’s thready breaths and the scrape of the fork on the plate filled the room. With my free hand, I played with her clit until she moved her hips against me, her wetness making a mess of my suit pants.

“You need to eat. I won’t tolerate a hunger strike.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I’ll return here three times a day to feed you like this, or I’ll have Doctor Petrov shove a tube down your throat three times a week,” I threatened.

Molly was quiet as she chewed. “I’ll eat, but you don’t have any food. Don’t you live here all the time? It’s empty like a show home.”

I thought about that critique for a moment before realizing she was right. “I’ll see that there’s food here. Make sure you eat it.”

“Are you trying to fatten me up like a sacrificial lamb?”

“Oh, Princess, the sacrifice already happened,” I murmured against her arm.

I circled her clit harder, making her pant slightly. It was killing me to hold back, but Molly had to eat, and being inside her felt better than anything. If I had my way, I’d always be inside her, even when doing the most mundane things.

“So, should I cook you dinner?”

“Another sandwich? Don’t tire yourself. I’ll see you’re provided for in the fashion you should become accustomed to. Being poor doesn’t suit you, Molly. Henry spoiled you too much as a kid to ever adapt fully.” When Mallory was my wife, she wouldn’t need to do anything because I’d spoil her rotten. But she wasn’t in the right frame of mind to hear that right now.

She didn’t like that comment and pushed the fork away from her mouth. “Fuck you,” she snarled.

I pinched her clit hard, making her moan. “Now, Molly, I know you’ve not been living in polite society for a while, but we don’t leave the table until everyone is finished. What would Henry say if he heard you begging to be fucked when we haven’t had dessert?” I turned my head toward the kitchen, arranging Molly’s skirts across her naked lap. “Dessert, please, Max.”

Max entered the room, and Molly stiffened. She hadn’t known he was here. I’d never let him see her body. I’d have to kill him. But I did enjoy how Molly trembled as her bodyguard set a bowl of strawberries on the table, his eyes averted from the scene. He turned away as I rotated my hips against her, and she gasped, holding onto the table edge again. My fingers

were still playing with her clit under her skirt, and now, I sped up.

“Max, give me an update on the Vardi deal cleanup,” I instructed my number two.

Even though I’d had Max glued to Mallory for the last week, he still knew everything that was going on.

Molly dropped her head, clearly embarrassed by sitting speared on me while Max and I talked business. However, if the wetness coating my dick was any indication, she was also turned on. I widened my legs, sending her even deeper on my length, and started to nudge in and out of her.

“Now, eat up,” I told her smoothly, picking up a strawberry and putting it to her lips.

Her eyes were glazed and unfocused, and pleasure sent a blush up her neck. Max droned on about the deal, and I didn’t hear a single word. He finished updating me as Molly let out a moan that destroyed me. He swiftly exited with one look from me, leaving us alone.

“You’re a twisted fuck, weird boy, you know that?” Molly gasped when we were finally alone. She relaxed against my chest, melting into a puddle as I brought another strawberry to her mouth.

“Only for you, Princess,” I promised her as she ate a strawberry and bit my fingers sharply.

She moved insistently on me, dragging a groan from my soul. I couldn’t keep this up. The need to drive hard inside her was too much. I pulled her up, and her bare feet scrambled to land on the edge of the table. Then I was fucking up into her hard. She arched her back as one hand circled her neck, and the other worked the needy little bud of nerves between her legs, making her slippery and desperate.

She came before me, spasming hard and milking my length as I continued to drive into her. Her cries and my name on her lips undid me. I followed her, pumping in as far as I could and coming hard as her pussy fluttered around me, sucking up my cum and making me forget myself for a moment.

After, she lay boneless against me, and I found my lips pressed against her forehead, my mouth moving in untraceable ways over her skin. I might be taking my revenge and finally satisfying my dark need to punish this woman by using her in all the ways I'd dreamed of, but there was no denying the simple truth.

I was happier than I could remember being in seven long years.

MOLLY

When Kirill left the next morning, I wandered around his gigantic home, rooting through everything I could get my hands into. What if this was nuts? Maybe he truly was a remorseless psycho who would never bend. Maybe we couldn't go back. I wallowed glumly in my worries.

I was staring out the window at a gray city day when voices from the foyer shocked me out of my trance. *People?* I headed eagerly in that direction, hurrying along the hall to the kitchen to investigate. I was desperate to see people. I made a terrible prisoner, willing or not.

Max stood in the hallway, and I slid to a stop in front of him. He gave me a tired grin. "Mallory, you're looking well, considering."

I was still outraged that he'd drugged me. And pretending not to see me while Kirill had me on his lap last night was the final indignity. "Save it. Do you get off watching?"

"Christ, don't say that. If Kirill thought I'd looked, well, let's just say I like my eyes where they are in my head."

I considered the tone of genuine fear in Max's voice. Tapping my finger to my lip, I gave him a grin that made him tense. "Is that so? So, I shouldn't tell him you hit on me, spied on me when I was changing, or touched me when I was drugged and couldn't move?"

Max paled, his strong eyebrows like slashes on his skin. "You wouldn't."

“Oh, I would. I don’t care what happens to you, and I’d even pop some corn and watch,” I said sweetly.

He stared at me, shocked, and then chuckled. “You know, I felt sorry for you when Kirill found you. You seemed like a sweet girl. I thought his obsession with you was too twisted ... but I get it now. You’re as savage as him, aren’t you? A match made in hell.”

I shrugged off his words. “I don’t care what you think about me. I care about my friends. How are Fede and Theo? Keep me updated on them, and I won’t point a loaded gun in your direction.” Kirill was my loaded gun, not that I could handle him, but Max didn’t know that.

“Theo is fine, cozying up with his boyfriend in the hospital.”

Relief filled me at knowing Officer Tucker was okay. I hadn’t fully believed Kirill last night.

“Federica is as well as she can hope to be, considering.”

I frowned. “Considering what?”

Max swallowed and shrugged mulishly. “That’s her story to tell.”

“If she’s in trouble—”

“I’ll keep an eye on her. You don’t have to ask,” Max said, releasing a heavy breath.

Interesting.

“What about Henry?”

“Alive.”

“And my mother?”

“The same. Can I get the fuck out of here now before Kirill kills me for talking to you for too long wearing that?” Max averted his eyes to the top of my head.

Right. I was wearing one of Kirill’s sex doll fantasy outfits.

“Fine, but I’ll need an update again soon,” I tossed to him.

The TV went on in the kitchen. Someone else was here. Max swore colorfully in Russian and headed for the front door.

I wandered into the kitchen to see a small, curvy lady in her sixties standing before the fridge. It was surprising to see a woman in Kirill's thoroughly masculine space. Since I'd been here, I'd only seen tough-looking men who could play serial killers or mercenaries in movies without visiting the wardrobe trailer once.

She looked at me, blinked once, and crossed herself like she'd spied a demon breaking into the room. I looked down, remembering the white gauzy Victorian gown was see-through. With my white-blond hair down and my pale skin that barely saw the sun, I probably looked like a ghost.

"Hi, I'm Mallory, and these aren't my clothes. They're Kirill's."

That sent the older lady's eyebrows even higher. She crossed herself again and looked like she was rethinking her life choices. Then again, she was already making dodgy ones considering she was working for Kirill. This lady looked as if she'd wandered out of the local church and got confused.

I tried one last time. "He doesn't wear them. He couldn't because ... have you seen him? He's huge. Anyway, I meant he bought them for me as a gift," I finished lamely.

She narrowed her eyes, and I waited for her to throw holy water at me. "Men never buy good gifts," she said and turned to the fridge.

Well, okay. Thank goodness that awkwardness was over.

"I'm Olga. I'm to cook for you. Kirill Viktorovich said you're too thin and cold all the time."

I was taken aback. I thought his insistent feeding last night was more about fucking me than a genuine attempt to get me to eat. The idea that he was worried I wasn't taking care of myself warmed me a little.

"My coldness toward him has nothing to do with temperature," I said, jumping up on the counter and rooting through her bag.

She smacked my hand away with a sharp *tsk*. "Don't pick. I'll make you something. You need protein and fiber." She eyes

me worriedly like I was in danger of fading away before her eyes.

“I’m fine. Everyone loses weight after high school,” I teased, making light of the truth. There had been many nights I skipped dinner in the last few years.

I recalled Kirill and his sandwiches wistfully. It felt like another life.

Olga narrowed her eyes at me. “He didn’t tell me you’re a joker.”

I laughed. “What did he tell you I was?”

Olga bustled about, muttering so softly I almost didn’t catch it. “An important guest.”

I wrinkled my nose. “A guest? Nice. I guess you didn’t ask too many questions?”

Would Olga let me out? I’d told Kirill I’d decided to stay, but it was interesting to find out what kind of people he trusted enough to let them interact with someone who was his prisoner.

“My job isn’t to ask questions. I do what Kirill Viktorovich asks. He’ll tell me what I need to know,” she said with perfect confidence.

“Wow, that’s some loyalty. What does he have on you?”

She frowned at me. “Excuse me, Miss, but we don’t know each other, so I won’t be telling you that. I owe him a debt that can never be repaid. If he needs me to feed you, hold you down, or tie you up and force food down your gullet, I’ll do it.”

Well, that was a conversation killer.



OLGA WASN’T FINISHED with me. A few hours later, she called me to come and eat. After, she handed me a variety of pills in a small cup.

“What are these?”

“Vitamins,” she said, holding out a glass of water.

“Pass, thanks. I don’t take stuff I don’t recognize from people I don’t trust.”

“They are from Kirill.”

“Exactly. No thanks.”

Anger flashed in Olga’s eyes, and I reassessed my first opinion of her. She had looked sweet and harmless, but it turned out she was utterly terrifying. She thumped the glass down and rolled up a sleeve. I watched, fascinated. Was she going to thump me? I had no idea, but I was starting to think I should take the vitamins.

She bared her forearm to reveal a faded, ugly tattoo and a number.

“The men who brought me to this country when I was ten tattooed me with this number, so they could easily trace who they sold me to.”

I had no words to respond. It was too awful.

“Kirill Viktorovich hunted down and killed the ring that sold countless other kids into lifelong slavery. He turned Viktor’s head from the flesh trade and replaced it with his computer crimes.” Olga waved her hand. She clearly had no clue about computer crimes. But it wasn’t trafficking little kids, so I had to agree it was better. “He worked for years to achieve it. Relentlessly, endlessly, even when it broke him. He’s not Viktor, and he’s won my respect. If he asks me to make sure you take these pills, I’ll make sure you take them.”

I grabbed the cup of water from her hand, my fingers trembling. I stuffed the pills into my mouth and drowned them.

Olga’s wrinkled hand patted my head, and she broke into the first smile I’d seen from her. “*Maladets.*”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make your job harder. I-I don’t know how to handle all of this. It’s a new world to me,” I confessed softly.

She picked up my plate and headed for the sink. “Then you are one of the lucky ones, *devushka*. Come, I’ll show you how to make Kirill’s favorite apple pie.”

A peel of laughter escaped me. “I don’t think Kirill expects you to teach me how to be a domestic goddess. That’s not what I’m doing here. He doesn’t want you to teach me how to take care of him. He doesn’t need me like that. I’m not his girlfriend or anything.”

Olga shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Being young is such a burden. Everyone needs someone to take care of them.” She jerked her head toward the sink. “Wash your hands, and you can cut the apples, or I’ll lock you in your room the rest of the day.”

Well, there wasn’t much argument to be made to that, so I got off my ass and went to the sink. “Yes, ma’am.”

KIRILL

*A*fter the best week of my life, I was annoyed at being summoned to my club to meet with my father. I didn't want to deviate from my new routine, which was getting back to the Tower as early as possible and sinking inside Molly. The rest of the night, I lingered around her, watched her, ate with her, and let my obsession take over. It was the happiest I'd been in a very long time.

Pravda was packed as usual, though the VIP was invitation only. Thanks to Viktor's presence, it was a Chernov-only night. As my father grew older, he became more paranoid about safety. He had no idea he was at greater threat of being shanked by one of his sons than a rival bratva member.

"Tell me how it's going with Sofia De Sanctis. I need updates. I haven't heard from her father in a few days," Viktor said. "You know these things must be solidified quickly if trust is to be established."

We were at the bar, and all I could think about was getting home to Mallory. Home? Christ, I was as fucked in the head as she was.

I sipped my drink, wishing it was something stronger. "We're getting to know each other." I'd learned over the years that evading his questions was the best system.

He eyed me, his beady, sly gaze missing little. "How often have you seen her? Have you fucked her yet?"

"She wants to wait until marriage," I improvised.

Viktor let out a meaty chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” Nikolai asked, appearing behind us. “You started without me?”

“You weren’t invited.”

“I’m wounded. What’s so funny about Sofia?”

“She’s a virgin, according to your brother,” Viktor chuckled.

Niko’s eyes narrowed into slits he tensed. “And there I was thinking she wasn’t your type.”

“She’s not, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate her beauty,” I said, simply to wind him up.

“That’s right! You only like blondes, don’t you? Small, waifish things with waist-length hair and ... wait, what color are *Lori’s* eyes?”

I stilled, anger bursting forth at my brother. He was goading me by talking about Mallory in front of Viktor. I’d walked right into that one. Thank fuck he didn’t know her real name. There was a chance Viktor hadn’t forgotten the Madison family had brought me to his door seven years ago.

“Who’s Lori? Are you seeing someone, Kirill? Cut it out now. A meaningless fuck is one thing, but you can’t have anything going on that Antonio De Sanctis will take as a slight. You know those fucking Italians. They’re old school; tradition, respect, honor, and all that. I set up this match to partner with a powerful family, not offend them. We need the respectability of the De Sanctis mafia to move forward in this city.”

“No, we don’t. If you’d stop looking at how things used to be done and focus on the future, you’d see we have everything we need. Times have changed. Politicians no longer respond to a horse’s head in the bed.” I tossed back my drink, trying not to let Niko see how much he’d pissed me off. As it stood, he hadn’t given much away yet, but he could.

“No one needs a horse’s head in a bed,” Viktor said. “It’s about style and might. De Sanctis is good at that, and the alliance will help us prosper.”

“What happened to you retiring soon?” I asked idly.

Niko tensed beside me. It was the most important question for both of us.

“I’ll retire when I’m confident I’m leaving the bratva in two capable hands,” Viktor said with a cold smirk.

Viktor lived to pitch us against each other, and as time passed, the competition only increased, growing bloodier and more barbaric with each passing year.

One thing was clear—Viktor was set on this marriage. It was a further test of my loyalty and one I would fail. The walls of the bloodstained cell I lived in were closing in, and I had no idea how to break out.



THAT NIGHT, Molly was waiting for me in the kitchen when I came home.

I paused as I rolled up my sleeves, catching sight of her bending over the hot stove. Despite the late hour, my willing little captive had waited up for me.

“What are you doing?”

“Making you dinner,” she said primly, rounding the table. She was wearing a satin slip with a gauzy robe over it.

My eyes immediately zeroed in on her and my fatigue lessened. “Didn’t Olga come by?” Why had she waited up for me? Had she missed me? My little Princess was difficult to read at times.

“Of course she did, seeing as it doesn’t smell like burned toast in here.”

“Well, from now on, she’ll see that you eat more than burned toast.”

Employing Olga had more to do with keeping an eye on Molly, or so I told myself. After tonight, it was hard to keep the truth from ringing in my head like a bell. I worried about Mallory’s health because I loved her and always had. The idea of her hurt or sick drove me mad with worry. A headache

clanged through my temples. Mallory was my weakness, and Viktor and Nikolai were going to use it against me.

“If you’re not careful, Kirill Chernov, I’m going to start thinking you care about me.” Her green eyes twinkled, and I had to fight my natural reaction to her. With an effort, I slammed on the mask of indifference that fit less with each passing day.

“There’s a thin line between love and hate, Princess, as well you know.”

She stepped forward, making me still and wary. She reached out and touched my chest, and my heart sped beneath her fingers. “I don’t think your body got the message.” Her hand slid tentatively down to where my arousal pushed at my belt.

She had never initiated things between us before, not since that first night when she’d kissed me. I commanded, and she complied. It was our system. But these last few days had muddied the lines between us. Mallory was new to intimacy and the things men and women did together in the dark. The chemistry between us was weaving a spell over her.

I couldn’t afford to have them muddied, blurred, or anything in between. I couldn’t afford to lose control because I would make a mistake and endanger us both. Tonight had been a stark reminder of that.

I caught her hand in a hard grip, stilling her. “Hate fucking is usually preferable to making love, so don’t be confused. I only do the former. Don’t romanticize what isn’t there. You’ll regret it.”

Pushing someone away who knew me like Mallory did was tough. It took a hard approach. I turned my back and started to walk away.

“But we have made love before,” she reminded me, doggedly persistent. “The first time—”

I stopped so suddenly that she collided with my chest and would have gone sprawling if not for my hand snagging her wrist.

I forced my dark eyes to be mocking and empty. Tonight, it was easy. The conversation with Viktor made it easy. “The first time, I barely stopped myself from strangling you with my bare hands for leaving me.”

Her elegant throat bobbed as she swallowed. “Where were you tonight?”

“Out,” I said shortly.

I released her, moving to the bar by the window and pouring myself a drink. She couldn’t touch me right now, or I’d spill my guts. My mind was a million miles away, and if I weren’t careful, Mallory would see inside. She’d see my anxiety about keeping her safe and my torment at knowing that soon, I had to move against my father and risk everything in the process.

“Out where?” she asked, folding herself onto the couch and propping her head up to watch me.

I turned, leaning a hip against the bar, and narrowed my eyes at her. It was typical that the one night I needed space, Molly was desperate to talk. “Pravda. One of the clubs the bratva runs.”

“A club?” A look I couldn’t interpret crossed her features. “Why did you go there?”

Jealousy. It was jealousy. Fuck. I steadied myself and only just held myself back. My Molly being jealous over me was a heady feeling. She had no idea the depth of my obsession if she thought I was interested in even breathing the same air as another woman. Still, it gave me a chance to correct the power balance between us.

“Why does anyone go to a club? To drink and fuck,” I said curtly.

She whitened, swallowing that gut punch before rallying. “Is that why you went?”

She was struggling for nonchalance, but the bright, glittering look in her eyes betrayed her feelings. Standing, she rounded the couch and approached me. “What did *you* do there?”

My lips quirked. “Are you asking me if I fucked someone else tonight? Just ask, Molly, don’t be shy.”

“Well, did you?” Her color rose higher, staining her pretty cheeks with her fluster.

I sipped my drink and failed to answer. I leaned my head against the cabinet behind me and let her see the glassy exhaustion in my eyes. “Why do you care? Enjoy the break, Princess.”

It wasn’t an answer, and fuck knows, I hadn’t looked at another woman, but Molly didn’t know that.

She dashed away an angry tear, and a spear of pain jobbed my heart. She made it two steps before I grabbed her and spun her against my chest.

“Let me go! You’re a pig,” she accused, pushing at my chest.

“A pig you’re desperate for. Are you already wet for me, Molly?”

Molly, jealous and desperate for me, was everything I’d ever wanted, yet tonight, all I could do was destroy.

She wriggled out of my hold. I hauled her back before she took one whole step, clamping an arm around her middle to keep her hostage against my chest. I pressed my face into her hair, holding her immobile. “If you need fucking, Princess, just ask. I can always rise to the occasion for you.” I wanted her desperately, yet I knew I was too raw tonight. I’d break under her touch.

“I hate you,” she fumed, mad in a way she didn’t know how to cope with. She was livid, and I was sure if she’d had a knife in her hands, she’d have happily stabbed me.

“No, you don’t, and that’s the problem, isn’t it?” My voice whickered against her temple.

She stilled in my arms, and I held her immobile until her breathing calmed and her warmth sank through my cold chest, thawing me a little.

“I met my brother and Viktor at the club. We talked, they pissed me off, and I came here to get the third degree from

you.” I didn’t plan on spilling my guts, but her hurt was a heavy, uncomfortable weight I couldn’t bear.

She turned in my arms, and I let her. Her expression softened, and it warmed me in a way I could become addicted to—if I weren’t already. I needed this. I needed her. Now I’d found her again, I was already in deep. I couldn’t push her away and pull her back at the same time—it was impossible.

My voice was quiet when I spoke. “You have no idea, Molly. I only see you. That should scare you more than it does.”

Finally, the pensive look in her eyes blew away like a storm cloud, leaving a sunny day behind. She smiled.

“Do you like that, Princess?” My voice was soft and slipped under her defenses.

She sighed. “I probably shouldn’t.”

“But you do,” I pushed her.

She nodded and bit her lip.

“Show me,” I said, the alcohol burning in my veins. The need to bury my problems and take refuge in Molly’s body called to me. “Show me much you like being all I see.”

“How?”

She was still so new to intimacy. It turned me on to know I would be the only one teaching Molly everything related to sex and carnal delights. The trust burning in her eyes had lust boiling in my veins.

“Take your panties off.” I watched her comply with an insatiable hunger. “Now, get down on all fours, and let me see that pretty behind.”

Slowly she sank to the floor, excitement firing in her eyes. I’d never played with someone like I did with Molly. In the past, encounters had been for stress relief, and I left immediately after. I didn’t fuck face to face or draw the act out.

But with Molly? I could play all day. Best of all was how my particular brand of play seemed to light her up from the inside. She liked to participate, and nothing shocked her. It was a

heady combination in someone who was a virgin not too long ago.

“Now, crawl to the bedroom,” I told her thickly, standing behind her so I could see her pretty holes winking at me through her transparent skirt.

She dipped her head to hide her grin. She started to crawl, and the movement made her body slink, her ass rolling temptingly with the movement. I walked behind her, watching her the entire way.

We didn't make it to the bedroom before I pounced.

MOLLY

*A*nother day, another humiliating harem outfit that made me blush. I knew Kirill was fucking with me when it came to the clothes in the wardrobe. If there'd been anything I truly hated growing up, it was pretty pink princess dresses. Kirill seemed to have made it his mission to fill an entire wardrobe with them, and his versions were X-rated. It was like being an extra in a late-night, adults-only princess parody, wandering around an expensive penthouse all day, waiting for my owner and captor to come home and fuck me to the point of exhaustion.

I indulged him because fighting about it seemed exhausting. Besides, I liked to torment him and myself by walking around half-naked, never knowing when he'd snap and grab me. He always did, unfailingly, and my body became more addicted to his every day.

After Kirill had told me the truth last night, he'd taken me to bed and sank inside me so many times that it was a little hard to walk today. He'd fallen asleep still buried inside me, and an hour later, I'd wake to him fucking me again, a wet mess of both of our juices dripping down my thighs, his fingers playing with my clit, and my body already racing toward release. It had happened more than once. The only disappointment had come this morning when he was gone when I woke up.

Olga noticed immediately as she eyed me in the kitchen.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, apart from being held captive by a bloodthirsty criminal,” I said with a manic smile.

She decided not to comment on my statement. Her eyes snapped over my clothes, her look disapproving. “Here, you wear this,” she told me sternly, passing me an apron.

“Thanks, I love it. It is literally the best thing I own these days.” I wrapped it around me, glad I was mostly covered.

Olga tutted. “It’s loaned.”

Right. I rooted around in her grocery bags and was pinched on the hand for my trouble.

“Today, we’re making *blinkshki*.”

“Sure.” Maybe an activity would distract me.

Olga removed items from her bag and placed them on the counter. “Here.” She handed me a dove gray rectangle.

I stared at it for a few minutes. “It’s a notebook,” I said stupidly. “You bought me a notebook?”

“Not me. Kirill said your mind needed occupying. You like to write? Write the recipe I tell you so you can practice when I’m not here,” she bossed.

Seriously, Olga could have been an effective military commander in another life.

Stunned, I ran my finger across the dove-gray velvet. Kirill remembered I liked to write? Or had he discovered my journals when he cleared my house behind my back like a creep? I’d hoped one of his lackeys had done it for him and saved me the embarrassment.

“You’re happy today? Good, happy bakers make the best food,” Olga said approvingly.

“How can you tell?”

Olga tutted. “Silly girl. You’re always smiling.”

I stared at her. “I am?”

“You don’t know? Yes, you’re always smiling like a fool. Since the first time I came.” She looked at me distrustfully,

like I might be insane and about to bop her over the head with her rolling pin and rifle through her shopping.

“I had no idea. I wonder what it means,” I muttered more to myself than her.

Olga snorted like I was too stupid to live and she’d be asking for overtime for putting up with me. “It means you’re happy, crazy girl.”

Surprise landed on me, followed by a heavy dose of shame and guilt. How could I be happy in my elective captivity with a man who’d shot a cop and beaten my father to a pulp? I was clearly crazy.

“Like you said, I guess only an idiot would be happy in my situation,” I muttered, following her directions around the kitchen.

She eyed me sideways and sighed. “This is a mood for girl talk. You don’t have a friend to talk to?”

“I have you,” I stated flatly.

“I mean girls your age. Ones you can be silly with.”

“Right, I get it. Enough insults for one day. I can only take so much.”

Olga chuckled like a sadist. “Enough? We just started baking. The insults haven’t started yet.”



THAT AFTERNOON, I settled in the small library nook in the sitting room and opened the notebook. Olga had forgotten about making me write down the recipe, so the beautiful notebook was blank, brimming with possibility and potential. I enjoyed holding it for a second. It was too pretty to write in, but I had nothing else, and this was my thing. I could write whatever I wanted, journaling or something else. I could write a story.

I chewed the end of the pen I’d found in the kitchen and considered what story I’d write. My mind wandered as I stared

at the blank page, doodling. After a moment, I realized I had written something.

You don't have a friend you can talk to?

I blinked at the words. I did have friends I could talk to, and Kirill had never explicitly forbidden me. I wasn't sure what to say, but hearing Theo or Fede's voice might give me the strength to feel grounded in reality again.

I headed for the kitchen. Against all odds, there was a shiny black landline phone in Kirill's kitchen. I knew it worked because Olga called her friends on it. I stared at it and picked it up gingerly. I put it to my ear, staring at the camera in the corner and knowing Kirill could be watching me at this very moment.

"Who do you wish to call?" a voice demanded in my ear. Yikes, I'd forgotten that all calls from here went through the front desk.

"The Blue Rabbit, on Mulberry Street." I held my breath as I waited to be told I wasn't allowed.

"One minute," the voice said.

To my surprise, the line started to ring. My heart raced at the thought of speaking to someone. Human contact with someone who wasn't on Kirill's payroll was exciting. I stared at the camera, willing him to cut me off. Then again, knowing how prepared Kirill was, I had no doubt this phone was here on purpose. He was allowing me to make this call so he could listen and see where my head was at. He was always ahead, and I was finally getting used to the idea.

"You've reached the Blue Rabbit. This is Federica."

I clutched the receiver hard. "Fede."

"Lori? Holy shit! Are you okay?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat at her familiar voice and her concern. "I'm okay. I wanted to check on Officer Tucker."

"He's okay. He's recovering in the hospital. The bullet didn't hit anything vital. Where are you?"

I took a deep breath. I could tell her I was at The Tower. It was an easy building to find, considering how famously expensive and exclusive it was. But what then? If she came here, she'd get hurt, and I couldn't let that happen.

"I'm in the city," I said evasively.

"Are you hurt? Did he hurt you?" she demanded.

I shook my head, forgetting she couldn't see me. What could I say? That this monster of a man had shot someone and tortured my father in the same night, but the only pain he'd given me was the hardest orgasms of my life? That was the kind of fucked up we were dealing with. She'd be horrified to hear how resigned I was about Henry. I was a little shocked by it myself. My love for him had hardened into cold resignation during the years he'd been terrible to my mom and me.

"No, he hasn't. He won't. Don't worry about me. I was concerned about Tucker. I'm so sorry for getting you involved."

"Lori, you need to tell me where you are. I can help. I'll call the police."

"The police can't do anything against him, and you know it. You know men like him, don't you? He told me you're running from someone."

"Is he forcing you to protect him by threatening me? Because I can take care of myself," Fede said, her tone full of fire.

I noticed she didn't deny it. How many secrets had Fede and I been keeping from each other? "It's complicated. I'm sorry, but I can't talk about it. I needed to know you, Theo, and Tucker were okay."

"We're not okay when we don't know what's happening with you. We're worried about you, Lori."

I forced a breezy tone to my voice. "Don't be. I'm fine. That night got out of control, but it's better now. I promise," I said through clenched teeth. I knew I couldn't ask her to save me. I was unsalvageable.

"If he's making you say this—"

“He’s not. Do you think he’d let me phone you like this if I was being held against my will?”

Fede was quiet as she processed my words. “So, you’re telling me you’re choosing to be with him, despite what he’s capable of?” she asked, her tone cool.

I cringed at her judgment. I felt pathetic, like every woman I’d ever scorned for being too in love and stupid over a man to see sense.

“It’s complicated,” I repeated.

Fede laughed bitterly. “It’s really not.”

“It is. If you don’t understand it, you’ve never been in love. Knowing someone, *really* knowing them with all their ugly parts ... it’s something different. If I abandon Kirill, I abandon myself,” I finished quietly. I’d had no idea those words were coming, but as I said them, they rang deafeningly true to my ears.

“Lori. Some people can’t be saved.”

“If he can’t, then neither can I.” I knew that was true the way I knew the world turned, and people needed air to breathe.

Fede took a moment to answer, and I could feel the weight of her disappointment over the phone. “I’m sorry you feel that way. I’ll tell Theo you’re all right. Good luck, Lori,” she said and abruptly hung up the phone.

I stared at the receiver, tears welling up inside me. Christ, that was brutal, but I couldn’t blame her. I was sorry I felt that way too.

MOLLY

The next few days were rough. Federica's words wormed into my brain and played on repeat like a vine with thorns prickling at me whenever I moved. Was she right? Was all this a mistake? Could I reach Kirill one day?

Then suddenly, one day, it got worse.

It was mid-morning on a routine day. Olga and Max were in the kitchen, and I'd left them to go shower. I'd realized halfway along the corridor that I'd left my notebook in the kitchen and had a childish fear of someone, like nosy, no boundaries, Max, reading it. As I went back for it, I heard Max and Olga speaking quietly in the kitchen.

My feet moved soundlessly over the polished wooden floor as I approached the kitchen and heard their whispers. Something about their conversation set my nerves on edge. They sounded like people with something to hide, and I was paranoid these days. I slowed my approach and lingered outside the doorway.

I knew I shouldn't listen, but I couldn't help myself. I had always been attracted to things that would hurt me, and eavesdropping on Max and Olga talking was no different.

"His brother wouldn't be so confident if it weren't a done deal." Max sounded grim.

The music of Olga loading the dishwasher punctuated her words. "Kirill hasn't spoken about a woman except for this little caged bird he keeps here."

Max snorted. "That bird locked herself inside with a cat, daring it to eat her. Don't underestimate Mallory. She knows

Kirill better than he knows himself. She can hold her own.”

Pride and something warm spread in my chest at those words.

“I see that between them. He’s someone else with her. Someone different. Viktor won’t like it. Anyway, his new wife will soon see her off. He can hardly marry a De Sanctis and expect her to turn a blind eye to a mistress from day one. Her pride wouldn’t allow it.” Olga sounded tired all of a sudden.

His new wife?

“Time will tell if Kirill can give Mallory up, whether his new wife wants him to or not.”

“Kirill will do what Viktor wants, or the Chernov name will go to Nikolai, and then, God help us all,” Olga said, and I could picture her crossing herself superstitiously. “He has no choice.”

I turned from the kitchen archway and walked numbly along the hall toward my room.

Kirill was getting married?

To a powerful mafia family, it sounded like. He knew this, and he still brought me here? It couldn’t be true. There had to be a mistake.

No, of course, there isn’t. He promised to break you, and this is the beginning. You’re the idiot who believed she could save him.

No, it couldn’t be true. He wouldn’t bring me here to have his fill of me and discard me to get married. *No.*

I closed the door to my room, tears spilling from my eyes. I hated to cry and usually fought it hard, but now, I couldn’t. There wasn’t an off button to the hysteria that conversation had pressed in me.

Tears dripped down my cheeks as I turned my face into my hands before staggering toward the bathroom. I turned on the shower as sobs threatened to push past my lips. The last thing I wanted was for Max to hear and report to Kirill. He’d come here and force me to tell him what I’d heard. Then, there’d be no hiding from the truth. I felt sick.

I'd cried without Kirill *for* seven long years, and for the first time since he'd found me, I cried *because* of him. I hadn't cried when he'd hunted me down, tricked me, and dragged me back here, but I was making up for it now.

My heart was breaking in my chest.

What an idiot. I believed he was still in there, my best friend, my first everything. I'd sunk into his depravity for a chance to glimpse that boy again, but he was gone. There was only a hardened criminal with an axe to grind. How he must have laughed at me behind my back.

While the shower thundered down, I stripped off my clothes, tears falling on my bare chest, and climbed under the water. I turned it as hot as I could stand and shivered under the spray.

I lost track of how long I stood under there, burning my skin off, the water washing the salt from my cheeks. I hugged myself hard around the middle, the only comfort I could find, and a gradual resolve seeped into my bones.

There would be an explanation. There had to be.

But what if there isn't?

I closed my eyes and dug my nails hard into my palms. I wanted to scream, but Max would hear. Instead, I silently fumed under the water.

When my tears ran themselves out, like always, anger followed. I got out of the shower and dragged the towel roughly over my pink, smarting skin before wiping the steam from the mirror. My pathetic reflection met my eyes. God, I was still naïve after everything life had thrown at me. You needed to be a special kind of dumb for that.

My eyes were swollen and red, and my cheeks mottled. My neck held a bruise from Kirill's hands. My body was a testament to how much I'd committed to letting a self-proclaimed monster have me. I had bite marks, bruises, and hickies. The most depraved part was that I knew his body held the same. He had torn into me, and I had answered. All because I'd been laboring under the assumption that deep down, he still loved me.

Stop making it easy for him to own you, then.

My pride was a snarling beast, stalking through my head, burning a righteous path of shame and disappointment.

I turned from the mirror and went to my bedroom. Crossing to the wardrobe, I ripped it open. One thing was clear; I was done letting him order me around, starting with the dresses, the bane of my fucking existence.

I ripped some diaphanous dresses off their hangers and rent the material in long, vicious tugs with small scissors I found in the bathroom.

If he's lied to me, I'll be the poison that sticks in his jaw, the shard of glass he can't swallow.

I ripped and tore and took every inch of my heartbreak out on his clothes. Only later, when I was sitting in a pile of silk and torn chiffon, did the tears return.

This time, I couldn't stop them.



KIRILL HAD ALREADY TOLD me some of his inner circle, his most trusted, would be dining with us tonight. I'd flattered myself into thinking, in his twisted way, that he was introducing me to his friends. Now I knew better. They were coming to laugh at my expense.

The time for dinner ticked past. I was ten minutes late, then twenty. Finally, I gathered my courage and anger and left the room. I'd spent the rest of the afternoon polishing my hurt like a jeweled spear.

I heard them before I saw them. There was the low hum of conversation in the dining room, a place we'd barely used, and the clink of ice cubes in glasses. I walked in, and the murmurs stopped.

I was wearing Kirill's old sweats and t-shirt I'd run away in weeks ago. We had come full circle. Three men were sitting at the table apart from their boss. Max and two strangers. Their

expressions were easygoing, jovial even. Only Kirill's eyes met mine immediately. He wasn't jovial. He was tense as hell. It gave me a kick to think of him waiting for me to join them while the time grew later and later. Now, his eyes fixed on my outfit, and any trace of humor fled his dark eyes.

Kirill was pissed. Well, he could join the club.

I sashayed past the occupied chairs and went to pull out my seat next to Kirill.

His voice was like a whip. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Sitting unless you want me on your lap again?" I asked.

His friends were still, deathly so. His hand was clenched into a pale fist beside his wine glass.

"Is that okay?" I sassed. I must've had a death wish, but it gave me too much satisfaction to push him if I was using the Kondo method, then pissing Kirill Chernov off sparked joy.

"Sit down," he said after a long pause.

I'm sure his men wondered if they'd get any of Olga's fantastic food before the table was overturned. They resumed their conversation hesitantly when Kirill failed to speak further.

I poured myself a huge glass of red wine. "Are you going to introduce me or pretend I'm not here?" I asked, just when everyone relaxed.

The tension thickened. A muscle ticking in Kirill's jaw was the only indication I was annoying him.

"Of course. Max, you know. Ivan and Pyotr, this is Mallory Madison." He turned his eyes to me. "Mallory, these three men are the only ones I trust with my life."

"And mine, I suppose. I thought Max was a glorified doorman for all excitement he gets these days," I said, reaching for a hunk of black bread and the butter.

To piss Kirill off further, I folded my legs on the wide chair, sitting cross-legged at the formal dining table, and slathered an

unholy amount of butter onto it. Hmm, fat and carbs. Kirill seemed to have it his mission to feed me up.

“He watches what’s important to me,” Kirill said steadily.

Only days ago, that comment would have made my heart race. “What, your apartment?”

Ivan, sitting at the table, snorted with repressed laughter.

Kirill narrowed his eyes at me, studying me. I saw in those dark depths the ruthless interrogator he’d become and the boy who’d known me better than anyone. It was a killer combination. “Princess, you’re playing with fire tonight.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, well, it gets pretty boring around here. I have to make my own entertainment.”

Kirill sat back. “If your idea of being entertained is to be punished until you can’t sit for a week, then keep going.”

I snorted softly, looking at his men. “Kirill likes to pretend he’s my father, but he doesn’t like it when I call him Daddy. Go figure,” I mused.

Max snorted into the glass of wine he’d been burying his face in and fell into a coughing fit.

“Molly,” Kirill ground out, danger in his tone. Fear and anticipation skittered through me. So, this is how it felt to skirt danger? It was kind of exhilarating.

Max met my eyes and subtly raised an eyebrow at me in warning. It was too late for that.

“Yes, master?”

I saw the exact moment Kirill’s patience snapped, and he decided to give me exactly what I was asking for.

“Come here,” he said darkly. Sitting back from the table, he spread his strong thighs and patted the table before him. When I failed to move, his eyes darkened. “Now.”

I blew out a breath, my heart racing as if I’d run a marathon. I tossed my hair and pulled up my baggy sweats before shuffling toward him and sitting on his knee.

He tutted loudly. “No, Princess. Put your hands on the table.”

He turned me to stand between his legs, positioning me so I was leaning forward and presenting my ass like a gift. My face burned with embarrassment and rage, but I wanted this. I wanted his debasement, and I couldn't pinpoint why.

Because if I was going to burn, so was he, my inner voice snarled defiantly.

He stood, circling behind me and setting my nerves on fire. We'd often played with an edge of danger and power. Now, it turned me on instead of scaring me.

His hand landed on my hip, sliding over my ass as he leaned toward my ear. “Do you want to tell me what's going on? Or do you want to be spanked and fucked hard in front of my men?”

I chuckled even though his words had stolen my breath. “The second. Let's see who breaks first.” I turned my face forward.

Kirill was still. He forgot I knew him. He was as possessive as hell and wouldn't want his men seeing anything, but he'd backed himself into a corner.

“Very well,” he said quietly as one of his huge hands landed hard on my skin.

I gritted my teeth, keeping my eyes on the table and refusing to make a sound. He followed with the other side, and the force rocked my entire body.

“Is this what you want, Princess?” Kirill muttered in my ear before smacking me again.

My skin burned and my muscles clenched. I was horrified to find myself getting wet at his punishment. What was wrong with me? He'd broken something inside me. I'd never be normal again, even if he let me go.

He followed with the other side, and the pain burned through me, filling me and soothing my ragged heart.

Kirill was getting married. My Kirill was engaged to another woman. Just thinking it fucking hurt.

“You’re not even trying. Put your back into it,” I goaded him.

The tension around the table was thick. I could see Kirill’s men choking on it, and I knew what they were thinking. Kirill was getting dangerously close to an edge that had proven lethal to many.

The next time his hand met my skin, it started to bite. I closed my eyes as the pain loosened the tight knot of spiky emotion in my chest. The lone tear that escaped my eye fell with a deafening plop on the table.

“Leave us,” Kirill said suddenly into the loaded silence.

Chairs scraped, and the door to the dining room closed with a soft click. I knew Max would be stationing himself outside, standing guard for whatever Kirill decided to do with me. I was an idiot because even now, I wasn’t afraid.

His hand came to rest on my behind, smoothing a comforting circle against my stinging skin.

“Do you want to play this game or tell me what’s wrong, Molly?”

“I don’t want anything from you,” I snarled over my shoulder, a hair’s breadth from breaking down.

“Ask me anything, and I’ll tell you the truth, Princess. If you can get over yourself enough to be honest.”

I bit my tongue as the question threatened to burst free. No. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. I was hard-headed as fuck, like him.

“Fuck you,” I bit out over my shoulder.

Kirill sighed. “So, the hard way?”

“Let’s not pretend you’re capable of anything else,” I muttered to him and turned back to the table. “Do your worst.”

His hand remained on my ass for a second before hooking the stretchy waistband of my sweats and tugging them down. The cool air bit at my skin as he ruthlessly shoved the material down to my knees. I was wearing lacy, full-cheek panties, and he pinched the fabric together, making it into a thong.

His hands smoothed over my bare skin before rising and falling sharply. I bit my lip at the maddening sting. I rose and fell with the pain, riding a wave of humiliation and degradation I didn't understand. It soothed the part of me crying out for this man's attention and approval.

In the end, I didn't ask him to stop. I didn't want him to. I needed the pain in some perverse way. I needed to remember Kirill was now more capable of inflicting pain than he was of loving someone.

His hand landed on my bare skin, and the sting burned as he moved to the other side. It wasn't horrible. Not like it should have been. His hand rubbed a soothing circle, and I found myself pressing into it before it changed tracks and came down sharply again. A soothing circle followed, and my back arched involuntarily into the gentleness.

"You like this, don't you, Princess?" Kirill asked quietly, his voice holding a tone I couldn't decipher. It sounded worshipful, but that couldn't be right, could it?

"Whatever helps you sleep better at night," I snarled, already clenching for the next strike. He wasn't wrong, but I'd die before I admitted it.

Seeming to read my mind like he always did, he removed his warm palm. "Let's check, shall we?"

Before I could protest, his finger hooked the makeshift thong aside and slid down my soaking-wet cleft. I burned with embarrassment. He was quiet for so long that my skin crawled with humiliation.

"Maybe *liked* was an understatement," Kirill said roughly.

His broad finger pressed inside me, making me gasp. Fuck, that was exactly what I wanted, and it felt fucking amazing. He pushed deep inside with his long finger while his thumb traced over the soft pucker above, making me rigid.

"Wait—" I hated how his calloused skin felt against me there, feeling out of control.

"You belong to me, Molly, and that includes every single part of this body. It's mine to touch, finger, lick – whatever I want

to do with it.”

His filthy words only turned me on more, making me so wet that I could feel it dripping onto his hand.

He chuckled. “You like that too, don’t you? You like to be reminded you’re mine.” His thumb, now wet from my juices, pressed inside me, making me cry out. He leaned over me, sinking his digits deeper, and spoke in my ear. “My most precious, perfect possession. Most treasured and exalted,” he murmured as his hand pumped gently into me, taking me in both places at once and making my legs shake. “Do you know how perfect you are, Princess? Do you have any idea?”

I rose quickly, rubbing my thighs together to get some pressure on my clit. He let me ascend higher and higher until I teetered on the cliff he usually brought me to more than twice a day. It was like he’d trained my body to have a Pavlovian response to his. I saw him, I got wet, he touched me, and I burned.

He pulled his fingers from me as I reached for a gut-wrenching peak. I opened my mouth to protest hotly but clamped the words inside. No, I wouldn’t give that engaged bastard the satisfaction of knowing I wanted him.

I chewed my tongue, and he chuckled. “You don’t need to come, Molly?”

I pushed the roaring lust whirling through me down and promised myself I’d come all I wanted later in the cold loneliness of the bed Kirill left me to sleep in every night after he’d had his fill of me. I’d finish myself off, but it wouldn’t be nearly the same. The disappointment was thick, but my pride was more stubborn.

“Very well, Princess,” Kirill said after a moment.

I thought he was done and would send me to my room. Then, pressure pushed at my core as his blunt, mushroom-headed tip glided effortlessly through my wetness. He sank inside me in one swift movement as he slipped his thumb back inside my other hole, making me full as hell.

“Don’t beg. I know what you need, and I’ll give it to you.”

His hips moved fast, fucking me hard against the edge of the table. “Go ahead and touch yourself if you want. With how good and tight you feel, you don’t have long unless you don’t care,” he grunted.

The pressure built as he fucked me hard, and I ached to touch my clit. He would pound me into the table, come, and walk away, leaving me desperate to finish. I knew it. He wanted me to admit how good it felt to surrender and give him power over me—the power to reduce me to rubble.

I wanted to touch myself so badly. I clenched my hands together and interlaced my fingers like I was praying. Kirill’s pause was so slight, I wouldn’t have noticed it if I didn’t know him so well. His disappointment flooded over my skin.

He set a brutal pace, sending the huge dining table scraping along the floor as he drove toward his release. His finger was thrusting perfectly with his hips, and it felt so good that I worried I would come regardless. His hips slammed deep, and he pulsed inside me. His hand landed in my hair, and he yanked my head back, bending me lower than ever.

Kirill came for long minutes, but there was something muted about it like he was dissatisfied. Good, because that made two of us. He pulled out abruptly, leaving warmth leaking down my legs as I pushed shakily from the table.

He tucked himself away and reached for his wine glass, downing the expensive red and wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. He was breathing hard, and his probing eyes turned to me as I pulled my panties and sweats up my legs.

I crossed my arms over my chest and refused to meet his gaze, knowing he would see too much. “Can I go?” I asked, putting as much arctic chill into my tone as possible.

Kirill’s hand tightened on the glass until his knuckles turned white. I thought he was going to speak, and the floodgates to all my insecurities would slam open. I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from laying my heart bare before him.

But he only sighed. “Go. Get out of my sight.”

I turned and made my way hastily toward the door. I cast one last glance over my shoulder to see him standing still as a statue. His eyes were fixed on the place where I'd stood, the empty glass still clutched in his death grip.

I hurried back to my room and burrowed under the covers of my bed. My heart was being pulled inside out, but my body was on fire. I shoved my hand between my legs, smelling the scent of his hard use as I rubbed myself. It only turned me on more. I closed my eyes to relive the table moment, spasming around my hand only moments later.

KIRILL

A week after the scene at dinner, I tossed Mallory a hoodie and told her to get changed. I was tired of her hurt silence and her withdrawal. I was tired of her downcast eyes and how she only gripped me when I came to her late at night, turning away from me immediately after.

Sure, I could fuck her into submission and threaten her with Henry's safety. But a kernel of fear was forming in the pit of my stomach. Mallory was breaking, and it was breaking me too. I couldn't let it happen.

"Put that on and get ready. Visiting hours start soon." I moved my attention to the news.

We were listening to the headlines about some new mayoral candidate. The newscaster claimed the man might be in the running as a modern-day saint. I snorted into my coffee, tickled by the claim. This man had paid for three bodies so far, and there would undoubtedly be more in the future.

Mallory sighed. "I don't want to go anywhere."

"Too bad," I snapped. "Get changed, or I'll change you myself."

"Fine." She got up and wandered away. Even the way she moved was different. She was lackluster and without purpose.

After ten long minutes, I went looking for her. She was brushing her hair in front of the mirror, staring sightlessly at her reflection. She was wearing a white dress and looked achingly lovely. She noticed me watching her in the glass.

I shouldered the door open and pushed down the desire to go to her. “What’s taking so long?”

“I just remembered I had to pay for something important at the nursing home, and I forgot.” A raw laugh left her. “I don’t even have the money. I’m unemployed and haven’t worked in a week. That’s the kind of daughter I turned out to be.” She closed her eyes, willing herself not to cry.

The sight broke something inside me. “So, you don’t want to go and see her?”

Her eyes snapped open. “What?”

“I’m taking you to visit Mara, but you need to get a move on so we can make visiting hours.”

A terrible, beautiful hope was etched in her eyes. “Really?”

I nodded and glanced at the intriguing sight of her half-bare chest. “Put the hoodie on. I can see your tits.”

“Whose fault is that? You’re the obscene stylist,” she grumbled as she pulled the heavy material over her head.

My mouth twitched. *There was my girl.*



I’D MOVED MARA MADISON, or Mara Wilson, from Grateful Dawn because the place wasn’t good enough for her. She’d given birth to Mallory. She was a queen amongst women.

If there was still a part of me that felt anything, it was for mothers like Mara Madison and my mother, Fiona Lewis. The women the world had chewed up and left behind.

I told myself I wasn’t bringing Mallory to see her mother for her sake as I drove my black Bugatti into the forecourt of Cedar Green, the upscale nursing home where I’d had Mara moved. I was doing it for the mothers whose children grew up to be stunning disappointments like Molly and me.

But Molly needed something to pick her up. She was fading before my eyes, and it weighed on me more than it should.

Molly looked around, scrunching her nose. “This isn’t the right place. Did you forget where it is? I guess head injuries are common in your line of work.”

“Get out of the car before I change my mind.”

She jumped out so fast I might have laughed if I’d been a different man. I followed, and we walked inside. Her eyes took in the luxurious seating and gold fittings, the calming waterfall feature on the wall behind the reception, and the three ambulances waiting outside the side door.

“This isn’t right. My mother isn’t here.” Molly was still muttering when there was a commotion by the front desk.

A widely curved body dressed in lavender scrubs was rounding the end of the desk and barreling toward us, nearly bodychecking an orderly who scrambled to get out of the way.

“Lori Wilson!” Gladys exclaimed before enveloping Mallory in a hard hug. “I was so worried about you until I met Kirill. I couldn’t be happier for you.” Gladys pulled back and beamed at me. “Mr. Chernov, it’s so good to see you again. I’ve been taking extra special care of Mara like you asked, and I’ve also been dropping in on—”

“That’s good to know, Gladys,” I interrupted Gladys in full flow. “I’m sure you’re doing a fine job. Can we see Mara?”

She looked thrown for a moment before recovering. “Of course, you can. I’ll show you to her room.”

Gladys bustled off, and Mallory turned to me with an urgent look. That look made something simmer in my chest that I couldn’t look at too closely.

“Let’s go,” I said dismissively, struggling not to meet her probing look.

Mallory caught my wrist and used both hands to tug me to a stop. “Did you move my mother into the nicest nursing home in the state and bring my favorite nurse to look after her?” Her voice cut through the cold in my chest and made me feel things I didn’t know how to deal with.

“Don’t flatter yourself. I didn’t do it for you,” I said curtly.

She narrowed her eyes and shrugged. “Why then?”

“Because Rafael Navarro from the Blue Rabbit called to tell me a woman named Gladys was desperate to get through to you. Because no matter if you’re giving me the silent treatment, Mara Madison didn’t do anything wrong. She’s the only innocent in all this.”

“Since when do you care about innocence? Why are you lying?” she demanded.

I glowered at her, wishing I’d never brought her. “Even monsters have a code, Mallory. If you want to see her, you’ll move your ass, or we’ll leave, and you won’t be back to visit – ever.”

Mallory bit down her words with an effort. I could practically see them piling up behind her lips. She shook her head as if trying to get a grip. Dropping my hand, she turned on her heel and stalked off through the lobby after Gladys.

I followed slowly in her footsteps. The place where her hand had touched mine seemed to burn.



I LEFT Mallory sitting beside her mother. She had tears in her eyes, making them shine like jade. She should have looked ridiculous, like a dime store prom queen, in a diaphanous dress with an enormous hoodie on top, but she didn’t. She looked so beautiful that keeping my eyes off her was challenging.

I answered a call as I headed out of the building after warning Mallory I’d be back in half an hour. I bit back a sigh when I saw my brother’s name on the display. “What is it?”

“*Privet*, motherfucker, to you too,” Nikolai said.

“What do you want?”

“Can’t a brother call another to chat,”

“A brother can. A brother like you? No.”

Niko chuckled. “You’re such a misery, Kirill. I don’t know how your little captive puts up with it.”

Ice slid down my spine. “Are you writing bad fanfiction about my life again?”

“I wish I was. I’d make something more exciting happen. I suppose the plot needs time to thicken.”

I ground my teeth so hard they ached. “Don’t threaten me, Nikolai. It won’t end well for you.”

“Does Sofia know you’re holding some poor innocent woman in your penthouse? I wonder what her father would think, considering everyone knows you two are getting married.”

Fuck. This again. I still hadn’t found a way to extricate myself from the arranged match with Sofia De Sanctis—a match neither of us wanted. I’d die before I married her, something my brother might be happy to make a reality.

“You’re bitter about this. If you want Sofia so badly, why don’t you take her? Force her father’s hand. I’m sure he’d take any Chernov over none.”

“Kirill, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to get me into trouble with Viktor and Antonio De Sanctis. He’s not someone I want on my bad side,” Nikolai said.

I should have guessed Niko wouldn’t be easily manipulated. Even though he had some kind of fixation with Sofia, he wasn’t about to blow his chances of becoming boss for her.

“Speaking about Viktor, he wants an update,” Niko continued. “He’s decided you need closer watching. Tomorrow, at the warehouses.”

I bit down a curse at the thought of seeing Niko and my father tomorrow. It was my duty to keep up the façade that I didn’t want to kill the men who were my personal demons.

“See you there,” I snapped into the cell phone and hung up.

I looked back up the hall to the room where Molly was. I could storm in, grab her, lock the door, and fuck her against the wall in the private bathroom. Maybe that would assuage the wild, reckless feeling in my chest.

Or I could let her visit with her mother.

I blew out a hard breath and turned toward my original destination.

I knocked gently on the door before opening it. The room smelled like lavender, cut grass, and some other underlying scent from my childhood.

I stepped inside and shut the door before crossing the room to the woman who sat at the window. I lowered my head to press a kiss on her head. "Hello, Mom."

MOLLY

“*A*nd then what happened?” I asked, hanging on Gladys’s every word.

Gladys dunked another cookie in her tea, relishing her retelling of the last few weeks. “Well, then, these men in black swept into Grateful Dawn. Everyone was on edge because of that accident when an officer was shot in the leg a few weeks ago.”

I turned my face so she wouldn’t see my reaction. “I heard about that. They never caught the guy?”

“It was the damnedest thing. The footage for the entire day was missing, like someone went into the server and deleted it. It was organized, that’s for sure. I heard the nice officer is fine and enjoying some recovery time at home. The next day, or maybe the day after, your Kirill came to talk about Mara.”

“He’s not mine,” I muttered.

Gladys rolled her eyes. “Sure he isn’t, honey. Have you seen the way he looks at you? That man is yours, pure and simple. Anyway, he comes in with his crew and takes care of business. I wanted to introduce myself and ask after you. He decided Mara should have as much continuity in her care as possible and asked me to work for him here. I can tell you, Lori, the added income has been a blessing.”

I gripped her hand and squeezed it gently. “I’m glad. And I’m happy knowing you’re here for Mom.” Tears pricked my eyes again. In the last week, I’d been more tearful than ever before, but my tears weren’t desperate or sad this time.

“Yes indeed, Mara and Fiona are both under my very best care —” Gladys said. Her eyes widened, and she fell silent.

“Let me guess. You weren’t supposed to talk about Fiona. Fiona Lewis, right? Tell me, or I’ll ask Kirill,” I warned her.

“You terrible girl,” Gladys muttered and then nodded. “Yes, it’s Fiona Lewis. Kirill’s mother.”

“How long has she been here?”

“Oh, forever. At least six years.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Oh, honey, what’s wrong with any of us? Life wore her out, I guess. She’s lucky she has a son with the resources to afford such excellent care.”

“But what exactly?” I pressed. “Don’t make me ask him.”

“Lori! That’s not nice! No one wants to talk about their mother being sick enough to try and – end things.”

Cold crept through me. Fiona had tried to take her own life? It didn’t take a genius to connect the dots. It was when Kirill entered his father’s brutal *bratva*, the one she had tried to keep him from. Another layer of guilt lay across my shoulders.

“Anyway, that was then. Now she has cancer, stage three lung,” Gladys said sadly.

“Don’t worry. I won’t say anything,” I reassured her when she looked close to tears. I patted her hand. “I was just curious. I used to know her. I won’t say anything.”

Gladys let out a long breath and relaxed.

“I do have one more question.”

Gladys narrowed her eyes at me. “Go on.”

“What room is she in?”



I CREEPT along the hallway toward Kirill’s mother’s room. I was being nosy, and I didn’t give a fuck. He wouldn’t like it,

and I didn't care about that either. I needed this. I needed to know if the man I'd given myself to had some humanity left. I needed to renew my hope that my Kirill was in there.

The door was ajar, and I could hear the deep murmur of Kirill's voice and another, maybe the doctor's. After a moment, a woman in a white coat stepped out. Her eyes were on a chart, and she didn't see me lurking like a weirdo in the hall. She left the door slightly more open than before. I crept closer, my ears pricked for the slightest sound inside the room. I heard the creak of a chair as Kirill sat beside his mother.

"So, knitting is the thing now? I like it. What is it?" His deep voice was so achingly beautiful, free from the usual tension and anger he directed toward everything else in his life.

"It's a scarf. And this ... I don't know. A baby bonnet, I suppose." Fiona's voice was scratchy and deep like a ten-pack-a-day smoker might sound.

As long as I'd known her, she'd been a hard woman. Drinking and smoking had been the only escape from her miserable life in the shittiest part of Woodhaven. She'd worked three jobs to afford a shoebox of a house and an athletic son who'd needed to eat massive quantities of food to fuel his training. His scholarship and talent in track had been their ticket out of that life, and it had all been taken that night.

"A baby bonnet? Are you trying to tell me something?" Kirill's voice was dryly amused.

Fiona wheezed out a chuckle. "No, I wouldn't. Your life is not for kids. Especially not sons."

Sadness seemed to settle in the room, so thick I could feel it from the hallway.

"Mom—" Kirill started but was interrupted by Fiona coughing. She coughed for a long time, and I wondered if she needed a doctor, but then she quieted.

"How's your father?"

"Still alive, unfortunately," Kirill said shortly.

Fiona sighed like the world was on her shoulders. “Cockroaches are always the last to go. That man will outlive us all.” She sounded truly depressed at the idea.

“No, he won’t. I won’t allow it,” Kirill said quietly.

“Promise?” Fiona asked.

“You have my word.”

Goosebumps prickled over my skin as I stood and listened to Kirill casually promise his mother he would kill his father.

“Good. Do it sooner rather than later. You’re still young. You could still have a life. You could still find her,” Fiona said.

My goosebumps became a full-body shiver. Fiona remembered me? The words didn’t make any sense, but there was no doubting what hearing them did to my heart.

“That’s why I’m here today instead of the usual time. I’ve found her. I’ve found Molly,” Kirill said.

“Well, I’ll be. I was starting to think she was never coming back. Take good care of her, Kirill. Don’t lose her a second time.”

“I didn’t lose her the first time. She left me,” he said woodenly.

Fiona sighed, the sound rasping in her damaged throat. “You sound like your father.”

The disappointment in her tone was tough to hear. I wanted to cover Kirill’s ears and protect him from it—a ridiculous idea because he’d probably tie me up and spank me raw for listening in on his private conversation.

He started to leave, and I turned away as Fiona spoke again. “Here, take the bonnet. Maybe you’ll need it.”

I didn’t hear what Kirill answered to that insane comment as I was already streaking down the corridor toward Mara’s room. I tried my best to retrace my steps but got turned around. My head was spinning with too much information. I found myself standing at the entrance to the cafeteria.

“Next?” A server called, looking at me since I was the only person standing remotely near the checkout.

“Um, tea?” I asked uncertainly. I needed to sit and process everything I’d heard. “Oh, wait. I’m sorry, I don’t have any money. Never mind.”

“It’s okay,” the server said quickly. His name tag read “Josh,” and he looked to be in his early twenties. He smiled at me with the kind of uncomplicated ease I’d never had. “It’s only hot water and a bag, and I already made it. It’s cool. On the house.”

Thanking Josh profusely, I carried the burning Styrofoam cup to an empty table and sat staring out the window.

Fiona Lewis was still alive, and Kirill took care of her. I didn’t know where I thought she’d gone, but it made sense. Kirill had always been fiercely protective of his downtrodden mother. He had been a champion of the women he loved, me included. At least he still loved Fiona. It was illuminating and precisely what I needed. There was a part of Kirill Chernov that remembered who he was under the abuse, sadistic training, and the soul-destroying job of living up to his violent father’s merciless expectations.

It was a crack in the wall Kirill used to hide his true self, and I’d seen it. But he didn’t know I’d seen it. It was my little secret and fuel for my dwindling hope. He also hadn’t said anything to his mother about an engagement to some high-profile mafia daughter. He had only talked about me.

I sipped the tea and burned my tongue. A looming presence beside me made me jump, and Kirill slid into the seat opposite. The man had an uncanny knack for knowing where I was at all times.

“Where did you get that?” he asked, taking my cup and sipping the burning tea.

I nodded toward the cashier, not trusting myself to speak normally.

He narrowed his eyes at the young server.

“All he did was give me tea on the house. He didn’t hit on me. No need to kill him.”

Kirill’s dark eyes swept across my face. “Lucky for him. You look cheered up.”

I couldn’t be sure, but he seemed relieved to see my melancholy had lifted.

I shrugged, and my unzipped hoodie fell off one shoulder. “Seeing my mom always cheers me up. Thank you.”

Kirill’s eyes moved to the sloping shoulder of the hoodie. He reached out and tugged it back into place. I realized I’d probably flashed a lot in those two seconds.

“Keep this closed,” he muttered. “Unless you want me to burn this place to the ground.”

“I’d be perfectly happy to cover my body up if you’d let me,” I complained. I paused and changed the subject. “How’d you know about this place?”

He shrugged nonchalantly, but I knew better. “It’s the best care in these parts.”

“And you want to give my mother the best care money can buy?”

“Why shouldn’t I, Princess? She’s like family to me.”

He was thawing the ice around my heart, and there was nothing I could do about it. Now that I knew his secret, my resentment was deteriorating.

“Now you’ve cheered up, I don’t want you moping around all day or not eating. That wasn’t a part of our agreement.” Kirill was watching me carefully, like always.

“Does it bother you to see me suffering? That’s not very villainous of you.” I sighed, draining my tea. I was pushing it, but we were in public, and I was feeling bold.

“I don’t want to snap a rib when I’m fucking you senseless. I take care of my things, Molly,” he said with a satisfied look that made me want to knee him in the balls.

Before I could think of a snappy comeback, my stomach let out a loud growl. “Good to know. Now we’re talking about it, I’m pretty hungry.” Actually, I was starving. It was like the dark clouds had lifted, and I’d been in a fog until now. “Shall we grab something here?” I asked, looking toward the cafeteria.

Kirill stood immediately. “Absolutely not. Let’s go.”

KIRILL

I planned on taking Molly somewhere no one would recognize me. It was imperative that my father remain clueless about Mallory. But since Niko wasn't letting it go, I was no doubt fighting a losing battle. Still, it paid to be cautious.

I knew a little diner near Cedar Green nursing home that was always empty. First, however, Mallory needed clothes. If one more man looked at her with interest, I was going to shoot him dead in the street. Unfortunately, my plan to keep her nearly naked and easily accessible with the see-through wardrobe had fucked me over.

I stopped the car outside a small boutique on a leafy street and took Molly inside. The sales assistant eyed us with interest. Molly looked like she had wandered off a photo shoot set, and I looked like her accountant in my dark suit and tie. I liked to dress like a respectable businessman when I went to visit my mother. I hoped she'd forget what I was and what I did, but she never did.

"What are we doing here?" Molly asked, looking around the boutique suspiciously.

"We are getting you some clothes that don't make me want to decapitate people as we're walking in public," I muttered, striding along the rails. I pointed one of the approaching assistants to a stack of jeans and turtleneck sweaters. "Get me these in her size," I told her. "Change," I directed to Molly.

The assistant hovered. "Which ones should I get in her size?"

“All of them,” I snapped and sat down to check my phone.

Molly eyed me curiously before drifting after the assistant to get dressed.

I had five emails needing desperate attention and a senator hopeful who wanted a favor. Business was booming for the bratva, and I’d never been more distracted. Molly and Nikolai were distraction enough, without considering the ridiculous marriage my father was intent on pushing.

I was worn out by the constant pressure from Viktor, and more than anything, I wanted to be in my apartment with Mallory. I wasn’t the sort of don who got off on power or prestige. I didn’t enjoy the lifestyle, and the only people I could stand to be around in the entire bratva were Max, Ivan, and Pyotr.

One day—and it was coming soon—things would have to change.

I put my phone away and checked my watch. What the fuck was Molly doing in there? I got up and headed for the changing room, scattering the curious sales assistants as I pulled back the curtain and stepped inside.

Molly jerked around, giving me a perfect view of her delicious, delicate body in the underwear I’d chosen; white lace with tiny pink flowers embroidered along it. At the time, choosing something I’d known teenage Mallory would hate had felt mocking. Back then, she was more of a ripped fishnets and black nail polish sort of girl. Now, it seemed fitting. Despite her bravado and tough-girl veneer, Mallory had been a virgin at the age of twenty-five, something practically unheard of.

Despite her snarls and put-downs, she had walked willingly into my prison because she loved me and wanted to save me. She didn’t understand yet that there was nothing left to save. The virginal, almost bridal-looking underwear suited this pure-hearted, brave woman who had selflessly given herself to the beast to spare others.

I pulled the curtain shut behind me. “What’s taking so long?” I muttered, lust tightening my groin.

Her eyes widened, and the pulse in her throat fluttered. “I was folding the too-big ones.”

I spun her, bracing her hands on the mirror so she was looking at herself, with me tucked behind her.

“Is that right?” I pulled a long spill of her hair aside to bare her neck. My lips immediately fastened on the long, pale column of her throat. “Do you have any idea what seeing you in this getup makes me want to do to you?”

Molly shook her head.

“It makes me want to dirty you up – to defile the perfect little princess,” I whispered in her ear.

I slid my hands around her hips. My scarred, huge, inked hands looked wrong against her. Too big, too rough, too brutal. I enjoyed the sight. The ink on my forearms looked darker against her creamy skin. Molly was well-acquainted with my sleeves, but she’d only seen the rest of my body in the dark. In bratva, the story of your life was written on your skin, and my flesh told not only my history but also my position in the bratva.

I moved my hands over her stomach and up toward her bra. The lace was so thin I could see the pink of her nipples. I pinched them hard, then soothed them in soft tugs. She arched her back against me and pressed her ass against my crotch.

“I want to bruise, bend, and mark you with my teeth and nails. I want to stripe your skin with my cum and rub it in like moisturizer, so you smell like me.”

She shuddered as I let one hand wander down to delve into her panties while the other rose to her neck. I circled the slender stalk and squeezed lightly.

Molly moaned as my fingers sank through her wet folds. “The assistants will hear us.”

“Let them. They wouldn’t dare interfere. Do you have any idea how wet you are? You’re walking around, desperate to be fucked at any second,” I stated, dark jealousy spreading through my veins.

“Only when you’re with me,” she breathed.

Her soft confession stilled my dead heart in my chest. I smirked against her skin. “Good girl. For that, you can come before we leave here,” I told her roughly. “But you only have until the assistant knocks, so you’d best be quick.”

I slowly began to circle her clit, and she rubbed against me like a cat. She seemed to be taking my word for it because her hands went to her tits, perfectly showcased in the half-cup bra, and caressed them as I fingered her. She humped her hips, chasing my touch, wanting to go faster than I allowed. I fought a grin as I heard footsteps approaching on the tiles outside the dressing room. Molly must have heard it, too, because she made a frantic, tortured sound before grabbing my wrist. She urged me faster, rubbing herself off until she pulsed around my hand. I clamped a hand over her lips, and her eyes flew to mine.

“No one hears you coming except me. Now keep your goddamn eyes open and watch yourself come on my hand.”

She shuddered in my arms, losing all control as a knock sounded on the door.

“Is everything okay in there? Do you need anything else?” the assistant’s voice called.

I watched Molly come down slowly from her high. “No,” I said roughly, taking a moment to find my voice. “I have everything I need right here.”



IN THE DINER, I watched as Molly stretched her arms over her head.

She was fresh-faced, wearing a turtleneck jumper and slightly baggy jeans, and she was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. She also looked young as hell. The sight brought up all sorts of memories I’d tried to bury deep inside.

“What’s good here?” she asked, tapping her lip.

“Do I look like I come here a lot?”

“You look like you eat babies and virgins for lunch, so no, you don’t look like you come here a lot.

“I’ll pass on the babies, but there’s one particular virgin I do enjoy eating, who’ll play nice and not tempt me unless she wants that to happen in an undoubtedly filthy bathroom down the hall,” I mused, looking at the menu. It was laminated and sticky. I dropped it onto the table.

Molly ignored me in favor of the menu, giving me plenty of time to indulge in my favorite hobby—watching her.

“Can I get pancakes?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Because it’s after lunchtime,” she pointed out.

“I’m not your dad. Get what you want,” I said shortly. Christ.

“Speaking of dads, how’s Henry?” Molly asked.

Henry Madison was a thorn in my fucking side. I had him locked up in a bratva safe house somewhere, and Ivan looked in on him now and again. I still hadn’t pulled the trigger and wasn’t sure what to do with him. Killing him would upset Molly, and I couldn’t stomach it.

“Assume he’s alive and outstaying his welcome on the bratva dime until I tell you otherwise. How was Mara?”

“She was well. She *is* well in that new place. It’s beautiful there.” She sighed, turning to look out the window. “You know, it’s the first time someone other than me has cared what happened to her in years. It feels weird.” She nibbled on her nail, looking like eighteen-year-old Mallory had stepped out of my memory and sat down opposite me.

“What does?”

“Not being alone anymore.” She turned a broad smile on the approaching server. “You’ve been my ghost for so long, I can’t get used to the fact you’re real.”

I didn’t trust myself to respond, but I knew exactly how she felt.

After we ordered, Molly took a long breath and fixed me with a probing look. “If I ask you something important, will you promise to tell me the truth?”

“I always tell you the truth, Molly, even when it hurts.”

She swallowed. “Are you engaged?”

Her question took me completely off guard. Molly knew about the engagement? The last few days suddenly clicked into place. The dinner party and the cold shoulder. Her withdrawal, which I’d assumed was an overreaction to Fede’s phone call. She knew, and she’d known for a few days.

“Yes,” I answered her honestly.

She flinched, and her earlier happiness vanished. “You didn’t want to tell me, so I could ... manage my expectations?”

“I had no need to tell you, Princess. I might be engaged, but I’m not getting married.”

It took a moment for my statement to sink in, and curiosity filled her eyes. “You’re not?”

“There is only one woman I’ve ever considered marrying. If it’s not her, I’m not getting married. The ball’s in your court, Miss Madison.”

She didn’t ask if it was her. There was no need. Both of us knew.

Molly nodded, cutting a corner of her syrup-soaked pancake. “Good to know, weird boy.” Then she pinned me with a smile, and my heart stirred in my chest.

It was like the sunrise on my face after a long, dark Russian winter.

MOLLY

We made it halfway back into the city when Kirill pulled his car off the road onto a small side lane leading into a leafy forest.

As soon as he stopped, he reached for me. “Jeans off, Princess,” he commanded. “Let me see those pretty lacy panties.”

I struggled to comply. After talking about the engagement at lunch, I wanted to touch him. I wanted him to hug and kiss me and fill the coldness plaguing me since I’d overheard that conversation a few days ago.

I wriggled gracelessly out my jeans.

“This is why I never want you in pants,” he muttered.

“Unless I’m around other men?” I reminded him.

Possessiveness tinted his eyes darker as my bare legs appeared, my sex covered by the tiny scrap of girly lace I’d worn today.

“This is why we should stay home, permanently,” he grunted, grabbing me as soon as I’d kicked my jeans off.

He pulled me onto his lap so my legs were straddling his hips. There wasn’t much headroom, so I had to bend over him. One of Kirill’s hands speared deep into my hair, cupping the back of my neck and holding my face an inch from his. The other was on my ass, his fingers dipping down my cleft.

“Kirill,” I gasped as his fingers brushed my untested pucker. The night at the dinner table flashed through my mind. Fuck,

that had been hot, but I hadn't been allowed to enjoy it fully. Now, I wished I could do it all again and enjoy every second.

"Yes, Princess," he muttered, getting his finger wet in the juices dripping into my panties and returning to my ass. "Don't you like that?" he murmured against my lips. His hand had left my hair, and suddenly, the seat lowered back, spreading me more against him. "Don't lie, Molly, I'll know."

"I-I don't know. Maybe?" I gasped as his finger slipped inside my illicit place. It felt taboo as hell, which was crazy considering everything we'd done together.

"I think you do, Princess. You're wetter than ever. Relax, and let me show you how good it can be. Don't worry. I'll make sure you're used to taking something before I fuck you there."

His free hand went to the pants of his bespoke designer suit and ripped them open carelessly to free himself. Hooking a finger in the elastic of my panties, he drew them aside and pressed inside me without preamble.

I cried out against his mouth. I was so wet and empty inside, and his remorseless entry was welcome, even though it stretched me too fast. I struggled to adjust as he sank deep and stayed there. I was lying flat against his chest with my bent legs splayed wide. His cock was buried to the hilt inside me, and his hand was down the back of my panties with his finger halfway up my ass.

Late afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows, falling on my face, and I let my eyes drift closed as he started to move inside me. It wasn't brutal or relentless like he took me sometimes as if he was trying to drive himself so deep inside, I'd never get him out. It was nearly gentle as he nudged in and out of me, our motion limited by the car. His finger grew more daring, pushing further into me. It felt odd as hell but as good as I remembered from the dinner party.

"Do you like being filled with me everywhere, Molly? My tongue in your mouth, my dick in your pussy, and my finger up your ass? You look like you love it from how you're bouncing on me, Princess. Tell me you love it," he urged, his lips scraping across my forehead.

“I love it. I fucking love it.”

“Tell me you love me.”

My eyes flew open to find him gazing steadily at me, his eyes full of emotions I treasured. I hadn't said those words again since his mask had come off, and the double life he'd been playing had ended.

“I love you,” I said without a second of hesitation.

“I fucking love you too, Princess, and nothing you could ever say or do will change that,” he growled.

He pulled me close, hugging me with one arm while his other hand stayed inside me. I lost track of the amount of time we spent like that.

For the first time in seven years, it was a perfect day.

KIRILL

The pier was busy today, and it had taken longer than usual to work our way along. Carnival music played, annoyingly chipper and upbeat, stealing my mind from where it longed to linger—on Molly. Her smile yesterday played again in my mind, and that car journey still whispered in my heart as I recalled her soft words and how she had felt wrapped around me.

Pyotr came to meet me as soon as I entered. I knew by his expression that something was wrong. “What is it?”

“Nikolai and Viktor are here.” Pyotr’s tone was solemn.

Tension clutched my guts. I’d known things with my father were escalating, but I didn’t expect it to spiral so quickly. I was distracted by Mallory, and mistakes could cost me everything.

I walked at an unhurried pace toward the makeshift office Viktor kept here. It was the same one where he’d blown out my knee seven years ago. Fuck, I hated the man with a passion, and one day, I’d keep my promise to my mother and kill the sick fuck.

“Kirill, son, thank you for joining us. You seem busy lately,” Viktor said, pointing me to a chair before his scratched-up desk.

Niko lounged by the window, looking like a true circus freak in the late morning sunshine. His neck tattoos stood out, startlingly black against his tanned skin, and his dark eyes

watched me with dangerous amusement. Nothing that amused my brother could be good.

“Business is booming, that’s all.”

“Is it? Good to hear. In a different life, you could have been a great businessman. You always were good at making money.”

“Were?”

Viktor shrugged, enjoying having set everyone on edge. “Are.”

“The bratva makes a lot of money from my business,” I reminded my father coolly.

“I can’t say it doesn’t. My successor would be obvious if you didn’t make so much.” He nodded toward Nikolai. “Niko has the flare for this work. You don’t, but you bring home the most bacon.”

“I thought the purpose of the bratva was to protect each other and prosper, not to mindlessly engage in murder and mayhem for fun and no profit.”

Viktor nodded sagely. “I know you believe that. You’ve worked hard to make us prosperous, and marrying Sofia De Sanctis will cement that income.”

“I don’t need the De Sanctis’s. It’s another family to share the pot with.”

“It’s another family to spread the risk with,” Viktor argued.

“You’re being short-sighted,” I fumed, losing my grip on my temper.

Viktor’s meaty eyes narrowed. “And you’re forgetting your place, boy.”

He nodded to Niko, who wandered out of the room. My eyes were locked with my father’s, and I couldn’t afford to look away. Viktor was on the prowl for a weakness, and I’d only walk out of here alive if he didn’t find any.

“You know, being here reminds me of the night you came to me. I know you resent me for dashing your track dreams, but one day, you’ll thank me.”

“How do you figure that?” I snapped.

Viktor moved to sit on the edge of his desk. If he’d been armed, I’d suspect he was about to blow out my knee again.

Pytor and Ivan shifted in the doorway. They were loyal to me and would go down with me if Viktor had come to kill me in the same office where he had first taken my life.

But he folded his arms across his barrel chest and stared out the window at the murky water. “You didn’t know who you were then. You were pretending to be who your mother wanted you to be. You weren’t being true to your blood. Fiona knew that. Why do you think she worked so hard to keep you from me? She knew what lived inside you. Didn’t you ever consider that?” He turned his head and gave me a sideways, considering look. “She wasn’t keeping the dark out and protecting her son. She was holding it back to protect the world – from you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You never knew Fiona.”

“I knew her as well as a man can know a woman. As much as she’d let me. They never really let you in once they understand what you are. That was true for Fiona Lewis, and it’s true for Mallory Madison.”

A cold chill fell across me like someone had walked over my grave. Mallory’s name in my father’s mouth made me feel sick.

Viktor turned to me. “I told you to end it.”

“She’s not the reason I won’t marry Sofia.”

Viktor chuckled. “Isn’t she?”

I shook my head. I was frantic with worry, though I couldn’t show it. “I don’t want to align with the De Sanctis’s, and I’ll show you why.”

With a hand I prayed didn’t tremble and betray my anger, I reached for the printout I’d discovered this morning and handed it to Viktor.

He stared at it for a moment. “What does it mean?”

“The Richardson deal we partnered with them on ...they’ve been skimming us. Look here,” I pointed to the pertinent part. “You can’t trust Antonio De Sanctis. He wants a bratva alliance to line his own pockets. Marrying into that family will bring us nothing but an enemy as a family member.”

Viktor took the paper and folded it, tucking it into his leather jacket. “I don’t know about that. I have to think about it. But I *do* know you’ve grown weak over something again, and it’s time to cut out the rot.”

Rough shouts and Niko’s mocking chuckle came from the corridor. I looked at Max, and he nodded slightly. If Nikolai came into the room dragging Molly, I’d shoot him and my father dead on the spot and deal with the fallout later.

I tensed, ready to pull my gun as Niko reached us. He threw a body onto the floor in front of Viktor’s desk.

It wasn’t Molly.

It was her father, Henry.

Henry rolled over, and his blood dotted the ground. I’d hesitated too long deciding what to do with the man, and the decision had been plucked from my hands.

“Henry Madison. I can’t quite believe it’s you. It’s been a few years, hasn’t it?” Viktor crouched by Henry’s head.

Henry wasn’t looking good after a few weeks in solitary confinement at the safe house. He slumped, staring mutely at Viktor.

“The interest on the amount I loaned you would be astronomical by now, but that debt was settled long ago.” Viktor laughed.

Henry frowned, clearly confused.

“Don’t you know? I should thank you. My son returned to me to forgive your debt. And what a fine made man he’s become. He takes after me,” Viktor said roughly. “However, your daughter is a bit of a fly in the ointment. She’s still his greatest weakness, it seems.” He leaned back and focused back on me. “Kirill, son, I know you’re having fun, but it has to end. I’ve

been clear that I won't tolerate anything getting in the way of the marriage. Anything or anyone that does will be removed. Do you understand? I'll remove her permanently, and like your knee, you'll learn to adjust."

Hate poured from my eyes toward the man who called me his son. I wanted to wring the life from him with my bare hands, but I was outnumbered here. Viktor's men looked on, and Niko was on our father's side. I had Max and Ivan. Only the sight of Ivan tapping out a quick message on his phone stopped me from pulling my gun and attempting to kill Viktor. I'd go down, too, but at least Molly would be safe.

"Do you understand me, Kirill?" Viktor repeated, needing to make sure I kowtowed to him.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

Viktor sighed. "Nikolai, I think he needs a hand."

Nikolai moved from his position on the wall and flowed toward me. I turned to meet him, ready for a fight that would take everything out of me. I'd fought Nikolai countless times. We were evenly matched, but I was distracted and off-balance at the thought of Molly being in danger.

But as Nikolai drew close, he pivoted and ducked. When he rose, his face was splattered with a patina of blood.

"There we go. That'll make it easier to let her go. I'm doing you a favor, son. She'll hate you, but she'll be alive," Viktor said, sounding proudly sadistic.

I looked down at Henry, gurgling on his own blood where Nikolai had slit his throat.

I watched Molly's father die, and my heart plummeted to my toes.



ONCE IVAN CONFIRMED that Olga had protected Molly, I went to Pravda and drank. I needed to go and let Olga and Molly out of the panic room, but I needed space to breathe first. If I

saw Molly now, I wouldn't be able to hide my turmoil. Weak men made poor decisions.

It didn't matter how much I downed; I was painfully conscious. A clock was ticking in my head, reminding me that my time with Molly had run out. I had to act or lose her forever. The music rose and swelled around me as I left the club. A woman or two tried to tempt me into dancing as I passed, but I brushed them aside.

I hadn't been lying the other night when I'd told Molly that she was all I saw and thought about. Other women didn't exist. In this world, there was only her and me.

Ivan drove me home, watching me in the rearview mirror.

"Don't fuss, Vanya," I warned him as I got out of the car in front of The Tower.

My gruff, oldest friend shrugged. "I don't like to see you like this."

"How is that?"

"Defeated," Ivan said.

I let out a raw laugh, my breath clouding in the air. Christ, would this season ever end?

"I've been defeated since I was nineteen with a blown-out kneecap, walking on crutches and completely bewildered by what life had done to him."

I took a cigarette from a packet in my pocket, and Ivan lit it for me, shielding the flame with his huge back. The tattoos on his knuckles shone in the streetlight. His tats were shiny with scarring as he'd gotten them in a Moscow prison at the tender age of twenty.

"Whatever comes next, Kirill, I'm with you," he said quietly.

"*Bratan*, there are easier ways to die."

"*Da, vladna*, but none so righteous. Besides, I'm growing rich and bored with this new *bratva* life you've made for us. I miss the smell of gunfire and blood."

I clapped him on the shoulder, and my grip stayed, tightening. He was a good fifteen years older than Max and me. Once, I'd been jealous of their brotherly bond, particularly as my half-brother was a lunatic, but over the years, they'd invited me in. I didn't want them to die with me, but I knew I had no choice. Whatever I had to do to protect Molly, they'd be there. That was brotherhood. That was the true meaning of bratva.

"Not long now. Rest, sleep well, and save your strength. Tomorrow ... who knows?" I muttered as I turned away and headed inside.

Max stood outside my apartment with five other men, guns trained on the door, even though security had told them it was me and I was alone. Max never took any chances, and I appreciated it.

"She's still locked down?"

Max nodded. "She's with Olga in there."

"Okay, I'll let them out. Take Olga home, and then get some rest."

Max frowned. "I'll come back. Someone needs to be here during the night."

"Not you. You need your strength. I'll need your strength," I told him, my eyes communicating what I couldn't before the other men. Sometime soon, I would have to defy Viktor's orders, and all hell would break loose.

Max nodded and left as I entered the apartment.

I paused inside, staring at the neat row of shoes on a tidy shelf by the door. Molly's converse, beat up and battered as hell, sat next to my handmade Italian shoes. They were so small compared to my size thirteens. I wanted to protect her, and there was only one glaringly obvious way.

Let her go.

But it wasn't possible. I couldn't let her go any more than I could walk myself off the roof of The Tower. The damn survival instinct that had seen me adapt and thrive in the

Chernov bratva refused to let me die. I wanted to live, and to live, I needed her. Nothing meant anything without her.

I went to the spare room and entered, immediately enveloped in Mallory's soft, light scent. She didn't wear perfume. I hadn't bought her any because the smell of her skin was too enticing.

I walked toward the huge walk-in closet housing her clothes. Stepping over a pile of them on the floor, I felt around for a hidden keypad. I typed in the number, and a series of beeps sounded before the heavy lock disengaged.

"Spokoyno, Olga, eta ya," I called, pushing open the door.

Olga stood with her feet planted in the center of the panic room, a gun held in her unwavering grasp, pointed right at me. Molly stood behind her, watching with wide eyes. As soon as she saw me, Olga dropped the weapon to her side, looking relieved.

Olga hurried to my side. I found my arm open to press her into my side, even as my eyes were fixed on Mallory. "It's okay. Everything is okay."

Reassured, Olga bustled out of the room, muttering about pastry.

Molly approached, her arms wrapped around her waist, her green eyes seeing every part of me. "Is it?"

I let out a long breath and shook my head. There was too much to say and not enough words to explain it all. I jerked my head toward the corridor. "Get on out of here. It's late."

She stopped when she drew parallel to me. I couldn't meet her green gaze, not when I could still see her father taking his last breath on a plastic sheet in a warehouse in Brooklyn.

She left silently, and I followed, stalking her through the apartment until she turned toward the bathroom and closed the door. I poured myself a drink and stared out at the dark city. Had I thought keeping Henry alive would ensure Molly stayed with me forever? Maybe I had, deep down. What a fool I was. Maybe I'd thought the imprisonment, power games, and all the

ways I'd played with her since I found her again could be forgiven so long as everyone she cared about lived.

But with Henry dead, there was no salvaging my soul in Molly's eyes.

She'd give up on me, and I'd truly be lost.

MOLLY

*I*t wasn't every day your housekeeper suddenly grabbed a gun out of a cereal box in the middle of rolling out pie pastry, shepherded you through the house into a wardrobe, and unlocked a secret door with a touch.

A panic room. Kirill had a full-blown panic room in his penthouse, and the entrance was in my room. Maybe I could have found it, now my wardrobe of silly dresses was reduced to ribbons on the floor, but I never had the inclination to look.

I couldn't stop looking around. The inside was lit with fluorescent lighting, and well-stocked metal shelves lined the walls. There was even a bed. It was pretty impressive.

"Have you ever been in here before?" I asked Olga.

She shook her head, still clutching the gun as if assassins might suddenly wiggle through the air vents. "No. I learned it was here and how to enter it a few moments ago."

"Just how to enter it? I hope you also learned how to leave it."

"Mr. Chernov will let us out," Olga said with conviction.

"Jesus, are you serious? You don't know how to get out? What if something happens to him?"

Olga narrowed her eyes disapprovingly at my question.

"I'm just saying." I tensed, wringing my hands. The very thought of Kirill getting hurt was difficult to imagine.

"Don't just say. If Kirill Viktorovich is dead, it won't be long until we are too."

“That’s cheery,” I muttered.

Olga slid me a look. “You want to live without him?”

Her sly tone told me she knew much more than she let on about my twisted, tumultuous feelings regarding the man of the house.

Never. “I did for seven years.”

“And you were happy?” she pressed.

Well, she had me there. But there was one small fly in that ointment logic. “Not particularly, but I was free and alive.”

Olga shrugged, dismissing my words. “Freedom is overrated. Protected is better. Cherished, like you? It’s spoilt.”

I laughed incredulously. “Spoilt? I don’t get to leave the house without Kirill.” I’d made peace with our relationship, but Olga’s blind worship of Kirill was infuriating.

“You don’t know anything,” Olga said quietly, waving her hand at me.

“I thought you’d object to being owned,” I said quietly.

She narrowed her eyes at me. Had I gone too far by reminding her I knew her past?

“*Devushka*, there is a difference between being owned and being kept like a prized thoroughbred. It’s the same difference as being a slave or a princess ... I think we both know which you are. Kirill Viktorovich loves you, which is why he keeps and protects you. You should appreciate him more.”

“You have an optimistic outlook considering your history,” I sighed, sliding down the wall to sit cross-legged.

“Thank you,” Olga said primly, tucking the gun into her pocket and sitting down.

“Did I say optimistic? I meant traumatized. I agreed to all of this, but we shouldn’t pretend any of it is normal,” I muttered.

Olga shrugged. “What is normal? My father beat my mother every day of her life. Your life with Kirill would seem like a fairy tale to her.”

“That doesn’t make it not fucked up.”

“I suppose your parents had a perfect relationship?”

I didn’t have an answer, so I shrugged, and we sat silently for a while.

“Did Ivan happen to give you a timeline on this panic room excursion?” I asked, wishing I had brought my notepad in with me.

Olga sighed and fumbled with something under the seat.

“What have you got there?”

She pulled out a shiny stack of papers and held them out to me. “Magazines. You read this one,” she said, passing me one about interior design.

“Thanks.” I flipped it open to look at a New England beach house, trying to picture a life where Henry hadn’t lost my inheritance to the Chernov bratva, and Kirill had never gone to his father. Instead, we’d both graduated, moved to a small New England town, and lived a quiet, peacefully wonderful life.

I stared at the pictures until the images blurred.



I’D KNOWN something was very wrong with Kirill as soon as he’d walked into the panic room—if having to hide in a panic room wasn’t a big enough clue. I was becoming numb to shock. Seeing his eyes clouded with anxiety, anger, and fear made my heart race.

After he sent me to bed, I’d lain there thinking about him, my mind several rooms over. What had happened? Why was he shutting me out? After the closeness of yesterday, his distance stung.

The bedroom door opened after about an hour. I should have been asleep. He no doubt thought I was. I lay still as his silhouette appeared in the doorway, my heart echoing through my body, beating faster and faster.

He entered the room in slow, measured steps, and I swore I could feel the tangled emotions rolling off him. He set down a glass on the bedside table, and his hands went to his shirt. I'd seen his body a few times, but never like I wanted to. His body was a testament to ink and suffering, and I longed to trace every scar and find out the story of every tattoo, but he never let me linger.

He pulled his shirt off, scattering buttons when his clumsy fingers failed to open them. He swayed gently, and I knew he was drunk. I opened my eyes and stared at his body, seeing the stars on his shoulders, denoting a rank in the *bratva*, and an orthodox church on his chest, with four onion-shaped domes. Then there was the skull on his neck, usually covered with a buttoned-up collar. His arms were nearly full sleeves. A ray of moonlight fell on his sternum, and that's when I saw it—a scrolling word written across his heart.

Molly's

It was hard to make out with so much other art clustered around it, but as soon as I did, I stopped breathing.

“Trouble sleeping?” Kirill asked, shoving his pants and boxers down.

I gave up the pretense of being asleep and nodded. “You too?” I tried to keep my eyes from his cock, springing up his belly, hard as ever.

“Always,” he muttered.

I pushed myself up and knelt on the bed. The emotion between us was softer than usual. Everything inside me was reacting to the sight of my name tattooed across his heart. He reached out and cupped my face, running his thumbs across my cheekbones. His touch was tender, more than it had ever been.

“I still can't believe I found you. I wake up every morning thinking it's a dream. I'm never sadder than in those moments,” he whispered.

My heart leaped to my mouth. “Kirill—”

“Don't. Don't say anything to remind me of what I am or what I've done to you. Weeks ago, Henry told me you tried to run

away and find me five times, and he dragged you back every time. He told me you never stopped looking for me.” His voice grew ragged, and he pulled a hard breath into his lungs. “He told me, and I hurt you anyway.”

“You haven’t hurt me.”

“I will. It’s what I do,” he said darkly.

I shifted closer. The barrier between who we’d been and the people we were now was growing thinner by the second. “It wasn’t always. You always protected me and took care of me. You still are. You’re not a bad person, Kirill.”

He laughed bitterly. “Oh, Molly, you have no idea what you’re talking about. Do you know why I thought I hated you so much?” His voice was tortured. His face was in shadow, and I couldn’t make out his expression, so I focused on my name inked on his heart.

I shook my head silently.

He took a shuddering breath. “What I did for you didn’t destroy me, but it cost me you. It made me a man who can never have you. Who will never be good enough for you.”

He pulled me forward and pressed a kiss to my forehead like a benediction. A confession ripped from the deepest part of his soul. “That’s why I hated you ... that, and the fact I’d do it all again to save you. I became this man bound to hell for you, and I’d do it again every single time to save you.”

I didn’t know how the hell to respond. It was too sad and messed up. Too fucking tragic.

“Kirill, you talk like it’s all said and done. You’re not two people. You’re one—my Kirill. We can change everything else.”

“I’m not him, Molly. Don’t expect me to be. You’ll be disappointed, and I can’t take disappointing you one more time.”

With those cryptic words, he grabbed me around the waist and threw me back onto the bed. I landed on the springy mattress, and he was on me before I could sit up. His hands spread my

thighs wide, pushing my nightgown up around my waist, and before I could say a word, his hot tongue traced a hard, scorching path up my center. Pleasure blazed out, lighting me up and ringing my nerves like tiny bells. His tongue burrowed between my folds and fucked into me before moving to my clit.

“Fuck, how are you so good at that?” I murmured as my thoughts dissolved like sugar in hot water.

“I’ve got a lizard’s tongue and a big fucking nose,” he muttered, making me laugh despite the heaviness only seconds ago.

“You’re trying to distract me,” I panted as he wet a finger in his mouth and sank it inside me. I looked up to see his face framed between my thighs, eyes hot like lava, blazing into mine.

“Maybe,” he said thickly, working a second finger into my tightness. “Or maybe I want to wreck you like you wreck me.”

“You already do,” I moaned.

He shook his head. “Impossible. No one wrecks anyone like you wreck me.” Then he lowered his head to his task and set to work, flicking my clit with his firm, pointed tongue as he finger fucked me.

The first time I came, he held me down and saw me through it. The second time, I tried to crawl away afterward, too sensitive and twitching with pleasure to stand his touch a second longer, but he only dragged me back. The third and fourth times, he tied me to the bedposts with a belt at each wrist and made me scream. He never entered me with anything other than his fingers and his clever tongue. He left me shaking and sweating in a mess of fluids on his mattress.

When I begged for mercy because it was too much, he knelt over me, his strong thighs bracketing my hips, and the sound of him beating off filled the room. I lay sated and wrung out as he striped his spend in long white ribbons across my bare chest. Breathing hard, he sank back and stared down at me like

he was trying to memorize the sight, and then he moved to clean me up. Instead of getting a tissue, he rubbed his release into my skin in long, dragging circles, massaging my tits until I was boneless, my skin moist and smelling like him.

He stood on shaky legs. I knew how he felt. I'd never have managed to stand right now.

“Stay.” I grabbed his hand before he could leave me, like always.

He paused, his dark shadow looming over me. He never stayed. I didn't know why I thought he might this time. He stayed there a long moment before moving toward me. He climbed into the bed and turned me so I was cocooned in his strong arms and my back was pressed against his chest. He arranged my hair so it wasn't in his face and rested his chin above my head.

Something monumental had shifted between us at some point in the dark. Or maybe it was always going to happen, and he'd finally stopped fighting it.

For the first time in seven years, I was home.

MOLLY

I woke to soft kisses trailing along my shoulder. It took me a moment to remember where I was. In my room in the Tower, with Kirill in my bed. He was still there, kissing me, his body hard against my back as his hands caressed my eager skin.

He rolled me toward him, leaning on one strong arm and gazing down at me. His eyes were clear, a beautiful green and gold in the morning light. I could see his tattoos for the first time, and I let my finger fall to my name over his heart. It seemed like there was a spell over us right then.

“Why did we have to go to the panic room last night? Were you expecting the boogiemer to break in here or something?”

“Or something,” Kirill murmured, kissing me. “Enough talking.” He shifted on top of me, cradling my face with both hands. It was an intimate position, especially in the harsh morning light. There was no hiding in shadows, and his hungry eyes on me made me blush, which was crazy considering all the things we’d done together.

He pushed inside me. I was already wet and desperate for him. He gathered me in his arms and held me tight as he began to move. A tear escaped my eye and ran down my cheek. He caught it with his mouth and kissed a line up my cheek. This was what I’d been waiting on. Lovemaking. Him allowing me to see him in the light.

I held him as I rose effortlessly. He played my body expertly like the last few weeks had taught him mastery over every part

of me, and he was an expert in what I liked.

He rotated his hips, grinding down on my public bone and catching my clit, and his dick rubbed a spot inside me that made me cry out his name. My nails sank into his back as I arched beneath him, clamping down on his length as I came.

He followed, a growl of possession leaving him as he jerked inside me, pushing in as far as he could and filling me to the brim with his warmth. His hands bunched in the pillows, and his entire body strained and tensed as he came endlessly. I could feel each pulse as he emptied into my willing body.

When he pulled out, it felt like an unbearable loss. I stayed near him, limpet-like, as he rolled onto his back and let out a long breath. I nudged my head onto his pec, making a space for myself on his chest, and he chuckled.

“Did you like that? Is that Molly-style lovemaking?” he asked, his voice a rumble in his chest.

“I liked it, but I liked all the other ways too.” My confession would have embarrassed me if this was anyone but Kirill. “I like all the things we do together. What about you?”

He combed his fingers through my loose hair, letting the golden strands catch the light falling on us from the window. “I like you any way I can have you.”

His phone rang as I opened my mouth to tell him that was the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to me.

He extricated himself after a reluctant pause and stood bare-ass naked and perfect. In the light, I finally got to see the full package of Kirill in all his glory. Marble statues had nothing on him. I snapped my mouth shut as he turned and looked at me after snagging his phone from his pants.

“*Slusha. Da*, I’m coming,” he said, hanging up and gathering his clothes off the floor.

I sat up, the sheet pooling at my waist.

Kirill paused, narrowing his eyes at me. “Molly, you know you’re making me want to stay home all day.”

“Good, because it’s boring as hell here without you,” I said, grinning at him. “Can we stop keeping secrets from each other, like the club and the engagement? I don’t think I can take it.”

His full mouth quirked in a quick grin, but it faded almost as soon as it appeared. “I wasn’t with anyone else, nor will I ever be, which includes a so-called fiancée.”

“You could have told me that the other night.” My prim tone and obvious avoidance of the fact that I hadn’t told him I was upset made him laugh.

“You could have asked me, but that wouldn’t have been nearly as much fun as getting spanked in front of my men and fucked hard, would it.” He raised an eyebrow at me, making me blush. “I like your jealousy, Molly. I hunger for it.”

“That’s fucked up,” I muttered, annoyed but too soft toward him after last night to put any venom into my words.

“I don’t think I’ve ever claimed not to be fucked up since we were reacquainted, have I?”

“No, and you haven’t lied to me about anything important. What happened last night?”

His smile stuttered, and he moved to the edge of the bed. “Let’s talk about it later. I have to go.”

His nakedness didn’t cause him a second of awkwardness, but if I looked that good, I wouldn’t feel awkward either. He leaned down and captured my mouth in a hot, rough kiss, holding my head to his with a heavy hand at my nape.

“I’ll see you later, Princess. Wait here for me. We’ll talk when I get back. Just wait for me,” he murmured against my lips before nipping the lower one between his teeth.

Those words were ripped right from my most painful memory. The night when I hadn’t been able to wait for Kirill, and I’d lost him for seven long years. Maybe old wounds could heal. Maybe broken people could be remade. Maybe there wasn’t anything lost that couldn’t be found.

I rubbed my fingers over my swollen lips and watched him go, infatuation beating in my heart. Fuck, I was a goner. I was

absolutely finished if Kirill decided to employ this version of himself. The dom kingpin was a real turn-on, but this version was deadly.

I flopped back in bed, waving a hand over my face to cool my heated skin.



I SHOWERED and dressed in jeans and a cozy jumper from my boutique haul the week before. I headed for the kitchen, my mind replaying last night on an endless loop. Kirill was bending. It was everything I'd hoped for and given up on.

Max was in the kitchen, messing around with the coffee machine. "Damn, this thing is broken again."

"Olga knows how to use it."

Max sighed. "She's off today. I'll run out and get something. Oh, while I remember, Kirill wanted you to have the code to the panic room. It is 0809. Use it if you need to. Be back in five with the vanilla latte you like."

0809? My birthday.

No one wrecks anyone like you wreck me. Well, right back at you, buddy.

I went back to my room to grab a warmer sweater, eyeing the panic room door, visible now that I knew it was there. Kirill was still worried enough about something to give me the safe room code. I wished he would share everything going on in his head, but he needed more time.

I tidied the wardrobe, feeling guilty about all the clothes I'd destroyed. At least I had new things to wear from our shopping trip after visiting the nursing home. With the weather turning colder, I needed them.

Next, I hit the bathroom. Of all the toiletries Kirill stocked, there wasn't a shred of makeup, perfume, or sanitary product. Now I thought about it, the sanitary products were pretty urgent.

Once I'd finished tidying, I glanced at the clock and blinked. Max had been gone half an hour. It seemed excessive to get coffee.

Anxiety crept along my nerves.

Why had Olga shoved us into the panic room yesterday? Kirill hadn't explained, and lovestruck me hadn't pushed for an explanation.

The strange darkness around him last night had swallowed all my questions.

I went to the front door, cursing Max. Why hadn't he come back? I wished I had his number to ask him to bring me tampons.

Deciding to take charge and get one of the other guards outside to call Max, I knocked insistently on the heavy front door until someone opened it. Four pairs of eyes immediately trained on me. The security guards were standing around the door while another made his way over from the elevator.

"Is Max back yet?" I asked, feeling bad I didn't know their names.

"Not yet."

"Can you call him for me?"

My eyes collided with the fifth security guard, striding across the hallway with a meaningful step. There was something vaguely familiar about his walk, like a predator approaching prey. He reminded me of Kirill. He was wearing sunglasses, which was weird as it was raining outside. As I thought it, he reached up and pulled them off. I had no time to speak as recognition slammed into me. Time slowed as he pulled a long pistol with a silencer from his jacket.

Nikolai Chernov took aim at the backs of the other guards, who were still watching me, waiting for me to go inside. I raised my hand to point, but he'd already fired three times. The fourth guard turned as a silent bullet ripped through the side of his head. Blood sprayed my face, obscenely hot and wet.

I stepped back, my reaction dulled by shock. I tried to slam the door closed, but one of the security guards had fallen in the gap.

“Mallory, you’ve made this considerably easier than I expected. Well done, sweetheart,” Nikolai said, stepping over the guards like they were trash on the street.

I turned and ran, darting down the hall toward my bedroom and the panic room. I heard Nikolai behind me, his feet much faster than mine.

I slammed through the bedroom door and ran full pelt for the wardrobe. I nearly made it. I was reaching for the panic room door when he grabbed me roughly, his fingers digging in as he hauled me back and used my momentum to throw me to the ground beside the bed. I scrambled back and eyed him warily, ignoring the throbbing in the arm I’d landed on.

“Now, Mallory, let’s not get this thing started on the wrong foot.”

“This thing?” I repeated, my eyes fixed on the gun.

Nikolai grinned. He was terrifyingly cool and collected as if shooting four men dead in the space of a minute was a daily occurrence.

“Our trip,” he said quietly.

I waited for him to continue, wetting my lips, and trying to find my voice. “We’re going somewhere? Does Kirill know?”

Nikolai laughed. It was jarring because he was so frighteningly charismatic that even his laugh was magnetic. But he was a killer, and his good mood frightened me.

“He will soon, but we’ll be long gone by then.”

He stood suddenly, and I cringed away. He held out a hand for me, waiting patiently as I blinked up at him.

“I don’t want to go anywhere,” I said plainly.

“I don’t care. You’re coming with me, whether you want to or not. The only thing you get to decide is how hurt you are when we leave here,” Nikolai said with cold detachment. He

snapped his fingers before my dazed eyes. “Let’s go. We’re burning daylight, and we have a road trip. Say goodbye to this place. You won’t be coming back.”

He pulled me up and placed his gun to my temple. “Walk.”

I started forward, terror jumping under my skin. Nikolai was taking me somewhere, and I had no idea where and no way to tell Kirill.

His words from before rang in my head like a scream.

“Just wait for me.”

For the second time in my life, I couldn’t keep that promise.

End of Book 1

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MILA KANE



I'm obsessed with cats, coffee, and anti-heroes just the right side of insane.

I write dark and dirty romance with the alpha-holes of your most filthy nightmares.

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