



WOUNDED
ANGEL

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Wounded Angel
The Umarova Crime Family Series
Book 5

Written by Ivy Black and Elizabeth
Knox

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Ivy Black and Elizabeth Knox

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Prologue

Xava

One Year Ago

I only recently found out I had some distant cousins in Chechnya. I haven't had any extended family reach out to me, but I know that when you're adopted, there are often cases where you don't know anything about who you are. I was lucky enough to at least know I was adopted when a lot of people in my position wouldn't even know that.

My life hasn't been easy by any means, but even in the worst of times, I try to be as grateful as I can. I know there's always someone out there who has it way worse than I do. As a child, I used to become so frustrated so easily. I clearly remember the day when my mother sat me down in our garden next to the roses and gave me a huge life lesson. She said there were many things for me to be thankful for and that I should let the small moments of frustration roll off my back like water because they weren't worth the hassle. I was a kid, so I didn't really understand what she was saying to me, but now I do. As an adult, I see how life isn't so easy. It's hard. If someone tells you their life isn't hard, they're lying straight through their teeth.

In regard to my adoption, I didn't know my biological parents personally. My mother told me that she was related to my adoptive mother but didn't give me any more information than that. I've had a hard time bringing up my adoption to my parents. It's a subject that they never want to talk about, and as much as I try to learn more about where I came from, they have never wanted to dive into that with me.

I'm not asking to meet my biological mother or father. All I'm hoping to do is understand more about myself. My adoptive parents ended up leaving Chechnya after my adoption, and I've lived in the Czech Republic with them ever since. Prague is the only home I've ever known, yet it doesn't feel like home to me. It feels like a place I've lived. I've never been able to connect with the city the way I always wanted to.

I guess that leads me to where I am today. I've just landed in Grozny, which is the capital of Chechnya. I'm here to finally meet my biological family. It was crazy to get a call this many years after my adoption. Long story short, they discovered who I was, that I even existed, and then they wanted to fly me out here so we could meet face-to-face. Honestly, that was a hard pill to swallow at first.

I don't know these people, so how would I know if they were safe for me to be around? I tried to talk myself out of it simply because I was anxious about what could happen. I debated whether I really wanted to know more about where I came from. I don't even know why there was a question in the back of my mind about it. For so long, I had wondered about them, what they were like, what I would have been like if I had grown up in Grozny, and what my life would have been like if I had never been adopted. The last thing I wanted to do was live with any regrets, so I agreed to come.

I agreed to fly to a place I'd never been to so I could learn more about them and, quite frankly, more about me. It feels like a piece of me has been missing for years, and I think this visit will help me understand more about myself.

Everything is so different here. Now, in Prague, there are so many different kinds of people. I mainly see Ukrainians, Eastern Europeans, and a few other nationalities in the city. It's also a big tourist spot. I've only ever seen a couple of women wearing hijabs, but as

I'm walking through the private airport, I notice about half of the women are wearing hijabs. Some of the cloths are black, but others are color coordinated with their outfits, which is pretty cool.

I pull my small carry-on luggage along behind me, thankful that it has wheels, and look around the small airport. I was told that someone would be here to pick me up. I notice a few men in suits standing around the place, and one of them approaches me.

He walks slowly, looking me up and down just to be sure I'm the person he's looking for. "Ms. Beno, my name is Rolando. I'm here to be your driver and your security detail while you're visiting."

Rolando looks to be in his early thirties. He has dark espresso hair, and his eyes are light hazel. They're beautiful, really, with the way the green and the burned bronze combine. "It's great to meet you, Rolando, and please call me Xava. Ms. Beno is entirely too formal," I tell him, but what I don't say is how relieved I am that he speaks English. I was so worried he was going to be speaking the old Chechen language, which I don't know any of. It's surprising, considering my parents are from here. You'd think they'd want to teach me their language, but it was quite the opposite.

"Please come with me." Rolando gives me a curt nod, takes my luggage, and leads me through the airport. It's much smaller than most of the airports I'm used to. Once we're outside, he leads me to an SUV with blacked-out windows. He unlocks the vehicle, opens my door for me, and even puts my luggage in the back of the SUV. I get inside the vehicle, and Rolando shuts my door. Shortly afterward, he slides behind the wheel, and we're off.

I stare out of the window the entire time, looking at the city that could have easily been my home in another life. I often wonder what would have happened if I wasn't adopted. Would I be wearing a hijab? Would I have a

boyfriend? Would I know everything there is to know about my family? I'd like to hope so. I even hope that my family members are kind. I'm a bit anxious to meet them today, though I know it's going to be good for me. There's even a small part of me that hopes they'll be able to give me some information about my birth parents. That's why I really accepted this invitation to come here.

I didn't even tell my parents I was coming to Grozny. I told them my friend Dominika was going to Greece for a week and invited me to go with her. Right now, they think I'm on a beach somewhere with one of my best friends. I, of course, told Dominika about the lie in case they communicated with her. That way, she can cover for me. She is in Greece, so I didn't lie about that part. She even said she'd send me some photos of the beach and whatnot so I could text them to them. If I do that, they might not reach out so much.

"How was your flight?" Rolando asks me in dead silence.

"It wasn't bad, like at all. No turbulence. It was odd to be on a private plane, though. When I travel, I'm used to the commercial planes. You know, the ones filled with hundreds of other people. It was quite an experience." I laugh lightly at the end because I know I'm rambling.

"Yes, I know about the planes you speak of." Rolando chuckles.

"Obviously. I apologize. Sometimes, I ramble and don't make much sense when I'm nervous."

Rolando approaches an intersection and stops at the light while we wait for it to change. "Are you nervous about meeting the Umarovas?"

I swallow hard as I try to gather my thoughts. "Yeah, this whole thing is a bit intense for me. I don't know if you know *who* I am in relation to them, but as far as I know, they're my only blood relations besides my

parents. I grew up in the Czech Republic, so being here, in the place where I should have grown up in... it's a lot."

"It sounds like a good opportunity for you to learn about your roots while you're here then," Rolando suggests, and for the first time, I hear a light accent coming through his words. I'm not sure where he's from, but there's a distinct way he says certain words. I'm not going to pry, but maybe I'll find out soon enough.

"Yes, exactly. It's crazy because I'm nervous to be here, but I'm excited too. There are so many possibilities." I might sound a little bit crazy, but I am excited to learn more about my birth family. "Do you know anything about them?"

Rolando looks in the rear-view mirror and raises a brow. "I know a lot about them. What is it you'd like to know?" Rolando begins moving in the line of traffic and proceeds down another road.

There are plenty of questions that run through my mind. "Are they good people? Are they family-oriented? How many of them are there?" Every time a decent question comes to my mind, I ask it. I don't want to pry too much, but I want to know more about them, too. I don't even know how I should be acting right now.

"There are a few of them. Ruslan is the oldest, and then there's Lom, Nazyr, and Eset. All in that order. I'm taking you to Ruslan's house now to meet him, where you'll likely meet his wife, Amelia, and their little boy, Karim."

"I can't wait. This has been such a long time coming."

"I'm sure it has. We're going to be there very shortly," Rolando tells me as he shifts lanes.

I look out at the beautiful city of Grozny. This could have been my home. It blows my mind. On the right, there's The Heart of Chechnya. I've seen it online, but I never thought I'd have the opportunity to see it in

person, even if I'm simply driving by. It's the oldest mosque in the city, which has Ottoman-style architecture, and it's also one of the largest.

Rolando keeps driving, and at the next intersection, he makes a right, and then he pulls into a parking garage attached to a massive condominium complex. He goes up a few floors and then parks. Rolando gets out first and opens the door for me, extending a hand in the process. I gladly take it and exit the SUV.

"We will come get your bags later, depending on what you decide."

"What I decide?" I repeat, uncertain what he means.

"I believe Ruslan and Amelia are going to let you stay with them if you want. If not, there are plenty of local hotels where we can make some accommodations for you."

"Oh, okay, I see," I say and force a light smile.

Rolando leads us toward the elevators and presses the button to go up. He pulls some sort of key from his pocket, and when he selects the floor we need to go on, he inserts the key and turns it to the right. The button he pressed lights up green, and the elevator takes us to that floor.

Now I'm getting really nervous. Up until this moment, it didn't feel as real as it does right now. I'm about to meet more of my blood, more people who can help me connect with myself on a deeper level.

Suddenly, the elevator doors open, and we walk into Ruslan's place. "Mr. Umarova, I've arrived," Rolando declares as he steps inside the home.

"Hey there. Ruslan's in the office with Lom." A woman with brown hair and hazel eyes comes toward us from the kitchen area. A small boy stands next to her, tugging on the leg of her jeans. "I'm Amelia, by the way.

It's really nice to meet you, Xava. Everyone here is really excited to get to know you."

Amelia's words help to settle my nerves a little bit. "It's great to be here. Thank you for inviting me."

"You're very welcome," Amelia replies, then looks at Rolando. "Go ahead and take her into the office. I know Ruslan and Lom are anxiously awaiting her arrival."

"Of course, Mrs. Umarova," Rolando responds as he begins walking further into the house. In less than a minute, Rolando is rapping his knuckles against the back of the door.

"Come in," a man's deep voice greets us.

I lick my lips nervously as Rolando opens the door for me. I walk inside the office, and Rolando stands at the door for just a moment. "I'll wait for Xava in the living room, sir."

"Don't you mean Ms. Beno?" the man who sits behind the desk asks Rolando. I think that must be Ruslan, but I can't be too certain since we haven't made introductions yet.

"No, sir. She specifically requested I call her Xava," Rolando answers.

The man looks at me, and I speak up, supporting what Rolando has said. "I felt like it's entirely too formal. Xava is easier."

The man motions with his head for Rolando to leave, and Rolando shuts the door. I take a seat in the other armchair sitting across from the desk.

"Xava, I'm Ruslan, and this is one of my other brothers, Lom." The man behind the desk is the patriarch of the family, now I see.

"It's great to meet you both. Thank you so much for flying me out here. I'm really excited to be in Grozny." I

plaster on a smile, trying to break the ice. I don't know if they can tell I'm nervous, but I am.

"We're very glad to have you out here. It's been a long time coming." As Ruslan speaks, my stomach drops. It's almost like he knows something I don't. I mean, he hasn't given me any real indications that this is the case, but over the years, I've learned to trust my gut, and my gut is telling me something else is going on here.

Could Ruslan and Lom be more to me than just a relative?

"I'm sure you're wondering why we flew you out here. If I was in your position, that's the million-dollar question I'd be asking myself," Lom speaks up. His hair is chocolate brown, with a slight curl to it.

"My curiosity is getting the best of me," I admit. "I know coming out here has something to do with my adoption, obviously, but from the way the two of you are looking at me right now, I'm getting anxious. What is it? What aren't you telling me?"

I'm barely an adult at just nineteen years old, but one thing my father always taught me was that I needed to be able to read the room. I'm doing just that right now, and the room is telling me that there's something they're not revealing to me.

Lom looks directly at Ruslan, and if that isn't a confirmation, I don't know what the hell is. "Xava, we're not just your relatives. We've discovered that you're our sister, our full-blooded sister."

I lean back in my seat as pure shock takes over every aspect of my body. I'm their sister... which means I'm Nazyr and Eset's sister as well, according to what Rolando told me about the family tree a little bit ago. I don't know what on Earth I'm supposed to say right now.

"I... I don't understand. Or maybe I just don't have all the information. You and your siblings, were you all

adopted as well?” I’m trying my best to make sense of it.

“No, we weren’t. We were... raised by your biological mother. Our biological mother,” Ruslan tells me. He’s trying to do it with care, but there isn’t a way he can delicately deliver this news. He and my siblings were raised by our biological mother, but I was cast aside like the red-headed stepchild. I do not understand why. I don’t understand any of this.

“Do you know why I was adopted out? Was I unplanned? A child of an affair? I... this isn’t making sense to me. My whole life, my adoptive mother told me she adopted me from someone within our family, someone who couldn’t afford to take care of me. From the looks of things, the family does very well for themselves, so why was I thrown away like garbage? Why was I not good enough to be raised with the rest of you?” I know my questions are coming out like bullets from a gun, but I deserve to have answers.

All my life, I assumed I was the daughter of someone who couldn’t afford to take care of me. I never thought I’d be part of some wealthy family, but from the looks of it, this is exactly the case.

Lom looks over to Ruslan, and they both stare at each other, not saying a word.

“Come on, tell me.” It’s like the two of them are trying to figure out what to say to me. Are they trying to get their story straight, or are they not sure what to tell me? Do they even have the answers I’m seeking? I have no idea.

Ruslan clears his throat and takes a moment before he speaks up. “Xava, we all understand this is unexpected. This news can’t be easy to take, and I’m sure you’ve felt like you’ve been lied to your entire life. We didn’t know about your existence until very shortly before we extended an invitation for you to come here.

This is going to be a lot to take in, and I'm sure you're going to have a lot of questions as I tell you all of this."

As Ruslan speaks, I can feel my heartbeat in my head. My blood pressure has to be going up. My adoptive mother told me that I was important. She was always making remarks like that when I was a kid, so is this why? She must know all about what Ruslan's about to tell me. She has to.

"Our father is an Umarova, which is our surname." Ruslan motions between himself and Lom. "Our family is one of the oldest families in Chechnya, specifically Grozny. What I'm about to tell you is going to be a lot to process, but every single thing I'm telling you is true about our family. Understand?"

I nod. "Yes, please tell me what's going on."

Ruslan takes in a deep breath. "Your biological mother, who is also our mother, had frozen embryos she made with our father many, many years ago. I was born, and then Lom. I'm still not sure if we were products of those embryos or not, though I'm going to assume we are. Our father was killed after Lom was born, and our mother married again. She had two more children, Nazyr and Eset, who we presumed were her husband's children. We recently discovered that they were not his children, but instead, they were embryos she made with our father. You were an embryo. She had a surrogate carry, and then she had one of our cousins raise you. She wanted you tucked away for safekeeping as an insurance policy in case the rest of us ever perished. At least she'd be left with one living child from the Umarova line."

"Why would one child from the line matter?"

"Because the Umarova line is important here. We've been around for hundreds and hundreds of years. If the Umarova line were to die off, I'd hate to see how the city is handled." Lom is the one speaking now, and while I'm trying to understand, I'm having a really hard time

comprehending what he's saying. I feel like I'm someone who has a puzzle in front of them, but only half of the pieces are here. Maybe with time, I'll get the rest of the pieces, and I'll be able to put the puzzle together.

"I'll put it plainly. Our mother was sick. She wasn't right in the head, and then she put her own selfishness above everything else," Ruslan interjects.

Was. Ruslan is saying "was".

"What happened to her?" I ask, afraid of whatever the answer is going to be.

"She died." Ruslan's tone is ice cold. There isn't one ounce of care in the world coming from him. It's as if he's saying a terrorist is dead, someone that he couldn't give a damn about.

I don't know what I expected. The way he said "was". It couldn't have been anything good. "As we said, we didn't know about you until recently. We wanted you to come out here, meet the two of us, and then the rest of our family," Lom goes on.

"My wife and I discussed you staying here with us, but I also made arrangements at a nearby hotel in case you needed time to process everything. We can talk more in greater detail about things soon, but this is the heaviest of the information, in my opinion. Are you comfortable with staying at a hotel? Rolando will be posted outside of your door."

Rolando's been driving me places, but is he some sort of security as well? "I don't understand. Why would Rolando need to be outside of my door?"

"We have men who guard each of us and our families. We're powerful people here in Chechnya, and there are those who wish to take it from us. Rolando being posted with you is for your own safety," Lom fills me in.

I nod. "I see."

“If you want, we can meet up tonight for some dinner with the family,” Ruslan suggests.

“I think that would be a good idea.” I need some time to process what they’ve said and some time to come up with any other questions I might have.

What I really need to do when I get into my hotel room is call up one of my best friends. Yara’s also adopted, and I know if anyone can understand the way I’m feeling right now, it’s going to be her.

Chapter One

Ambros

Present Day

I couldn't be more thrilled to be touring my brand-new home. Located in Mykonos, I've never been happier. I've had smaller homes in this area, but nothing of this caliber. It's a recently renovated mansion that's been here for many decades. I remember staring at this home as a little boy and knowing I'd own it one day. With a little over sixteen-thousand square feet, it holds six bedrooms and seven bathrooms.

It's a stunning, modern villa that offers incredible views of the water. The team who conducted the renovations did a fabulous job of making sure the inside and the outside spaces were cohesively tied together.

I'm sitting outside on a lounge chair in a pair of deep blue swimming trunks, the same blue as the sea in front of me. I find myself sitting here most days, staring out at the serene beauty. I'm lucky enough to live in a gorgeous place such as this, and this happens to be the place I call home. I grew up on the other side of Mykonos, and my entire family lives here as well.

Unfortunately, I won't be able to enjoy this view for long. I've been traveling a bit over the last few weeks, and I'm leaving tomorrow for another job. This time, I'll be headed to Russia.

My phone begins ringing, so I pick it up and look at the name on the screen. It's Linus, my younger brother. I press the green button to answer it and bring the phone to my ear. "Hello there, brother."

"Wow. I'm shocked you answered. I figured you'd still be sleeping this late." Linus knows I'm notorious for

drinking and partying when I'm home. Mainly because my being home means that I'm not working.

"No, I had a lot to get done this morning."

"Really? What were you doing?"

"I'm at the house." Sometimes, my brother can't remember anything of importance. Why would it surprise him that I moved from across the city to a bigger house? It doesn't directly affect him, so maybe that's why he doesn't remember. Linus tends to only care about what's circling his own world, so to speak.

"Oh, fuck. I forgot about that. Mind if I swing by?"

"No, go right on ahead. I'm out back by the pool. You hungry?"

"I mean, I could eat." Linus chuckles, and I put him on speaker while texting my personal chef, Marsala.

"I'll get Marsala to make us something. When do you think you'll get here?"

"Probably twenty minutes or so."

"All right, I'll see you then."

I hang up the phone with my brother and immediately switch to my text message app.

Ambros

Linus will be here in about twenty minutes. Is there anything you can throw together for lunch?

Marsala

What do you think about garides saganaki?

I could really go for some shrimp right now.

Ambros

That sounds great. Thank you.

Marsala

Of course. I'll start on that. I'll make some pasta salad and souvlaki too.

I put my phone down and lean back, baking in the sun until my brother arrives. It's nearing thirty minutes by the time Linus ends up getting here. I should have told Marsala it would be thirty minutes. My brother's constantly running late. If he somehow manages to run on time, something must be wrong.

Linus walks out through my massive open-concept living area and takes a seat on the empty lounge chair beside me. "This place is awesome. Was it designed like this before you got here?"

"No, I had an interior designer come in and add everything. You know, I don't know how to do any of that shit. If I did it myself, all the renovations would be done for nothing. I would've made a mockery of all the work they did."

"I'm sure it would have looked fine, but your designer did a very good job." Linus motions toward the outdoor furniture. The lounge chairs we're on are white wicker with deep blue and white pillows that lay against the back. There's about a ten-foot coffee table between the lounge chairs and the custom-made couch I had designed for this porch area. The couch has a cream base, but the cushions on the top and bottom are a lighter blue. The couch has small accent pillows on every seat, which tie in the deep blue on the lounge chairs, with white running through the pillows as well. Meanwhile,

the coffee table pulls everything together with various blues and whites, as well as a sand color.

“This is nothing. The interior blows my mind. I don’t think I’ve ever spent my money in a better way.”

“I can think of one way to spend your money better.” Linus flashes me a mischievous grin.

“Not everyone has to pay for that, brother. Maybe if you up your game a little bit, you might be able to get it for free.” I paid for a high-class escort one time just to try it out. It wasn’t anything it was cracked up to be.

“You’re feeling a bit confrontational today. For once, you and our father have something in common.” There’s not one ounce of playfulness in his voice.

“What’s going on?”

“I should be asking you that. He isn’t happy with you for some reason.” Linus stares at me dead in the eyes. He’s inherited the same eyes I have, the same ones our father gave us.

“Ambros, I have your lunch ready. Would you like it to be served here or in the other outdoor seating area?” Marsala says as she approaches my brother and me.

“Here is fine. Thank you, Marsala.”

“Of course.” Marsala walks back into my house, and within a few moments, she brings out a tray with a few perfectly presented plates. Everything looks great, but I know it’s going to smell even better. When I was looking for a chef, I had different people making me food for months, and I mean months. It had to have been around six or seven, and then I found Marsala. She blew every dish out of the water, and that’s when I knew she’d have to work for me.

Marsala places the dishes down in front of us, and she even has plates and silverware ready for us. “What would the two of you like to drink?”

“Water is fine for me.”

“I’ll take a beer,” Linus comments.

“I’ll be back shortly with those drinks.” Marsala walks away, leaving my brother and me by ourselves.

“So, what’s going on with Dad?”

“He’s got some issues with you, apparently. What did you do to piss him off?”

“I stood up to him. I’m not going to be Dad’s pet that he can push around whenever he wants to. You and I aren’t kids anymore. We haven’t been for a long time, so I don’t think he understands that we just won’t bend to his will.”

“You know he thinks we’ll do whatever he says because he’s the patriarch of our family.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck if he is or not. It’s bullshit. It doesn’t give him the right to think he can speak to me the way he is, and I’ve told him that.”

Linus smirks. “Oh, now it makes sense. That’s why he’s so bitter and upset at you.”

“Good for him. Maybe it’ll teach him that when you give respect, you get it in return.”

“He’s not going to want to do that.”

“I know he won’t, but he’ll have to. There’s no other option where I’m going to give in to him. He’s gotten really cocky and disrespectful these last couple of months, and I’m over it. With as much as I do with the family, I am completely done with his attitude problem.”

“He’s only getting worse with age, brother.” Linus isn’t wrong. A lot of the men in our family who were around my father’s age got crankier and more demanding before they passed. It could simply be a part of aging, but I’m not about to take this bullshit like my cousins did from their fathers.

“Are you going to come to dinner tomorrow night?”

“No, I’m leaving first thing in the morning for Russia. I have a job out there.”

“More like you’re trying to avoid our father, and it’s your perfect excuse. Ambros, you know you can’t avoid him forever, right?”

“I’m not avoiding anyone. I have a very well-paying job. I’ll see Dad eventually.” I look right into my brother’s eyes, needing to know he won’t be causing waves in the water for no reason. Am I avoiding our father? No. Do I really want to see him right now? Also no.

“Sure, whatever you say.” Linus isn’t buying what I’m saying to him at all.

“Ambros, here are your drinks. I also fetched this for you.” Marsala has the drinks on a tray. She hands me my glass of ice water first and then hands Linus his beer. The next thing she gives me is an envelope addressed to me. The return address is from the Umarova family, so I immediately open it. The Umarovas are a powerful Chechen family. They’re also arms dealers, whom I’ve worked with for many years. I’ve purchased a lot of what’s in my armory from them directly.

Upon opening the letter, I see it’s an invitation to Lom Umarova’s wedding. It’s in a couple of weeks’ time, but I need to make it a point to attend. You don’t want to miss events such as this. If I take a few more jobs in Russia while I’m there, I might be able to just go directly to Italy for the wedding. That would probably be the best bet.

“Thank you, Marsala,” I say to her and grab some of the shrimp with my fork. I can’t wait to dive into this delicious spread.

Chapter Two

Xava

I'm currently in Italy for my brother Lom's wedding to Emily. He and Emily have been together for a while and are finally getting married. It seems like it took a long time for them to get here, and I'm so happy for them. Emily's been planning her wedding for the last year—since I was welcomed into the family, actually. She was so kind to include me in helping her plan her wedding. I never really expected that in the least bit. She's had me, Amelia, and even Mona—Nazyr's girlfriend—help her. Eset doesn't seem overly interested and would rather be working at the family business or focusing on her artwork.

Emily has a daughter from a previous relationship named Sierra, but you'd never be able to tell. Lom loves that little girl like she's his own. She'll be turning twelve in a few months, so I guess we're going to have to throw her one heck of a birthday bash pretty soon. Emily and Lom also had a baby nine months ago, which made Sierra a big sister. Kolson is such a sweet boy with a loving personality. He's the happiest baby I've ever met, and that's saying something since my adoptive mother owns a daycare company back in Prague. Kolson wasn't the only baby who recently arrived, either. Ruslan and Amelia had another baby, too—a boy that they named Adlan. Mona also has two little girls from before she met Nazyr. Vanina is four, and Ira is turning three very soon.

Emily told me not too long ago that she's asked Eset to paint her some things to put up around her house as a wedding present. Eset seemed honored to do so, and there have been many times when I've found Eset hiding in her studio, working instead of out with the family.

Emily rented out an entire villa in the Tuscan countryside and told me they sent out invitations for around four hundred and seventy-five guests. I can't imagine inviting that many people to a wedding, but our family is very well known. I'm sure there are a lot of old family friends coming, as well as business associates. My brothers and sister are always working. I don't know too much about what they do, but I know it has to be important. They work at all hours of the day, and the only time I get to see everyone all together is during Sunday dinners or on major holidays.

For a large part of the day, I've been sitting out on the back patio, getting as much sun as I can. I was allowed to invite a plus one, so I asked Yara to come with me. She flew out, and Rolando drove me to the private airstrip to pick her up yesterday. We've been relaxing, checking out some of the local wineries.

The villa itself is enough to house my family, plus Yara, while all the other guests have local accommodations.

"Are you starting to get excited?" Yara asks me. Her hair's pulled up in a loose ponytail, and she has on a pair of red heart-shaped sunglasses.

"I guess so. I haven't ever attended a wedding before, so I'm not sure what to expect."

"Most of the weddings I've been to have been older family members. They were so boring. I expect your brother's wedding to be very action-packed and fun. I mean, look at what they're setting up for it." Yara points out to the countryside. There are various areas where there's seating, multiple bars, and even a couple of different dance floors. Most of the land through here isn't flat at all, but every area on the property that is flat is being used for something.

All you can see for miles are rolling hills with vineyards spanning across them. There's the occasional

villa, but the place where Lom and Emily are having their wedding is quite private. This villa is a mixture of history with modern amenities. The entire exterior of the villa is made up of cobblestone. The patio areas are made up of old pavers, probably at least one hundred years old. The outside is beautiful, but the interior is something special. There are exposed wooden beams throughout the place, and the pastel wall colors really make you feel like you're at home. The ancient terracotta floors pull the entire place together, and if we didn't live in Grozny, I could see myself living in a place like this.

"Yeah, it's probably going to be a blast. I need to start getting ready soon," I mutter the last bit. Lom and Emily are getting married at eight tonight, but Emily wants all the bridesmaids to be in her bridal suite around five so we can get our hair and makeup done and then have some group photos taken together with the sun in the background.

"Okay, while you're doing that, I'll be soaking up the sun for a bit longer." Yara giggles lightly.

She's the complete opposite of me. Pale with the lightest blonde hair I've ever seen. It's almost snow white. She doesn't even dye it, either. Her eyes are a light sky blue, and she could honestly be a supermodel. I might be pale, but I have dark eyes and dark hair. Whenever we're out in public, she's always the one who gets the most attention. I'm not an attention whore or anything, but men are always flirting with her. It hardly ever happens to me.

"You have fun while doing that. I'll catch up with you later."

"Ugh, I do have to say, I wish you had another brother that was single. All your brothers are so handsome and kind. It's no shock that they're all taken, too. It's hard being a single woman out there these days."

I don't feel Yara has any reason to talk about being single. Men throw themselves at her all the time.

"Well, they're all taken. You never know, though. You might find someone at the wedding that you like." I don't even know what I'm supposed to say to her, but maybe that will suffice.

"Maybe we both will! That would be awesome, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, it would." I doubt it'll happen, but if it did, I wouldn't be complaining in the least bit. "I'm going to get going. Enjoy catching some rays. I'll see you in a bit."

"Sounds good. Have fun, girl!" Yara's accent comes through now thicker than ever. Since moving to Grozny, I have noticed how our accents are thicker. I've been speaking a lot of English with my siblings since I don't know Russian or Chechen yet. When I'm speaking English, I think a lot of my own accent has melted away, so to speak.

I give Yara a slight hug and then walk back over to our suite at the villa. Emily's getting ready in her suite, and I have a little bit of time, so I take a quick shower and then get changed. I blow dry my hair, and by the time I'm done, I don't have anything else to do, so I head down to Emily's suite.

I knock on the door lightly and wait for someone to answer. Laughter can be heard on the other side, and Eset opens the door for me. The laughter is coming from Amelia and Emily, who it seems are both having the time of their lives. Sierra, Vanina, and Ira are all here, too, so I guess the boys are with their dads.

Emily's dress is hanging in the center of the window, with four plum-colored bridesmaid dresses hanging nearby, two on either side. The girls are in matching plum dresses, but there's a bit of white in their dresses, so they stand out more.

“Hey, ladies, is everyone excited?” I’ve come a long way with these women in the last year. At first, things were awkward, and I didn’t know if I was going to be able to forge any sort of connections or friendships with them, but over time, things have really blossomed between all of us. I feel like we’re truly a family unit, and everything I’ve been praying for my whole life has come to fruition.

“I’ve had enough alcohol that I don’t have any nerves whatsoever,” Emily speaks up, and the women start laughing. The little girls don’t understand what we mean, but the adults are getting a kick out of it.

“We’re slowly nursing our drinks. Emily happens to be in an entirely different situation. She was so nervous this morning. You have no fucking clue. Lom made the mistake of telling her how many guests were actually going to be here today,” Amelia tells me with her eyebrows raised.

“How many?” I know it’s on the upward of four-hundred-something, but there’s no way it could be more than that, right?

“Almost six hundred,” Eset fills me in, and I’m at a loss for words. My eyes are wide, and I can’t believe what I just heard. Six hundred people here? Goodness. I didn’t realize how many people our family knew.

“Lom did tell her that he was going to throw her the biggest wedding Grozny has ever seen, but now it’s not even in Grozny.” Amelia chuckles.

“Nope, instead, he’s practically invited everyone in the city to our wedding,” Emily remarks as she takes another sip of her drink.

“I take it you don’t like being in front of a lot of people?” Emily’s never struck me as the type of woman who gets anxious in social situations, but I’ve never seen

her in large group settings. At the most, it might have been twenty or so people.

“You’ve hit the nail right on the head. I can handle small groups of people, one-on-ones. I could do that in my sleep, but he invited everyone under the sun to our wedding, and I’ve been getting really nervous.” Emily shakes her head, obviously uncomfortable with how big of an event my brother turned this into. Sure, Emily planned out things like the food, location, and wedding colors, but Lom was the one who handled the guest list.

“Don’t be. It’s going to be an amazing day that you’re going to remember for the rest of your life. Um, did... did Lom tell you if your parents are coming?” I’m trying to distract Emily, but the second my question passes through my lips, I wish I hadn’t said anything. Amelia’s eyes dart right at me at the same time Emily’s do.

“I’m not sure, and I could honestly care less. I’m sure he invited them... but the last time we all spoke, we weren’t on good terms. They said some pretty unforgivable things to me. Things that I don’t know if I can move past.”

“Sorry, I brought it up. I was trying to distract you, and I guess I chose the wrong thing to switch the subject to.”

Emily begins laughing. “No, you did pretty well. Now I can think about everything I want to say to them if they have the nerve to actually show up here.”

“Good job with that one,” Mona whispers as she elbows me in the side. I guess Emily’s nervousness was pretty damn bad earlier today.

Chapter Three

Ambros

For the last couple of weeks, I've been traveling in various parts of Russia to get work done. I started in Moscow, went to St. Petersburg after that, and then arrived in Sochi. I finished my Russian trek in Kaluga. Now I'm in a rural part of the Italian countryside for Lom Umarova's wedding to Emily. I didn't realize this at first, but Emily is the cousin of Ruslan's wife, Amelia. What a small world it is.

I've rented a private chateau for a couple of days while I'm in Italy for the wedding, and then I'll be heading to Rome for another job. You'd think I'd be able to relax while I'm here. That was the goal anyway, but my brother has made it a bit difficult to do.

Linus has been getting on me about coming home and speaking with our father, but I will continue to use my work as an excuse for as long as I can. I know the moment I see my father, we're going to have a major confrontation. There's no other alternative. He's been pushing my buttons too much for far too long.

Linus has a way of being patient with our father, but I believe that has a lot to do with Linus being younger. He isn't forced to make the same decisions as I am or even pressured to live up to exacting expectations. Since I'm the oldest, things are very different for me. A lot of the time, he ends up being a mediator for my father and me. Nothing makes me more frustrated than my father using my brother as a way to cool things down between us.

Luckily, I won't have to worry about my father while enjoying my time here in Italy. I highly doubt he or my brother will attend, which means I'll get a much-needed break from them as long as I turn my phone off. I love

my brother, but God, he can be aggravating. A lot of times, it feels like he's my father's champion. I think Linus needs to get away from the family business and do something for himself. He'd be a lot happier if he did that, and then I wouldn't be so frustrated with him. Sometimes, I worry I'm going to lose my relationship with my brother because of him constantly stepping in between me and our father.

For fuck's sake. I'm in Italy. I need to not think about my family bullshit while I'm here and have a good time instead.

I've already pulled up to the property where the wedding is, and their valet parked my car. There are numerous event staff members walking around the space, showing everyone where they need to be. The staffers are in full, head-to-toe black outfits. All the women have their hair tied back in tight buns, and the men look rather clean-cut as well. Every single one of them has a smile plastered across their face, and you'd naturally assume they love their job.

The staffers are escorting everyone from around the villa to the back. The villa is made up of old cobblestone, and the pavers we're walking on look like they've lasted through years of use as well. We continue heading down the path until we're walking down a paved hill, and we're taken to another building on the property. It looks newer than the villa we just walked past, but it seems like the owners of the property put a lot of thought into making sure it aesthetically matched the main villa.

At least sixteen-foot-high doors sit where attendees can walk inside, but the doors are wide open, allowing for an indoor-outdoor open concept. It reminds me of my home in Mykonos. I walk into the building, and a lot of guests are already there. A bar sits at the far side of the room, so I stand in line to get a much-needed drink. With my brother nagging me about our father, I need a little something extra to help me relax.

I stand in line for about ten minutes while the people in front of me are taken care of. While I wait, I look around the room and people watch. The best of the best are here. Diamonds hang from around women's necks, their dresses are no doubt designer, and the men walking around are in thousand-dollar suits. I guarantee this is a mixture of family, friends, and criminal underworld connections.

"Sir, what can I get for you?" a man behind the bar asks me as the person ahead of me takes their drinks and walks away.

"Do you have Metaxa?" It's a Greek drink, but if I'm lucky, I might be able to get some here. The Umarovas no doubt requested liquors from around the world, given the people they invited were probably from many different areas.

"Give me a moment to check." He walks back and begins opening cupboard drawers. After a couple of minutes, he finds a fresh bottle, tears open the seal, and walks back over to me. "Would you like that on the rocks?"

"Yes, please."

He puts three ice cubes in a glass and pours the Metaxa over it. Metaxa, a Greek drink made from brandy, is created from a wide variety of grapes, a combination of plants, and Muscat wines from Samos.

"Here you are." He hands me my glass, and I pass him some cash for a tip. I then make my way out of the building and walk back onto the property grounds.

I note the wooden beams sticking up along the pathway with delicate lights draped at every beam. It really gives an all-around romantic feel. If I were to ever get married one day, I'm sure my future wife would want something as picturesque as this.

“Attention all guests, please make your way down the hillside to where the wedding will be held,” a woman in a black suit states as she walks around and repeats the same announcement over and over again.

I follow the lines of people, and we head down the hillside steps to an area I didn't even notice before. It's a ways below the villa, and in the background, you can see the vineyard and rolling hills. With this scenery, it's no wonder the property owners wanted to have the ceremony area here. It's mesmerizing, and I'm sure it makes for exceptional photographs.

I take a seat in the third row, not giving a damn whose side I'm actually sitting on. It takes about fifteen minutes for all the wedding guests to find their seats. If I had to guess, I'd say there are at least five hundred people in attendance.

Once everyone is seated, a live band plays off to the right. There's a cello, piano, violins, flutes, and a woman singing in English. There's an older man in the back with an acoustic guitar, but he hasn't started playing yet.

Shortly, Lom and his best men begin their walk toward the altar. They include his brothers and his brother-in-law, Santos. There is another man, but I'm not too certain who he is.

When all the men are standing in place, I notice Lom just staring down the aisle. All the wedding guests turn to see who's walking up the aisle, and the first woman is someone whom I don't recognize. She's young, maybe in her early twenties, with dark features and beautiful alabaster skin. After her comes a red-headed woman, who I believe is with Nazyr. Another woman walks up the aisle, and when she gets closer, I can tell it's Eset Umarova. The last woman before the bride is Amelia, who is married to Ruslan.

The music playing in the background changes, and the female vocalist begins singing from her heart. After

Amelia reaches her place, Emily appears, wearing a long, flowy, and delicate lace dress. She's all smiles as she walks toward her future husband. Lom is smiling from ear to ear, and the small children in the front row start giggling. They must be the group of new Umarova children, and I'll bet the people sitting with them are security guards.

The ceremony continues to go amazingly and much quicker than I figured it would. I've been to some weddings that take almost an hour just to get the couple married. Not this one. It wasn't overly religious. It was straight to the point, and the vows they wrote for one another seemed like they actually came from the heart.

When the ceremony ends, we're all escorted to a separate reception area. It's different from the one I was in after I arrived here. This one is around the hill and might sit about half the guests in attendance. I quickly dash for the bar and get another refill before heading to the outdoor area.

There's a slight breeze blowing in the wind, but I notice over time, the wind just begins to pick up more and more. The woman I've been watching since the ceremony begins to rub her arms, so I take this as my opportunity.

She's wearing the plum-colored dress all the bridesmaids wore. Though it's a halter top, the halter is thick, and the dress cascades all the way down to her feet. There's a small triangle-shaped cutout in the middle of her chest area, and she's chatting with the other four ladies she was in the wedding with. I have no idea who this woman is, but she has to be close to the Umarovas. The other bridesmaids in the wedding are either Emily's sisters-in-law or cousin.

I take my time getting over to her, trying to read the body language she's putting off. If she seems like she doesn't want me to approach her, then I'm not going to.

She's chatting with Eset, who was formally an Umarova but is now married to Santos Ramirez, the nephew of Alejandro Ramirez, the current Mexican cartel leader. Eset spots me coming first, so she elbows the woman in the side, and then the mystery woman's eyes look right into my own. She's a bit shorter than me by maybe a foot or so, but her body, with its hourglass shape, is delicious. I wouldn't say she's overweight by any means, but she does have curves, which is a bonus in my book. As I grow closer, I notice how she has the deepest, darkest chocolate eyes. They're deeper in color than any eyes I've ever seen, and they're so very beautiful.

I walk right up to her and take my suit jacket off. Without even giving it a second thought, I place my suit jacket over her shoulders.

"What are you doing?" she asks, baffled by what I've done.

"I'm helping you get warm, obviously. I'm Ambros, by the way."

"Ambros Galanis," Eset speaks up, staring right at me. She crosses her arms and cocks her head a bit as if she's in a defensive stance.

"Eset, it's great to see you."

"I wish I could say the same." Eset's really showing this woman that she shouldn't want to be friends with me.

"Did you do something to her?" the mystery woman asks of me.

I shake my head. "No, I didn't do anything to Eset. She's just angry my business interfered with her friend's interests many years ago."

"Eset, my uncle is here and would like to speak with you." Eset's husband comes up at the perfect time and whisks her away, which is my perfect opportunity to get

to know this enchanting woman much better. The other two ladies smile slyly at the woman and then walk away, giving us some much-needed space.

“I don’t think I got your name.”

“It’s Xava.” Xava scans her eyes up and down my body. I keep my attention right on her eyes, unable to tear myself away from the beauty of them. I wonder about something else, though. I want to know who Xava is to the Umarova family. There were rumors filtering around for a while about a secret sibling. Could any of them be true? Or is Xava simply an extremely close family friend? The rumors began circulating a little under a year ago, but there’s never been any sort of confirmation.

“You look like you want to know something,” Xava speaks up.

“I do. I want to know how I haven’t ever crossed paths with you. It seems like you’re close to the Umarova family, and there have been many times when I’ve crossed paths with them.”

Xava shrugs. “I guess I haven’t been around when you have.”

“That seems a little hard to believe. So, how do you know the bride and groom?” I’m going to keep digging until I get the answers I seek.

“They’re my family. My mother is their mother’s cousin,” Xava states, almost a little fed up that I’ve continued digging.

“I knew you had to be part of the family. There have been rumors circulating, which is the only reason I was digging in the first place,” I go on to tell her.

She furrows her brows. “Rumors? What kind of rumors?”

“Believe it or not, about their being a secret child.”

Xava begins giggling, and it's the lightest, most carefree laugh. "That is about the funniest thing I've ever heard of."

"You'd be surprised. If it were true, it wouldn't be the first secret child I've ever heard about. People in families like the Umarovas usually always have a backup plan."

"A backup plan?" Xava furrows her brows and sips on her champagne.

"Yeah, in case something happens to the other children. At least then there would be one left to carry on the family name, the blood, the power."

"You're acting like the Umarovas are the most powerful family in the world."

"Depending on who you are, they might be."

"I don't think they're that big of a deal." The way Xava says it is like she doesn't realize just how powerful her family really is. She is a cousin, of course, so maybe she doesn't know exactly what they do. She might think they just have old power from being in Chechnya since the area was practically created.

"Yeah, you're probably right." I agree with her just because I'm trying to get under that beautiful dress of hers tonight.

"Yeah, so what do you do, Ambros?"

I take a sip of my drink and smirk. "I'm a translator. I usually work remotely from my computer, but I do travel around the world for work as well."

"That must be exciting. I'm going to put my money on you being Greek."

"Was it that easy to tell with my charming good looks and god-given bronze skin?" I joke, and Xava snickers.

"Something like that." The more I spend time with Xava, the more I realize that she has a natural sort of

beauty. She's barely wearing any makeup, and while I noticed it before, up close, I can really see just how gorgeous she is. There isn't one bit of plastic surgery on her whatsoever. I don't see any traces of a facelift, lip fillers, or even implants. So many women across Europe have been hopping on the plastic surgery trend as of late, but I can't stand it.

Xava has thick well-rounded brows, a perfectly sculpted button nose, and thick natural lips. Her cheekbones are high and well-formed, and I like how she has a little bit of plumpness to her cheeks. She doesn't look too thin or like she's starving herself.

Xava's eyes dart over to the left. She's looking past me and gives a nod. A nod that I can't help but notice. I'm doing the one thing she probably is going to get annoyed with. I look over my shoulder and see Ruslan Umarova boring holes into the back of my head. He narrows his eyes as he looks at me and then returns his attention back to Xava. "Ruslan seems to be overprotective of you."

"He is. He's very overprotective, as is the rest of my family." For the first time, I hear the fierceness of the Umarova line coming through her voice. She might act like she doesn't know about the power her family holds, but deep down, she does. Maybe she just hasn't accepted it yet.

"Of course, he is." Ruslan has every right to be. He knows how dangerous this life can be, and I have this funny feeling that Xava has been lucky enough to never experience such a thing.

Chapter Four

Xava

I don't know what in the actual hell is going on, but for the first time in my life, a man is actually choosing me over other people. I don't know if it's because I'm no longer in the Czech Republic or what. I've been getting a little more attention in Grozny, but no man has actually come up to me and flirted like Ambros is. Maybe it's because Rolando is usually always around me. Most men might think Rolando is my significant other, but in actuality, he's my security detail.

I spend a lot of time with Ambros throughout the night, recalling that I saw him when the wedding ceremony was going on. I wasn't sure he was staring at me, but since his eyes were also glued to me while I was rubbing my arms from the cold chill, I had my confirmation.

Yara has been off chatting up some fancy-looking guy with sandy blond hair. Every once in a while, she checks in, but we're giving each other some distance right now. "I'm going to get another drink. Want me to get you one as well?" Ambros asks.

"Yes, please." I could really use another drink. Alcohol helps me relax a lot. Without it, I think I can be too tense and take life far too seriously.

Ambros gives me a soft nod and heads toward the bar. While he's walking away, I glance across the seating area and notice Yara is taking this as her opportunity to come over and chat with me about things.

"How is your night going with that hunk?" Yara fans herself playfully, and I snicker.

“It’s going so well. He’s really nice and has been great company. I think I might have to keep this night going after the reception.”

“Oooh, look at you! Okay. Do you want our suite in the villa, or...” Yara questions. She glances back at her date and smiles at him. “We do have two rooms in our suite, so it’s not like we’d be in the same spot. I think it could work out well like us going back to the suite and not making it awkward or whatever.”

“If he’s staying local, maybe I’ll go back with him instead. The last thing I want to do is be in the same building as my family while I’m screwing some hunk like him. Could you imagine if my brothers came in or something?” The mere thought is enough to make a chill run down my spine.

“Oh, God. I never even thought of that. Do you think they would?” Yara’s the only person I ever confided in about my paternity. She’s really the only person who I thought would understand it the way I needed her to. She’s my confidant, my best friend, and the person who never judges me. I used to think that was Dominika, but over the last few months, the two of us have really grown apart. I know as we get older, some people stay in our lives, but other people leave. There’s an old saying that my mother used to tell me—“people are like the seasons”. Basically, they come, and they go.

I just wish I knew why Dominika and I drifted apart. I’ve yet to get an answer on that, but part of me believes she was angry about me going off and exploring the world without her. The last time I really had any sort of communication with her was when she was going to Greece on holiday. I had her lie for me in case my mother asked about how the trip was going, and since then, things have been rocky. She’s barely spoken to me, and I need to make it a point to communicate with her so we can try to resolve this. She and I have been friends for so long that losing this friendship would almost feel like a

breakup. If I'm being honest, though, it kind of already feels like there isn't any coming back from this.

I've reached out numerous times over the course of the last couple of weeks and haven't gotten a reply back. I'd love nothing more than to squash this. I just don't think she wants to. If she did, I figure she would have reached out by now.

"I have no idea, honestly. I'd rather just not even have it be a possibility. You know?"

"Yeah, I totally do," Yara confirms. "I think I'm going to enjoy the privacy in our suite with my newfound date if that's okay with you."

"Go right ahead. Do you like him?"

"Sure, I guess." Yara shrugs. "He's got a good smile and a banging body, and he's charismatic. That's all I really want in a one-night stand. Let's just hope he knows how to use the tool between his legs."

I shake my head and try to hold back my laughter, but I can't. Ambros ends up coming back up to the table and takes his seat. "Yara, this is Ambros. Ambros, this is Yara." I make the introductions, and Yara smiles mischievously at him.

"It's so nice to meet you. Have fun tonight. I need to get back over to my date." Yara simply stares at Ambros at first, then gives me a wink before she walks away.

"I'll bet you two have been friends for a very long time." Ambros hands me my drink, and I take a sip.

"How can you tell?" I laugh.

"You two have an unspoken language with your eyes. It's like the two of you don't have to say anything to understand each other."

"We've been friends since we were little girls. I guess we do, in a way."

“Sometimes the friendships you forge in your younger years are the best ones.”

“I think so. Yara’s one of my best friends, if not my only friend. When I was younger, I used to have more, but you know how life goes. Sometimes, it tears people apart.”

Ambros takes his seat beside me. “I can only agree to that slightly. If life pulls someone away from you, it likely means they weren’t supposed to be in it at all.”

“I’ve never thought about it that way.” He makes a good point, like Dominika, for example. We were close right around the time I was coming to Grozny for the first time, but ever since then, she’s faded away into the background. I’ve called her a couple of times, but she hasn’t called me back once. I even reached out to her via text and on social media, but still nothing.

“It’s something I’ve learned through the years.”

“You talk like you’re some old man.”

“I am to some people.” Ambros chuckles in a carefree manner, and it makes me smile.

“How old are you?”

“I’m thirty-two.”

“Oh, my word. You’re ancient, aren’t you?” I widen my eyes and make a big spectacle out of it, then take another sip of my drink. As I sip on champagne, I try to hide my amused smirk.

“Ancient is kind. Prehistoric is entirely more accurate.”

Ambros and I both spend the next couple of hours chatting and drinking with one another. Before I know it, it’s already past midnight, yet there’s a large portion of the guests still here partying it up. Ambros and I have been sharing mischievous glances every once in a while, and I’m getting really tired of waiting.

“Do you want to get out of here?” I look right into Ambros’ deep, whiskey-colored eyes. They remind me a bit of my own, but his are darker. I’m surprised that’s even possible.

His expression shifts, and he looks at me with hunger-filled eyes. “Is that what you want, Xava?”

Ah, so he wants to play cat and mouse a bit. “Yes.” I keep my answer plain and simple, not wanting to mess around too much. I’ve spent a good portion of the night with him, and if I don’t at least get one hell of a kiss from Ambros, I’m going to be pissed.

“Then let’s go.” Ambros stands up first, and I follow suit. He slides his arm around my waist as we walk the old paverstone path up the hill. Once we reach the top, we’re at the same portion where the villa is. We walk around the villa to the cobblestone driveway, and there are a couple of men working the valet booth.

I glance around to see where my security is, noticing he’s staring right at me from where we just came from. He stops sipping on his drink and follows suit. I don’t believe he will interfere with the fun-filled evening I have planned, but I know he has to be close by.

Ambros hands his ticket over to one of the men, and he walks off, heading to get Ambros’ car. After a couple of minutes, the man comes back with the car, a Bentley Mulliner Bacalar in a deep yellow color. I’m sure the car’s creator calls it something special, like a yellow flame. Typically, car companies come up with fun colors like that to help upscale the product.

We get inside, and Ambros heads down the driveway. We make idle chit-chat while he drives.

There are barely any lights on in the Tuscan countryside at this time of night. It’s not like Grozny, where there are lights at every street corner or apartment

lights from the unit across the street. It's dark, and in the darkness lies beauty.

Ambros makes a left and pulls down a private driveway. We drive under a row of trees on either side. I glance back in the mirror and notice a vehicle driving behind us. There's no doubt in my mind that's my security, but I don't make a big deal out of it. All I can do is hope Ambros doesn't notice. I'm nobody to him, and if he realizes I have security, he might begin to ask questions. "It's tucked away a little bit, which is why I rented this small home. I wanted a little bit of privacy while I took a break this weekend."

A sole light is attached to the house itself, providing just the minimum of illumination. But I can tell it's made up of stone, likely the same stone our villa was built from. The doors are painted a deep, evergreen color, and Ambros parks the car right in front of them. We both get out and head over to the home. He takes out a key and unlocks it, then flicks the light switch on.

As we walk inside, I really take in the nineteenth-century architecture. The floors are made from old bricks and spread as far as I can see them. They even extend to the stairwell, and I'm curious to know if they continue on the second floor. Off to our right is a small living area with a raised fireplace. It looks original and has the same bricks surrounding the interior and part of the exterior. The outside is painted cream, which matches the rest of the walls, but the dark stained beam over the top of the fireplace really ties it together.

Ambros grabs my hand and leads me upstairs, where I confirm the brick floors continue throughout. "If you want to stop, now would be the time to tell me."

I appreciate how he's trying to give me a chance to back out of this, but I don't want to. Honestly, I'm more turned on than I've been in a very long time.

"Not a chance in hell," I say with a smirk.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Ambros licks his bottom lip and leads me into the bedroom. It’s not overly large, but there’s a king-sized bed sitting in the middle of the room. There are metal accents around the room, from the headboard to a couple of interesting pieces of art hanging on the wall. They even have some sketches from Leonardo Da Vinci framed and on the walls. I’m uncertain if they’re originals or copies, but they tie the room together beautifully. The duvet almost completely matches my dress in its deep plum color.

I tear my thoughts away from the aesthetic of the room and take in Ambros. Or should I say take in all of his glory? He might have been joking earlier when he compared himself to a god, but I don’t think he should. He’s tall with a thick, muscular build. The man at least has a foot on me, maybe a little bit more. His eyes are the kind that completely call to you. No matter what you’re doing, all you want to do is stare right into them. His skin is a golden bronze, which tells me he spends a lot of time out in the sun. He said he travels a lot for work, but I wonder if he tries to stay in the sun a lot when he isn’t working to keep his perfectly tanned skin.

“Do you like what you see?” Ambros playfully asks, an amused smirk dragging at his lips.

I make it a point to scan my eyes up and down his body slowly. His suit clings to him like a second skin, showing every angle of his muscles without even being naked. “It’ll have to do now, won’t it?”

He gives me a full shit-eating grin. “There’s no other choice, really,” Ambros tells me as he takes a couple of steps in my direction. I lick my lips in anticipation, wanting this more than he knows. I’ve pretty much been celibate for the last year. Unintentionally, of course, but maybe it’ll make this experience with him so much better.

Ambros is right in front of me and drags his fingertips against the chiffon material of my dress. He runs his fingertips over my hip and slowly drags it down my leg. We're staring into each other's eyes, and I can't help it. I want to taste him. I want to know if he kisses as well as he talks.

I place a hand on his stomach, and his perfectly formed abs greet me. Slowly, I snake my hand up his chest and hold onto his tie. I pull it gently until he comes toward me, and our lips are a mere millimeter apart. He takes control and presses his succulent lips against my own. He kisses me, unlike any kiss I've ever had. It's not forced. It's not rushed. It's passionate and caring.

He teases me with them, and I enjoy every second of it. I don't realize it, but as he kisses me, Ambros pushes me back up against the wall. As soon as my back hits the wall, I'm instantly alarmed. At least I'm alarmed until Ambros talks to me. "Don't worry, I've got you."

He slides his arms around my neck and slowly peels off his suit jacket that he let me borrow for most of the night. He then looks for the zipper of my dress. Luckily, it's a halter top, so I have a small zipper at the top hidden by the material of my dress. There's another zipper midway through my back that goes down to my ass, but I have a feeling Ambros can manage to get this off me without any issues.

Just as I thought, he takes off my dress like it's second nature to him. The plum dress falls to the floor in a pile at my feet, and I start unbuttoning his dress shirt like I'm setting a Guinness world record. Ambros unbuttons his pants and kicks them off just as I finish with his shirt.

It's not long before we're acting like two animals who just escaped their cages. His hands are all over me, and mine are all over him. His lips reunite with mine, and

while his kisses are still passionate, they're now fueled with fire.

Ambros surprises me by sliding a hand between my legs. He brushes a couple of fingertips between my lips, the only guard being my lace underwear. They don't stay on for long because he's soon dragging them down my legs.

"Fuck, you are divine." I've never been told this before, yet the way Ambros says it makes me believe he's telling me the truth.

He picks up his pace with his hand, and I lean my head back against the wall. "That's it, relax." My pussy is growing wetter the more he toys with me, and I gnaw on my bottom lip to curb the moan waiting to be let out. My nipples began to tingle, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't turned on right now. If I had a knob controlling how turned on I am at this moment, it would be all the way up.

"I need you, Ambros," I finally tell him.

He doesn't stop immediately. He keeps playing with me like a child who has his favorite toy in front of him. Eventually, he stops, but it's only for a few moments. He heads over to the small wooden end table by his bed and opens the drawer. Within a second, he has a condom, and he's ripping the foil with his teeth. He slides it over his thick cock and comes back to me.

Ambros lifts me with his strong arms and tosses me on the bed. He hooks one arm under a leg and spreads me wide for him, his eyes staring longingly at my pussy.

"Like what you see?" I playfully ask him.

He shrugs and smirks. "It'll have to do now, won't it?"

I like that he can be playful and sexy at the same time. He finally lines himself up at my entrance and begins slowly pressing himself inside of me. "Holy fuck, Xava," he hisses as he's about halfway in. I feel like he's ripping

me apart as I clutch the duvet under me. I've only had sex with two other men in my life, and neither of them was this thick. It's not even that Ambros has a long cock. It's that it's so fucking thick I think he could rip me.

Eventually, he rocks in and out of me, which helps, and my body adjusts to his size. "Fuck," I moan, and Ambros begins to press chaste kisses against my skin. He starts at my collarbone and then goes lower until he's sucking a nipple into his mouth. He uses his tongue to circle it and then teases it the same way he was teasing my pussy a few minutes ago. It's calculated, methodical, and damn, it feels so fucking good.

He rocks in and out of me, and over time, I don't feel any pain at all. I dig my nails into Ambros' shoulders, and he begins sucking on my neck.

I don't know how long this is going to last tonight, but I'm praying it's an all-nighter. Unlike my previous sexual partners, Ambros knows exactly what he's doing.

Holy shit. It's the next morning, and I'm in total shock. I've never had a one-night stand before, but last night, I did something out of my comfort zone and completely shocked myself in the process.

The first boy I ever had sex with was someone I went to school with back in Prague. His name was Jan, and we were sixteen. Let's just say the experience wasn't the best. We even dated for a couple of months, but the romance fizzled out. After that, I met Jakub, someone who was in Prague for work. He was a few years older than me, and it was really my first experience of being with a man who wanted to rule his woman—and not in a good way. I managed to get away from him, but getting away from him wasn't easy.

I called Rolando a few minutes ago, and he'll be here to pick me up at Ambros' place very soon. He stated he was only around the corner, so I've already gotten dressed and am downstairs in the living area. Thankfully, Ambros never noticed Rolando last night. God, that would have made for some awkward conversation. I'm sitting on the plush couch and I notice a pen and some stationery on the table beside it. I doubt I'll ever see Ambros again, so I should at least leave him a note.

I pick up the notepad and pen and begin to write my message.

Ambros,

Last night was amazing. It's more fun than I've had in a really long time.

It was great meeting you.

xo,

Xava

My phone begins to vibrate in my hand, and it's Rolando, so I pick it up. "Hey, are you here?"

"Yes. I'm right out front."

"Okay, cool. I'm coming out now," I tell Rolando and leave Ambros' house.

I walk right out, and Rolando is in his usual blacked-out SUV. It never surprises me anymore how we could be anywhere in the world, and he's driving the same car. He steps out of the SUV to open the back door for me, and then I get inside. Rolando shuts the door as usual, and as soon as he gets inside, he smirks at me.

"What?"

“Oh, nothing. I’m just surprised you went home with Ambros Galanis. Of all the people at the wedding, you chose *him*?” Rolando shakes his head and begins heading down the chestnut tree-lined driveway.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“His family is trouble, Xava. Be careful who you let get close to you.”

“You’re reading too much into this. I’m not getting close to him. It was a one-night stand.” I shut it down completely. Rolando doesn’t even need to be giving me advice anyway. Who is he to judge someone like that? I don’t make comments on whatever he does with his life because it isn’t my place.

The rest of the drive back to the villa is awkwardly quiet, and when we arrive, I get out of the car and start to head straight back to the suite I’m sharing with Yara.

Rolando grabs my arm, forcing me to stop, and looks right at me. “You can’t go back to your suite yet. Ruslan wants to speak with you now.” His tone changes immediately, and I realize this isn’t a request. It’s an order.

Rolando releases my arm, and I nod. He leads me to Ruslan’s suite and opens the doors once we reach them. I take in a deep breath, not knowing what in the hell I’m walking into.

Ruslan’s sitting on a couch, scrolling on his phone. The moment I walk in through the doorway, he raises his brows and stares right at me. “You tried to slip your security detail last night. Do you have any idea how furious I am with you right now?”

He says he’s furious, but the tone in his voice doesn’t tell me he is.

“I wasn’t intentionally trying to slip my detail. I was heading out for a good time.” I explain. Surely, Ruslan knows I’m a young woman, and I want to experience life.

Hell, a woman needs to get laid every once in a while. I'm not going to come out and say that, though.

Ruslan presses his lips together and nods. "Mm, and birds don't fly. Xava, tell me, does that sound believable?"

"No, it doesn't." I shake my head as I answer him.

"Exactly. You can deny it as much as you like. I've been around the block before with people trying to slip their security. You wanted some freedom last night. That I understand. What I don't understand is why you would inadvertently put your life at risk by doing so. You know better. You know you need to be careful. So that's what I'm telling you. Don't slip your detail again. It's for your own good."

I suck in another breath and nod. "I understand."

Ruslan's phone starts ringing, and he answers it. He doesn't officially tell me I'm free to go, but I'm pretty certain I am, so I leave his suite. It's not like I'm a damn prisoner, but my brother is really good at intimidating me.

I exit the room, and Rolando follows a few paces behind me. Once I'm sure Ruslan's door is closed, I look right back at Rolando. "Wanted to take me to get yelled at, did you?"

"No. I wanted you to be aware of the importance of communicating with me. I don't care what you do, Xava. However, I do care about keeping you safe."

We continue walking throughout the villa until I'm at my suite. Once inside, I feel like I can finally take a deep breath. I don't see my best friend, so I head into my bedroom and shut the door behind me.

The one thing I need now more than anything else is a long, hot shower. Luckily, at this villa, they have bathrooms attached to all the suites. I take a lengthy shower, and when I get out, I go ahead and blow dry my

hair, put on some light makeup, and get dressed. When I finish, I head back into the main area of the suite, and Yara's sitting at the table with a coffee in her hand, but she isn't alone.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in." Yara giggles, obviously amused with herself.

"Was your night as interesting as Yara tells me?" my sister asks with a smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

"It was a very good, long night," I say with a smirk and walk over to the coffee machine. Yara gets up and practically shoves me out of the way, but I know it isn't in a rude manner. I've never been the best at making fresh coffee drinks, and she was pretty much born knowing how to do it right.

"Good. We all deserve to have some fun every once in a while, even if our brothers don't see it that way." I find that Eset and I have the closest bond out of any of my siblings. My brothers are all very overprotective. Ruslan is by far the worst with how overprotective he is, but he means well.

I'm fortunate to have good relationships with my blood siblings, but my relationships with my adopted ones aren't as great. I haven't seen my brother or sister in the last year, and my adoptive mother has made some comments to me that I should reach out more. It's hard to do when my relationship with Andrej and Branka hasn't been good for years.

"Yeah, they're fun killers, in a way," I say.

"Most people are," Yara says as she hands me my perfectly made coffee. I take a sip, and it's like liquid happiness wafting over my tastebuds.

"Not to change the subject, but you know Ruslan's going to be asking later. Have you given any thoughts about school? You know he wants you to pursue your dream, no matter what that might be."

Ever since I found out I was part of the family, Ruslan made it a point to tell me the family would support me through whatever I wanted to do.

“It’s not that I don’t want to go to school. I do. I just don’t know what I want to go for. I haven’t found my passion yet, and I don’t want to rush into anything.”

Eset nods. “I completely understand. Whenever Ruslan asks you about it, just shoot it to him straight like you did to me. He’ll appreciate your honesty. Not to mention respect you for not just jumping to do something because you feel pressured.”

“I’m sure I’ll know what I want to do at some point. I just don’t want to rush into anything just yet.”

“Say no more. You’ll know what you want to do eventually. It will hit you at the right time.” Eset’s trying to be reassuring, and while I appreciate it, I don’t think she understands what I’m saying. She’s always had a love for art. I don’t think she’s ever struggled with knowing what she wanted or didn’t want to do.

“Not to be rude, but I’m going to take my coffee outside and enjoy some fresh air,” Yara says, and she proceeds to walk out of the suite.

It’s the first time I’ve had my sister alone in a really long time, and there are some things I’d love to discuss with her privately. Typically, we have a couple of children running around or some adults. This is the sort of thing I’d love to talk to her about in private.

“You look like there’s something on your mind,” Eset states.

“I’ve heard a couple of rumors circulating about the family.”

Eset cranes her neck to the side. “What sort of rumors?”

I lick my lips nervously. “The kind about our family being powerful, dangerous people. I mean, I know we come from a powerful family... but I don’t know how we could be considered dangerous. It’s something I’ve wanted to talk to you about. I just can never find the right time to do it.”

Eset sucks in a deep breath and slowly lets it out. “This is a conversation we need to have with our brother, Xava.”

She only said one sentence, but it’s all I need to know that there’s some truth to it all. If there wasn’t, she would’ve denied it completely.

How could we be dangerous?

What is going on that I don’t know about?

Chapter Five

Ambros

Instead of returning to Greece, I accepted a job in the United States. Right now, I'm standing outside an almost empty office building in the middle of Manhattan. Most people would be afraid to pull off a job like this in one of the most congested places in the world, but not me. I've been doing this for so long that I've learned some tricks of the trade. It doesn't hurt I was trained by one of the best—my father.

Even though we often don't see eye to eye these days, I still owe him a lot of credit. I won't lie. I was pretty much thrown into the contract killer life. I didn't have the option to turn it down as the oldest son of the great Achilles Galanis. He was named Achilles because my grandmother loved Homer's *Iliad* and felt like it was a strong name for a man who would no doubt be a leader. My grandmother never said anything to me while she was alive about the family business, but I wholeheartedly believe she knew about the Organization, the contract killer business my grandfather started almost seventy years ago.

Since then, he's passed, with my grandmother joining him a few months later. I believe she died from a broken heart. She'd known my grandfather ever since he was a young boy. I think she might have been five or six herself. I can't imagine knowing someone that long and then trying to live without them. It must've been torture.

As I sip on my hot coffee, staring at the building under the security of my blacked-out sunglasses, my phone rings. I fish it out of my pocket to see it's my mother, which can only mean one thing. My father has been talking to her about me not coming around. I have

two options right now. I can either avoid the call and make things so much worse, or I can accept it and make sure that I at least smooth things over in the meantime.

Fuck. I know what I have to do.

“Mom,” I speak to her in Greek, knowing it will at least get me a couple of brownie points.

“Ambros, why is it you do not speak with your father? He has just told me you have been avoiding him for some time now. Do you think it is good for him with his failing health these days, hmm?” Well, I’ve been thrown straight into the depths of hell. She didn’t even give me time to warm up. She just started screaming and berating me like a naughty child.

“I’m not avoiding anyone. I’ve been doing job after job, had a wedding to attend, and now I’m on another job.”

She scoffs on the other end of the line. “Ambros, what do you think of me? Do you think I am stupid, that I am a fool? I carried you inside of me and have been your mother for thirty-two years. I know you better than these pathetic excuses you are trying to have me believe!”

Fuck, I’d better just stick with the lie now. “Mom, I’m not avoiding him.”

“You know I don’t believe a word you are saying to me right now.”

It’s obvious. I’m sure she’s flaring her nostrils and has lifted her chin up slightly. Every single time she’s angry, she does both of those things. They’re signature moves from her.

“Mom, I mean it. I’m not avoiding him. Can you cut me some slack?”

She begins laughing, but it isn’t an amused laugh. It’s a laugh that tells me she’s going to want to murder me the next time she sees me. “Slack? Oh no, you are far past

that. Your father has been stressed. His health has been deteriorating, and he's keeping this empire up on his shoulders. You should be helping him carry the burden, Ambros. It's your duty. The Organization will eventually be yours, and you're using your job as an excuse to be away from home. Away from us when we need you the most."

Sometimes, I don't think she understands how cruel and taxing my father can be. He treats her differently than he does Linus and me. She's his partner, and we're the people he'll be handing the torch to when he's ready to pass it down. I, for one, hope it's just me. I don't want Linus to be forced to live this life for the rest of his days.

"Mom, I don't think this is as big of a deal as you're making it out to be. All I'm doing is working and setting an example. Do you think our contractors will do as good of a job if one of Achilles' sons isn't out getting their hands dirty? No. They'll get lazy. We've seen it happen in the past when I wasn't working out in the field as much."

The truth, though. I am trying to avoid my father because I don't want to deal with him right now. He's too argumentative, and I don't think it's worth it most days. However, what I'm saying to my mother isn't a lie. Our contractors had slacked when they noticed I wasn't out doing what they do as much. I don't know why they would, considering they get taken care of quite well financially.

"You get home after this job and meet with your father. I shouldn't have ever been brought into this mess, and you know it." My mother's voice deepens, and she doesn't even bother to say goodbye before she hangs up the phone on me.

I slide my phone back into my pocket and shake my head. I didn't think he'd bring her into this, and she's right. She shouldn't ever have been brought in the middle. My issues with my father are my own.

I take another sip of my Freddo espresso. I'm calling it a coffee, but it's really a coffee drink I usually get in Greece. Here in America, many people don't know how to make it, though it's not overly complicated. Every time I order it, I end up having to explain it to the barista—two shots of espresso poured over ice.

The sun has already gone down as I finish my drink and toss it in the nearest trash can. With it being the middle of May, it's already humid here in New York. The streets are hustling and bustling as usual, but the building I'm staring at is the only thing I'm concerned about. At the Organization, we have a team of hackers who can access almost anything. I've already had them tap into the street cameras, so it will look like I wasn't even here. All I'm waiting on now is confirmation they've hacked into the building's security feed. When that's done, I can proceed with my job, and it will be like I was never here in the first place.

My phone rings once, indicating I have a new text message. I open it up, and it's from Dimitrios, one of the hackers at the Organization.

I open it up to see his text in Greek.

You're clear to proceed.

I text him back with a simple thumbs-up emoji and kick myself off the wall. I head down to the intersection, where there's a group of pedestrians waiting for the light to indicate we can walk across. A couple of the women turn back to look at me, and I smirk. Everywhere I go, I get some sort of attention from women. I used to love it. I loved it in the way addicts go for their drug or alcoholics go for their drink of choice. But something has changed in me over the last few days. I no longer crave attention from women like I used to before.

There's only one woman's attention that I crave. The same one who opted to leave me a handwritten note after a long night of having sex. They don't make women like that anymore. Most women would leave their number and say text me, but not Xava. Xava left it simple and then vanished like a ghost in the night. I have never, ever had that happen.

Visions of her on the night of the wedding keep replaying in my mind. Not solely because we had great sex but also because we seemed to have a great connection. When I first saw her, she looked innocent, like a fawn, and as the night went on, I got to know her a bit more. Fawn. I like that. When I see her again, that is what I will call her—*ελάφι*.

I shake my thoughts of Xava into the back of my mind as the light changes. The group of people begins walking, and I go along with them. Once I'm on the other side of the street, I make a left and head down the concrete sidewalk. The building sits halfway down the other end of this block, so I keep walking until I'm directly in front of the modern-looking skyscraper. I'd bet this was built or remodeled sometime in the last few years based on the glass structure on the outside of the building.

I walk in through the automatic doors, and just as I thought, the place is barren. My phone dings in my pocket again, so I take a quick glance to see who it is.

Again, it's from Dimitrios.

The target is on the fifteenth floor in an office. Head south, and you'll run right into him. I have the guards distracted with something, so they will not be a problem for you. When you leave, take the back staircase. It will lead you directly out into the alleyway, where we have a car waiting for you.

Very good. This is why I work for my family's business. Every step of the way, you have some sort of support to make sure you're not screwed over or left out in the cold. I continue through the building until I'm heading right for the elevators. I pull out my black gloves from my back pocket and slide them on, not wanting to leave any sort of fingerprints behind. There's not one peep coming from anywhere in this place, so I make sure to stay as quiet as I can as well.

I press the button for the elevator, and almost instantly, the doors open. I head inside and tap on the button for the fifteenth floor. As the doors close, I lean back against the wall and wait for the elevator to take me to my desired floor.

The ride isn't a long one, and once the doors open, I head toward the south side. My target today is Alexander Ferragimo. He's a businessman turned politician who is in the running for New York's next mayor. He's well known around the city and is even more well known back in California, where the client who ordered the hit is from.

We don't require our clients to give us details on why they're ordering hits on people. Sometimes, the clients want to let us know, almost as if they think we're going to judge them for ordering this service in the first place.

Our client informed us that Alexander inappropriately touched their seventeen-year-old daughter at a charity event they were throwing. At least, that's what they told us at first. We had put their order on the books, but the client called back and requested it be expedited. The client happens to be the young girl's father, and his daughter confessed she was raped by him, but she was too afraid to say anything.

A seventeen-year-old girl, whereas Alexander is in his late thirties. It's despicable. She isn't even an adult. She isn't someone he ever should have been pursuing in the

first place. I have no problem handling this job myself because of what Alexander has done. Honestly, it's why I took it. I get pleasure from eliminating men and women who act against children in a nefarious manner.

I continue down the hallway, passing office after office. All the doors are shut except one, so I head directly to the office and walk inside. "Mr. Ferragimo?"

He pulls his attention away from his computer, seeming a bit startled when he realizes I'm not someone who works in his office. I'm sure he can hear my thick Greek accent, and as he tries to place me, I think about how I'm going to do this.

"Yes, and you are?"

"A new hire on the security team, sir. We received a threat about a possible sniper. I need you to come with me, sir. We're not certain if it's a false alarm or not, but it would be better to be safe than sorry."

"Yes, you're right about that." Alexander hops up from his chair at record speed, seeming startled about what I've told him. Little does he know I'm going to be the one who makes him take his last breath.

"Please, let's hurry. There's no time to waste while the rest of the team tries to locate the threat." I begin walking down the hallway with Alexander until I find a conference room in the center. I stop and push the door open. He steps in directly behind me.

"Do you think this is safe enough?" he asks as I shut the door behind me.

As I turn to face him, I look right into his eyes. "No place is safe enough when you've hurt innocent people, Alexander. You would know a lot about that, wouldn't you?"

He begins stumbling backward, eyes widening out of fear. He knows now. He knows I'm not here to help him. "Do you know why I'm here, Alexander?"

Immediately, he shakes his head from side to side. “No, I don’t have the slightest idea.”

I scoff, knowing it’s total and utter bullshit. “Think really hard.”

Alexander looks down at the floor for a few moments, and then his eyes meet my own. There’s more fear there than I’ve seen from him before. “See, you do know. You know what you did. I’m sure you thought you weren’t going to get caught, but you did. Now you’re going to pay for what you’ve done.” I pull my blade out from the inside of my suit jacket and rush up to him. He freezes like a deer caught in headlights, and I ram my blade into the center of his throat. I want him to choke on his own blood and know that no one is going to come and help him. He’s going to suffer, and he knows these will be his last moments.

I watch as he falls to the ground. He tries to paw at the blade in his neck. He wants to take it out, so I’ll help him. I remove the blade, and he begins swallowing, then choking on his own blood. I’m certain I severed an artery based on the way he’s bleeding out in front of me.

I’ll stay here until he’s no longer breathing, snap a photo for proof, and get it sent over to my client. We’ve already had a deposit paid, but now the remainder of the Organization’s fee will be sent through.

There’s nothing better than taking predators like this out of the world.

Chapter Six

Xava

We've been back in Grozny for a few days now. Since Eset and I talked back in Italy about the family, I've had this feeling deep inside me, like I have to communicate with Ruslan about the elephant in the room. I think I've been too much of a chicken to do it until now, but today, that will change. Rolando is currently driving me over to Ruslan's place. I'm sitting in the back seat, and for some reason, I'm nervous.

I don't even really know why. It's not like I know anything about the family... like if we're actually as dangerous as the rumors I've heard make us seem. I rub the back of my neck, trying to get the tension there to go away. I don't know why I think it's going to work. If that worked every single time I got the least bit anxious or nervous, I would do it every time.

"Are you all right, Xava?" It took Rolando months to call me Xava instead of Ms. Beno, even though I specifically requested it from him numerous times. He'd call me Xava a couple of times in a row and then revert back to what he originally said. He told me he felt uncomfortable doing it, and I jokingly told him being called Ms. Anything made me feel like he was speaking with my mother. Over time, Rolando and I have developed a good friendship. He's one of my biggest confidants. I tend to tell him a lot more than I tell my siblings.

"I'm okay."

Rolando makes eye contact with me in the rearview mirror. "I know you better than that. Something is amiss. I can see something is bothering you."

I swallow hard and think about what I'm going to tell Rolando. I don't know if I should lie or be honest with him, but as I think about it, I don't see a point in keeping anything from him. "I'm going to speak to Ruslan about a couple of rumors I've heard since being here."

Rolando makes a left at the intersection and then looks back at me in the rearview mirror. "What kind of rumors?"

"Ones about our family being dangerous. I... I don't know why people would even say it, but I brought it up to Eset when we were in Italy for Lom and Emily's wedding."

"And what did Eset say?" Rolando questions.

"She said I should talk to Ruslan about it."

"I see."

"Do you know something I don't?" I already know the answer to my question. Of course, Rolando knows something. Otherwise, he wouldn't be speaking to me the way he is. He's been driving me around and has been my protection detail for the last year. I'm certain he knows more than I do, and maybe he'll give me some sort of information. I need something. I don't want to go into this meeting with my brother without knowing anything at all.

"I am privy to certain knowledge, yes, but as your sister said... this is something you should discuss with your brother."

"I am getting really tired of people saying that to me. Rolando, you've been very close to me for the last year. I'd even say you're a friend, and you're going to let me walk into my brother's without even knowing one thing?"

Rolando pulls down another street, and I know we're only a few minutes away from Ruslan's place. "Xava, you have to understand this is putting me in an incredibly

difficult position. If I speak up and your brother finds out, I could lose my job or worse.”

Or worse.

“What do you mean by that?” I ask, staring at him in the rearview mirror. His eyes are glued onto the road, but make no mistake, I see the uncertainty on his face. He doesn’t know what he should do right now, which only proves there is something about the family that I don’t know.

“Xava.” His tone is a plea for me to stop digging, but I won’t.

“Rolando, come on. Please, tell me something.”

“Your family is very powerful, and their business is as well. All your siblings have a hand in the business, and it’s a dangerous one. That’s why I drive you around. That’s why I protect you... because there are people who want you all dead.”

As he finishes his words, I can’t understand why someone would ever want us to die. What have we ever done to anyone else? My family... we contribute to local charities and do great things for the community. We’re good people.

“That seems preposterous. We are good people.”

“You are, but not everyone thinks so.” Rolando’s tone drops slightly. I’m sure he’s already worried about what he’s said to me. “Your brother will tell you things in more detail, but please do not tell him I said anything to you.” Again, I hear the plea in his voice. Rolando is scared. He might even be terrified for saying more than he should have.

“Don’t worry. I won’t say a thing.”

Rolando pulls into the parking garage attached to Ruslan’s building, and before long, we’re out of the car,

heading up to Ruslan's place. Ruslan's guard lets me in the condo, and Amelia greets me with a big smile.

"Xava, how are you? It feels so weird that we haven't seen each other since the wedding." Amelia pulls me into a big hug, and I wrap my arms around her.

"I'm good. You know things can just get so busy." It's a bullshit answer, but I think she's going to take me seriously. She's a mom, and she's always got something to do.

"Don't I know it. You know, I did want to talk to you about something. Well, it was more like me and Emily were chatting about it. You've been staying with Nazyr, Mona, and the kids for almost nine months now. If you want to, I think Emily should show you some apartments around Grozny that are available. I doubt you really get any privacy over there, and a single young woman like yourself probably wants some privacy, right?" Amelia gives me a knowing smirk, and I nod.

"It would be nice to have some alone time every now and again, yes."

"Perfect. I'll text Emily and have her find some listings for you. Maybe sometime in the next few days, the two of you can actually get out and look."

"That would be awesome. Thank you for setting that up."

"You're very welcome." Amelia looks like she's about to say something to me, but then Karim starts screaming in the background. "That's my cue to go. I'll text you later, and we really need to grab some lunch soon. There's this new restaurant on the other side of town that I've wanted to try really bad."

"Xava, you wanted to speak with me?" Ruslan's deep voice comes from out of nowhere, but I quickly realize he's come from the same way Karim's screaming was.

"I do, yes."

“Any reason our son is crying that loudly?” Amelia crosses her arms and drills my brother.

He huffs and looks right at her. “He isn’t very happy that I have to go into my office. I told him when I’m done, we’ll go out to the park for a bit. He wasn’t happy with that answer and demanded I stay with him and go to the park now. I told Karim I couldn’t and have a few things that need to be handled first.”

“Ah, so he’s mad. Now it makes sense.”

“He’s like you when you get hungry.” Ruslan shakes his head, and Amelia quickly whacks him on the shoulder.

“You don’t need to be such a total jerk.” Amelia rolls her eyes and walks off to tend to Karim.

“Now that I’ve successfully aggravated my wife, I guess we should head into my office so I can hide.”

Ruslan and I make our way through his place until we’re in his office. I shut the door behind me, and Ruslan cocks a brow. “You’re shutting the door, so this must be serious.”

I’m a little bit shocked that Eset didn’t give Ruslan any sort of heads-up.

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

“All right, let’s get into the thick of it then. What’s going on?”

I take the red seat across from him and lean back into the chair. I’m trying to relax, but I don’t even know if it will be possible right now. “I’ve heard some rumors about our family, and I’d like you to tell me if there’s any truth to them.”

I know what Rolando said, so I know there is some truth. What will Ruslan say, though?

“What have you heard?”

Okay, so we're going to start from scratch, I guess.
"That our family is dangerous."

"Hmm." He furrows his brows, and I know what Ruslan is doing. He's trying to figure out if he should be honest with me or keep doing what he has been doing.

"Please, whatever it is, just tell me the truth."

Ruslan is quiet for a few moments. He clears his throat and finally begins speaking. "Remember when we told you that you were a child who was tucked away because our family is powerful?"

I nod. "Yes."

"That's true. You were tucked away in case the rest of us died because you would be able to run Grozny and the family business on your birthright alone."

"Okay, what do you mean?"

"I'm getting to that... I'm just trying to figure out how to tell you."

"How to tell me that you've been lying to me the last year, right?" I don't know where this sudden anger is coming from on my part, but I'm pissed. I'm really fucking annoyed right now.

"I wouldn't say I lied, Xava. I kept things from you, yes. Things that would have scared you when we first invited you out here. Things that could have made you leave us when all we wanted was to be a family. If I told you everything right out of the gate, you would have gone back to your old life in Prague, and I know it."

I raise both my brows, completely blown away by how my brother is speaking to me right now. "I would have, huh? That's shocking. I didn't realize you were a psychic who could see the future, too."

"Xava." Ruslan knows he's getting into a deeper hole the more he talks.

“No, keep going. I want to hear this. What have you been hiding from me, Ruslan?”

Ruslan grabs the bottle of water in front of him and takes a sip. “Our family has been here for many, many years. All of that is true, but what I didn’t tell you was what our family does. We’re arm’s dealers. We sell firearms, bombs, and other products to different clientele from across the world.”

I burst out laughing. There’s no way he’s being serious right now. This is just some big, twisted joke.

Though, Ruslan doesn’t look like he’s amused in the least bit. “Xava, I’m not playing around. I’m dead serious.”

I’m caught off guard. Surely, I thought he was joking with me. I thought there was no way he could have been serious at all. What are the other options that could make my family deemed as dangerous, if not what my brother has just told me?

“I don’t understand how...” I lose my train of thought out of nowhere.

“I know. It’s a lot to process. Our father was killed, Xava. He was killed by the man who wanted his power. Our family has been in this business for almost two hundred years. We’ve always had ties to the criminal world, and this is how we provide for ourselves. I don’t expect you to jump into the family business the way Eset has. We grew up knowing what the Umarova name was known for. You were only thrown into it a year ago. I’m not going to pressure you to join the family business. All I want is for you to be happy, go to school, and pursue whatever dream you have.”

I shake my head, absorbing everything he’s telling me. “I don’t even know what I want to do.”

“That’s all right. You don’t need to rush. What do you think about everything I’ve said to you?”

“I... I don’t know. I’m a bit shocked, if I’m being honest. I never thought that... I never thought our family could be capable of such things.”

“We’re not going around killing people, Xava. We run a business. Sure, sometimes people get hurt when they cross us, but I promise you if that happens, it is one thousand percent warranted.”

I see it now. I see how the rumors of my family being dangerous are true.

“I’m going to need time to process this,” I blurt out. Ruslan’s going to have to understand just how big of a shock this is. I don’t even know what sort of questions I would have for him yet. I’m speechless about this whole thing.

“That’s fine. Take as much time as you need for this. Um, Amelia was talking to me earlier about how you may be looking for an apartment. You’ve been staying with Nazyr for a very long time, and I imagine you’d like your own space better.”

I didn’t realize Amelia had already talked to Ruslan about this. Then again, I guess there isn’t really much of anything that he doesn’t know about. “Yeah, Amelia chatted with me when I came in earlier. She’s arranging for Emily to show me a few places in a few days.”

“Good.”

There’s an awkward silence filling the space between us. I suck in a long, deep breath, and anxiety skyrockets through me. I think I just need to get out of here and go somewhere to relax for a while. As I’m thinking about it, I stand up. “I need to go.”

I don’t even let Ruslan respond before I leave his office and search for Rolando. I need to get out of here.

Chapter Seven

Ambros

“Sir, I don’t know if you were expecting your father and mother, but they are here,” Marsala tells me out of nowhere.

I’m making myself a much-needed espresso over ice in the kitchen. The day has been long, and I completed a job last night in France before flying back to Greece. Most of the day has been spent looking at new projects. “They showed up unannounced?”

“Yes, sir. They did.” Marsala presses her lips together in a light slash, showing her disapproval. I’m aggravated with their antics as well. Not so much my mother since she means well most of the time. My father, on the other hand, is an entirely different story.

“Where are they right now?”

“I have them seated in the open-concept living area out back. I even made them both a drink. The last I checked, they were chatting with one another.”

“Mmm, thank you. How does my father seem?”

“May I speak freely?”

“Marsala, I only ever want you to speak freely.” She’s worked for me for many years now, longer than anyone I’ve had previously. The only way she’s been able to do that is by maintaining a level of trust with me. Whenever there’s been an issue, she’s the first one to come to me and notify me. Others I’ve had working for me have tried handling things themselves, which isn’t their job. I’m the one who needs to maintain order with everyone underneath me, not them. It’s why I don’t have anyone in management positions.

“He seems like he’s up to something. I don’t know what it is, and I didn’t overhear anything specific. He just looks... like there’s a reason he’s here. Your mother, on the other hand, seems happy to have the opportunity to see you.”

I have been traveling a lot lately and haven’t spoken with my parents too much, besides the phone call I recently had with my mother.

After thinking back to that phone call, I debate if my father is the one up to no good or if it’s my mother. I told her I’d arrange a meeting with my father and how long have I been home for, maybe twelve hours? I’ll put my money on the fact she’s the one who decided to stop by unannounced. My father probably wants to speak to me about whatever agenda he’s currently contemplating, but this has to be my mother’s doing.

“Thank you for letting me know.”

“Of course. Enjoy your drink. I’ll go check on your parents and see if they’d like me to get them anything to eat.” Marsala walks out of the kitchen and heads back to where my parents wait.

I slowly sip on the bitter yet sweet espresso until I’m finished. Before I even finish the cup, I’m much more alert than I was a short while ago.

I head outside where my parents are and see they’re sipping on alcoholic beverages Marsala likely made for them. “Are either of you hungry?” It’ll be a good starting point for our conversation.

“Yes. Marsala is making us all some dinner. Isn’t that lovely?” My mother’s hair is blowing in the wind, and she has a satisfied smile plastered across her face. She’s happy she’s here, and I’m starting to think she might have even encouraged this. The other day, when she called, she was very adamant I speak with my father. This might have even been her idea in the first place.

“Yes, it is. How have you both been? I’ve been traveling so much lately. I apologize for not checking in more.” My apology is bullshit, but I try to make it seem genuine.

My mother shoots me a knowing look and rolls her eyes as she looks away. Meanwhile, my father sips his drink and keeps his eyes glued to me. The same eyes I inherited from him. They bore right through me, and as a child, I used to be terrified when he’d look at me like this, but not anymore.

“I’m sure it’s been very difficult for you to manage professional obligations as well as your family. It’s good you’re home now for a bit. Now we can discuss more pressing matters,” my father starts off. He looks over to my mother, and she makes herself scarce, walking over to the balcony overlooking the water. She’s a good thirty or forty feet away before my father begins speaking again. “You can cut the bullshit, Ambros. I know you’ve been avoiding me. You’ve done the same thing ever since you’ve been a little boy. You dodge. You pivot. You go off and occupy yourself with something and then use it as an excuse. It’s ironic how, in twenty years, your antics haven’t changed in the slightest bit.” My father chuckles lightly, obviously amusing himself.

Inhaling deeply through my nose, I take a seat across from my father and settle back into my chair. “Unlike when I was a child, I have obligations that I need to take into consideration. Our employees at the Organization need to see I get my hands dirty, too. I just set records for the company, Father. I know your team has told you how well I’ve been doing. They’ve undoubtedly said how much money I’ve brought in, how many kills I’ve gotten, and how many clients are happy with our services. Have they not?”

He’s silent for a moment. “Do you think what you’ve done for the company is going to make up for your behavior?” Ah, there it is. He’s appalled by what I’ve

done. He'll just have to get over it. Sure, I might have been avoiding him, but I have my reasons. I won't ever admit that to him, though.

“Dad, I think you need to look deep within yourself and ask why you think I'd be avoiding you. I've been working, and that's all.”

He rolls his eyes and presses his lips into a firm line. “I won't argue with you, Ambros. We both know what you did, and you can't deny it.”

“There's obviously some reason you think I'm avoiding you. We might bicker, but that's normal. I can never get through one conversation without you causing a quarrel in some way. Is that why you think I'm desperately trying to dodge you at every turn?”

Dad doesn't say a thing, and there it is. That's all the confirmation I need. “I need to speak with you about something important. Considering I'm here, I think we should do that.” He doesn't even want to get into the thick of what he's thinking. Fine, we'll avoid the issue at hand like always. It's what he always does. He constantly walks away from getting to the root of the problem.

“Sure. What is it?” I imagine he's going to bring up the Organization, some sort of power shift, wanting me to take a step back from going on jobs in the field, or something of the sort.

“You know, for some time, Greek families haven't had much power in the criminal underworld. My hope is to make that change by arranging a marriage between our family and the Drakos family.”

“It's not a bad idea. Our family came from nothing, and your father built it up, but the Drakos family has had ties to Greece for hundreds of years.”

“Yes, and considering I only have two children, I need to make sure the unions are strong ones.” I understand what my father is saying here for sure. The family needs

to be particular with whom we have alliances to expand our reach. I'm not just talking about the business aspect, either.

“Zoe will be a good fit for Linus, no doubt. They're around the same age, and I believe they attended school together.”

My father narrows his brows and begins laughing loudly. “I don't plan on arranging this union between Linus and Zoe. Zoe is going to be your match, Ambros.”

“That's not going to happen. I will find my own match, one who will benefit the family greatly.” This is a huge slap in the face. If either of us has the choice of picking our own wife, it should be me. Linus doesn't do half the shit I do for the family.

“It is going to happen because I said it will. I meet with Zoe's father next week, and you will not fuck this up.”

I scoff at his words. “I won't be forced to do something I don't want to do. After everything I do for our family, I don't appreciate having this decision made for me.”

“Everything you've done? Do you mean your duty? That's all you've done, Ambros. You've done the bare minimum for us, and I won't be handing you a gold medal or slapping you on the back for doing such a 'good' job.”

Now I understand the weight women of important families carry. They have these sorts of decisions made for them all the time. I have the luxury of being a man and having more of a say, but I guarantee my father will continue to not want to hear any of what I have to say.

“You should have consulted me about this. I have nothing against Zoe as a person, but I will not marry her. I suggest you speak to her father about Linus being her

match so you don't look like a fool when I don't show up."

"You wouldn't dare!" my father roars, nostrils flaring. He's hollering so loudly that my mother turns around to see what's going on between the two of us.

Marsala comes out of the house with a large tray carrying our dinner plates. She heads straight over to the dining table out here on the balcony and places everything down. My mother begins walking over and looks between my father and me.

"Come on, let's go eat." She tears her attention away from the two of us and looks at Marsala. "This looks great. I can't wait to try it."

I head to the table and take my seat, thankful that Marsala went ahead and brought me out a drink. She must have known I'd need alcohol by now. She's made *paidakia* and a traditional salad. Mmm, I can't wait to dive in. I'm not even going to wait for my parents. The last thing I will do is allow my father to ruin my appetite.

I've already dug into my food by the time my parents sit down. My mother's eyebrows are raised, and I know she's about thirty seconds from snapping at me for being rude.

"You better be at the meeting next week."

"I won't, and I'm making it crystal fucking clear that I won't be. You can try to force my hand with a lot of things, but you won't be forcing my hand here." I don't typically push back at my father this strongly, but I am not going to back down with this one.

I'm not even sure why I'm fighting back so much about this. I don't think it's the fact he isn't taking my wants or needs into consideration. Sure, that aggravates me... but he could do far worse, and I know it.

I have been thinking a lot about Xava these last few days. I can't help but remember the deep conversations

we had at Lom and Emily's wedding. I'm still having flashbacks of the night when we were together.

I wish there was a way she and I could communicate, but I don't know if there is. I only have that note from her... but there might be a way for me to track down her information. If I could get my hands on her number, I could send her a text.

"I am your father, and I have the right to force your hand whenever I see fit. Don't test me, Ambros."

"That's too bad because I'm testing you. I'm not going to marry Zoe Drakos, and there's nothing you can do or say to convince me otherwise. Now, if you're going to keep up with this shit, then you might as well go home. I don't need you ruining my meal," I snap, looking right into my father's eyes.

"Ambros!" My mother chastises me, but I will not apologize.

"I mean no disrespect, Mom, but I'm serious."

She wonders why I don't speak to my father. This is why. Because every time the two of us get together, we bicker. Now, this has been one of the worst fights we've had, and I seriously doubt it will be the last.

Chapter Eight

Xava

“I really appreciate you taking the time to show me some places.” I know how busy Emily is on a day-to-day basis. I’m not just talking about her being a mother and new wife, either. She works full-time, too.

“Are you kidding? If anyone’s showing you some places, it’s going to be me, not someone else who’s going to try to upsell you something that you don’t need. Now, before we go anywhere, I want to know what’s important to you in a condo or house. Do you know which you’d prefer?”

I lick my lips nervously. The fact I’m actually going out to look at a place to live blows my mind. “I don’t really have a preference.” I don’t know what I want. I don’t even know how I will afford any place Emily shows me to begin with, but that’s something I’ll have to figure out. Maybe I can get a job doing something in the city to make the monthly payments.

“Okay, so let me ask you this. Do you feel like dealing with the maintenance required in owning an actual home, even if it’s a townhome?”

I think she means mowing the lawn and those sorts of things. “I mean, I don’t want to go out of my way to do those things, no.”

Emily nods. “Okay, that’s exactly what I thought. I think we should keep our search limited to condos right now. Are there any amenities you know you can’t live without?”

I ponder what my sister-in-law is asking of me, and one thing really jumps to the forefront of my mind. “I’d love to have a bathtub. I don’t have access to one at

Mona and Nazyr's. Mona's told me I can take a bath in their bathtub, but I think that's kind of weird, so I don't want to do that."

"Okay, that should be easy enough to find. Are you looking for a certain number of bedrooms?"

I don't have any kids, and I really don't see why I'd need more than one bedroom. Well, wait... whenever Yara comes to visit, it would be nice to have an extra bedroom. "Two bedrooms would be fine, I think."

"All right. We'll look for two-bedroom, two-bathroom condominiums with plenty of space. I don't want you being shoved into a place the size of a shoe box. I'll try to make sure the closet space is more than accommodating."

"Sounds great. I really appreciate everything you're doing for me. Like, you have no idea." I offer Emily a soft, thankful smile. She really doesn't have to be doing any of this for me, and yet she is.

"Stop it. You're family, and I always look out for my family. Now, I believe Rolando is going to be driving us today, right?" Emily looks past me at Rolando, and by the time I turn to look at him, he's giving her a curt nod. "Perfect. Rolando, I need you to take us to The Caucasus."

"Certainly."

The group of us leave the house and head to Rolando's car. It's only a short five-minute drive before we pull up at the historic-looking building Emily called The Caucasus. "Is this it?"

"Yes, it is." Emily beams proudly.

Rolando manages to find some street parking, and the three of us get out of the vehicle and then walk up to the massive building. It runs two city blocks, and there's even an extension on the next street. The exterior of the

building is a cream stone, while the roof is a burnt amber color. “How far away is this from the city center?”

“A five-minute walk, give or take, but I’m sure since Rolando’s driving you, you’d get there a lot sooner. You’re only a few minutes away from the entire family, which is awesome. Now, come on, I can’t wait to show you this one. I actually think you’re going to appreciate a lot of the interior design. Most of it is original, but the current owner did put a few newer updates into the apartment.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” I comment, and Emily takes us inside the building. We head down a hallway and then find the elevators, where we go up one floor. The unit is located on the second floor, and as Emily slides the key into the door and pushes it open, I’m intrigued by the unique design.

The floors are a newer, almost white wood, while the walls are made up of various stones. As soon as you walk into the home, a cream and white-colored stone stretches across the living area wall. But the alternate wall features black and gray stone, which expands to part of the ceiling. Right where the black and gray stone comes to a halt on the ceiling, there is a blue light coming from the edge of the stone, which lights up about a few inches of it. It’s such a unique artistic feature, and I like it a lot.

“You can change the color of the light to whatever you want. The current owner obviously likes blue,” Emily continues, leading me through the place, and we head into the kitchen next.

The same flooring and lighter stone are on the walls, and the kitchen cabinets are quite unique. They’re almost quilted looking on the outside, and I’ve never seen this before. It’s beautiful and adds a feminine touch to the place. “Are these something the owner did as well?”

“Yes, she replaced them a couple of years ago. She really worked on wanting this apartment to have

feminine features. One of my colleagues actually sold the place to her before, and it was so dark and dank in here. She brought some much-needed life back into it, don't you think?"

"She did, for sure."

The kitchen isn't overly large, but I don't need anything too crazy. "How many bedrooms is this?"

"It's a bit more than you were looking for. It's three bedrooms, and there's an office as well. The office is very tiny, but it could make a nice work area or even a study area."

Study... I haven't even thought about going to school yet. There's so much pressure in trying to figure out what I want to do. I know I want to do something, but I just don't know what that something is yet.

Emily takes me through each bedroom, and they're all very nice. They're incredibly spacious, and the closets are enormous as well. Emily forgot to mention that there are three bathrooms. One is attached to the master, while the other two are very close to the other bedrooms. I don't really need three bedrooms, but I'm not going to complain about it at all. It's better to have more space than not have enough, right?

It kind of gets me thinking... Rolando spends a lot of time guarding me. He's pretty much around me all of the time. There have only been a couple of instances where someone else comes to relieve him so he can return to his apartment. "Rolando." I turn and look at my guard, and Emily's phone starts ringing, so she walks away to take the phone call.

"Yes?"

"If I get this unit, I want you to take the bedroom on the other side of it. I only need two, and I think it's important that you have a place to rest your head. You

keep me safe and do a lot for me... and I know you're never at your apartment since you're always with me."

Rolando smiles, but then it disappears. "Xava, I'm afraid I can't do things that way. If I did, people would think we're together, and I don't want that to happen."

"Rolando, you're my friend. I am only doing this as a friend and have no romantic interest in you. If anyone were to even mention it to me, I'd put them right in their place." The only person I've been thinking about romantically as of late is Ambros, the man who I wish I had left my number for. I've found myself wanting to talk to him a lot. Maybe not talk, but flirt. Flirting with him makes me warm and fuzzy inside. It boosts my confidence and makes me feel amazing. God, I strive for that feeling again. I yearn for it.

"I appreciate the offer. Will you give me time to think it over?"

I nod, but if I get this place, Rolando won't have a choice. If I tell him he has a room here, then he's going to have a room here. It would only make me feel that much safer as well.

Emily's off chatting on the phone for a while, so I take another stroll through the apartment. There are unique finishes like the additional stone wall in the living area, the custom cabinetry in the kitchen, and even some feminine, unique wallpaper in the master bedroom. Overall, I think I could move right in here without making too many changes. There's even a massive soaking tub in the master bathroom, which is exactly what I was looking for. I'd love to know more about the building itself and what sort of amenities it has, but I can wait until my sister-in-law is off the phone.

She must be talking to someone from work because the call takes a while. Either that or it's my brother. "Do you think this could be the place for you?" Rolando questions.

I don't even have to think about it for more than a few seconds. "Yeah, it could be. I'll still let Emily show us a couple more places, but I really like this place. It's unique, the building has some history behind it, and it's in a good location."

"Yes, well, don't jump on it just because it's the first place Emily's showing you. Give the other condos a chance as well."

"I will." I already like this place because there's an extra bedroom. I'm not going to lie. When I was first looking into places, I didn't even consider having a third bedroom so Rolando could be more comfortable. Now that Emily has shown me a third bedroom, I want there to be one. Rolando has become a great friend of mine over the last year, although if I really think about it, it's like he's my family, too.

I find Emily still on the phone, so I take another stroll, figuring I don't want to bother her.

"Xava, where are you?" A short while later, Emily calls my name.

"In the master bedroom," I call back, and she comes to find me.

"So, what do you think of this one?"

"I think it's great. I love how unique it is, and I could see myself living here." I lick my lips and press them in a firm line as I think about how I'm going to pay for this.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, really. I just don't know how I will be able to afford to move out. I don't have a job, and it's not like I even know what I'm doing with school, either. I'm... ugh, I'm just so stressed, honestly."

Emily giggles lightly. "Xava, you should know you don't have to worry about the price. The family is going

to get an apartment for you. Whether it's this one or another we look at today."

I'm taken aback by what Emily's saying. "You mean to tell me that the family is going to pay my rent?"

"Rent? No. The family is buying you a place. That way, you're not limited and can make whatever changes you want."

I know my eyes have to be huge right now. I'm blown away, completely and utterly blown away. "Wow. I had no idea that they'd do something like that for me."

"You're part of the family, Xava. We're always going to make sure you're taken care of. We all know you found out about us way later in life than any of us would have liked. It's the same way for us, too, and we all hated not knowing about you. Lom told me it felt like he was robbed of another sister his entire life. They... I mean, this is me assuming, but I believe they hold a lot of resentment against your birth mother for hiding you the way she did."

"Thank you. I just... this is all so intense. I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know if I should try to join the family business or if I should go to school. There are so many major life things happening right now, but I have the best support system behind me." I'm fighting back tears. I have never felt more loved and appreciated by my family than I do at this moment.

"Shit, I didn't mean to upset you. I'm so sorry."

I shake my head. "No, you're not upsetting me. It's just nice to know that I belong here. For the first time in my life, I actually feel like I belong. I feel like an Umarova, and you all have welcomed me in such an amazing way. I adore you all. You're even better than I could have imagined."

Out of nowhere, my phone starts ringing, and Emily goes quiet. I don't recognize the number calling me, but I

still decide to answer it. “Hello,” I say with a shaky voice.

“Xava?” a deep, heavy Greek accent greets me. “Is something the matter?”

“A-Ambros?” I stutter out his name, completely taken aback that he’s calling me right now.

“Yes. You haven’t answered my question. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I am. Um, how did you... how did you get my number?” I left him a note, but I specifically remember *not* leaving him any of my contact information and regretting it. Hell, I’ve been regretting it so badly today.

“I have my ways.” Ambros chuckles, and I can pretty much imagine how his nose is crinkling, and the lines around his lips are indented.

“I’m glad you called, but would it be possible for me to call you back in a couple of hours? I’m out looking at apartments with my cousin’s wife.” Ambros doesn’t know who my family really is to me, and I’m not sure if I’m going to tell him. Maybe one day he’ll deserve to know the truth, but if it’s just this surface-level thing between us, then I’m not going to tell him.

Emily is mouthing “Who is that?” to me, and I mouth back, “Ambros”. She raises her brows and then smiles brightly at me.

“Of course. I’ll be waiting for your call. Have a good day out.”

“I can’t wait to call you later. Talk to you soon, bye.” I hang up the phone, and Emily begins laughing so hard.

“What?” I say.

“I can’t wait to call you later. Xava, you didn’t leave any wondering. He knows you like him now.” I didn’t even realize I said it, but what the hell. I’m pretty damn certain Ambros knew I liked him the day of her wedding.

“Come on and show me these other places, okay?” I walk out of the bedroom, and Emily continues cackling behind me. She’s really getting some good old-fashioned enjoyment out of this. I don’t mind. I’m just stuck wondering why Ambros even went as far as he did to get my number.

Has he been thinking about me too?

Chapter Nine

Ambros

I don't have any jobs lined up for the next couple of days, and while I could stay in Mykonos and enjoy the beauty of the city... I've decided I need a change of scenery. Typically, I leave so I can enjoy some peace and quiet away from my family. While that's in order, I desperately need to see Xava again.

I called her yesterday out of the blue. I had gotten her number from a friend who, in no time, discovered her phone line was on the same plan as Ruslan's. I keep wondering what she is to him because, for cousins, it seems like he has a very close protective barrier around her. I remember the way he looked at me the night of the wedding. Almost the same way a powerful mafia father would look at a man pursuing his daughter. She told me they were cousins, but could they be more? Is Ruslan old enough to be Xava's father? He would have been young, yet it's possible.

She was out looking at apartments with Emily, so she called me a couple of hours later when she got home. We were on the phone for four whole hours. I don't think I've been on the phone with anyone for that long, yet talking to her felt so relaxing. I don't even like being on the phone. With Xava, though, I could imagine talking to her for hours, maybe even days. There's this innocence about her that is really hard to find in this day and age.

I'm now in Grozny, waiting to meet Xava. I had my private plane fly into a smaller airport out of the city, and I'm staying at one of the most prestigious hotels in Grozny. It's called Grozny City Hotel and is located in the city center. A newer, recently updated high-rise with

elegant dining and a fully working spa. I've rented out the executive suite for a few days while I'm here.

I have to admit, I'm impressed by how well the suite is decorated. It's nothing too fancy, a studio suite, yet it still has luxurious embellishments. I figured I didn't need a massive suite since I'm likely only going to be here for a short while. It's not like I'm going to spend much time here anyway, besides sleeping and getting ready for the day.

There are large floor-to-ceiling windows on my left at the end of the room. The floor is covered in a plush cream-colored carpet, which seems to be impeccably cleaned. Not one stain mars it, with not one part where it isn't the same tone. Bright red velvet curtains hang from each of the windows in the room, and the same tone is carried over onto the comforter of the bed. Gold designs and accents are scattered around the room. There's a small vase on the night table beside the bed, and the comforter has bits of gold threadwork running throughout it. Not to mention, the pillows on the couch are the same red as the comforter and the curtains. Overall, this suite has a very comfortable yet historic vibe to it.

I glance down at my phone and anticipate that Xava should be here any moment.

Xava and I made plans to go out to eat, so we're going to a newer restaurant that's on the outskirts of the city center. It's closer to what I'd call a suburban area, but Xava called it a private sector.

I asked Xava to meet me here, and she confirmed she would. Her driver, Rolando, is going to be taking us to dinner, but I'm really hoping to have her come back here tonight. In all honesty, I'm craving it. I haven't been able to stop thinking about her since the night of Emily and Lom's wedding.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I smile the second I see her name.

Xava

I'm in the lobby now. We're coming up.

I quickly type up a response back to her.

Ambros

Perfect. See you soon.

I already sent her my room number earlier today after I checked in.

Warmth spreads through my chest at the thought of seeing her again. I was a bit worried the other night she'd be turned off by the fact I got her number, but luckily that wasn't the case. If anything, I think she appreciates how I go after what I want.

A couple of minutes pass, and there's a knock at my door. I rise from the couch and head to the doorway. I don't bother to look through the peephole, so I open the door.

Xava looks as radiant as ever.

Her deep hazelnut hair is in long, soft curls falling to her mid-back. She's wearing a soft baby pink dress that stops a few inches above her knees. It molds to her body like a second skin yet isn't too revealing. The arms are made up of a see-through material, and the wrists pinch in, almost as if they're form-fitting. A portion of her dress cinches along the stomach into a bow, which only accentuates her natural curves. She knew this dress would compliment her body type. I don't have one doubt about it.

“Ambros, it’s so great to see you.” Xava wastes no time stepping toward me, and I pull her into my embrace.

She wraps her arms around me like we’re long-lost lovers who have gone weeks without seeing each other. I hold onto her for as long as I can before I notice her driver, who I’m certain is more than likely security, giving me a dirty look.

I’m not buying the fact that she’s just a cousin of Ruslan’s. Xava seems much more important, and I’m sure, at some point, I’ll start to figure it out.

“Likewise. How have you been?” Xava and I have been texting back and forth since I got her number, but it’s been small talk. Tonight, we’ll really have the time to catch up.

“Good, actually. Things have been busy, but that’s nothing new. What about you? How are things?” Xava smiles softly, and it’s one thing that makes me feel great. It’s not like she’s being fake. Every word she utters feels like it’s authentic and genuine.

“They’re good. Same as you, busy. Want to get going so we can go grab some food?”

“Yeah, that sounds great.” I could have just met her downstairs in the lobby instead of her coming all the way up here. It makes me feel like I’m the woman, and she’s courting me. I have an internal chuckle about it, and we leave my suite.

We leave the hotel and walk toward Xava’s car, which is a blacked-out SUV. I can immediately tell it’s bulletproof, and again, I have this gut feeling that she’s far more important than she makes herself out to be. What don’t I know? My curiosity is going to kill me if I don’t find out soon.

Within twenty minutes, we’re on the other side of the city, and Xava’s driver pulls up to the restaurant. He puts

the SUV in park, and when he does, I open the door and hold my hand out for Xava. She graciously accepts it and slides out the same side as me.

Her driver narrows his eyes on me. He thinks I'm trouble, and I can be... but I'm not going to hurt her. "Is your driver joining us, too?" I cock a brow as I ask Xava.

"No, not unless you want him to." Xava's giggle is carefree.

I shake my head. "I'll pass. Shall we head inside then?"

"Yes, let's do that." I shut the door to the car, and we head inside.

We greet the hostess, who takes us back to a small, secluded area of the restaurant. This place is unlike any other restaurant I've been to before. There's barely any lighting in here at all. It's extremely dark, and the only light comes from small, delicate bulbs along the walls. There's one exception in the center of the room where there's a chandelier, but it's very dim lighting as well.

Xava and I take a seat. I sit across from her, and there's a sole lit candle in the center between us. "This place is very unique."

"It is. It's... different. Thank you for agreeing to come here with me. I haven't had the opportunity, and I thought it would be fun to experience this together." Even though I can hardly see Xava, her pearly white teeth are bright enough to be noticed in the darkest of rooms.

"I'm sure it will be. What made you want to come here?" I'm very curious. This place must have some sort of theme behind it or a unique experience that patrons crave.

"So, it's pretty cool. The reason it's so dark here is that they want customers to fully experience the food we're enjoying. The concept is that in almost complete

darkness, it helps refresh our senses, and I'm looking forward to seeing if there's any truth behind that theory."

"Ah, so this is an experiment of sorts?" I cock my brows.

"Pretty much, yeah."

The waiter comes up and asks us for our drink order. Xava and I both get the house recommendations and end up choosing the same thing for our appetizers, entrées, and dessert items. It seems like we both want to have a great experience here, and I'm excited to be sitting across from her.

This woman has been plaguing my mind since the wedding. Even in moments where I don't find myself thinking of her, my mind slowly drifts to her. She's the kind of woman I want to spend time with. The type of woman who can have long, easy conversations with you. I don't find myself growing bored of her company. It very well could be because I haven't spent a lot of time with her, yet there's some feeling I have that's telling me it isn't the case.

Xava and I make some small talk, but when the waiter brings out our drinks, we start chatting a lot more. "So, what have you been doing since the last time I saw you?" Xava asks before she takes a sip of her fruity wine drink.

I inhale deeply through my nose. "Honestly? I've been working for the most part. I traveled for a bit, then went back home to Greece. Now I'm here to take a break for a couple of days. What about you?"

"My life isn't nearly as exciting as yours. I've been here, but I don't do too much. Spend time with family, keep myself occupied with family activities, that sort of thing." It seems to me that Xava doesn't want to talk about her family too much. She keeps looking down at the table every time she mentions them.

I decide to change the subject to something different. Xava's mood changes almost instantly. She's calmer, peppier, and seems a lot happier.

In no time, our food is brought out to us, so we enjoy our meals. Mine very well might be one of the best I've had in a very long time. Maybe this darkness thing isn't just a load of crap. Maybe it actually works.

Our waiter brings out our desserts, and then the two of us are ready to get out of there. The waiter brings the check, and Xava tries to grab it, but I'm stronger and take it right from her hands. I slide my card into the booklet and wait for the waiter to return, but I look right into her eyes. There's one thing I have to say to her. "When I take you out on a date, I will always be the one paying for it."

"While I think that's so chivalrous of you, it's not needed. I can at least pay for my meal, Ambros."

I shake my head. "I know you can, but when you're in my company, you won't. Call me old school if you will, but I insist."

Xava giggles and shakes her head. "Fine. I somehow think there's absolutely no point in arguing with you."

"You've got that right."

The waiter comes up and grabs the check. In a short couple of minutes, he comes back with my card, and I leave him a hefty tip. Xava's texting away on her phone and peers up to look at me for a split second.

"I'm having Rolando pull the car around the front for us."

"Ah, the man who doesn't seem to like me very much."

"Rolando doesn't like anyone he doesn't know," Xava points out, making me feel like he's very protective of her.

“Is it anyone or just men around you?” I’m not coming off as a dick. I’m generally curious.

“Anyone. Unless you’re in the family, no one is to be trusted.” Xava’s eyes darken with seriousness as she says this.

“I understand. In these times, you can’t give out your trust to just anyone.”

“Exactly.” Xava nods, and her features soften. Right now, I’d kill to know what’s going on in her mind.

I rise from my seat, and Xava does as well. I slide my arm around her waist, and we exit the restaurant together. Rolando hasn’t pulled the car up, and the city seems to be hustling and bustling, even at this late hour. I’m sure he’ll be here momentarily, but while we wait, I’m going to enjoy my time alone with her.

I pull Xava a bit closer against my side, and she looks up at me. A sweet, happy smile crosses over her features just as the sound of gunshots rings out. I immediately go into protection mode and shield Xava’s body with my own as I get her on the ground.

I look around to see if I can figure out where the gunfire is coming from when I spot a man running across the street toward a car. Rolando pulls up in front of Xava and rushes out to make sure she’s okay. “Stay with her. I’ll be back,” I grit out, but my anger isn’t directed at him.

I run across the street, weaving myself in and out of traffic as I chase after her assailant. He’s trying his best to get to his vehicle, and there’s a man already behind the wheel. I’m watching them both, and the man in the car must decide his buddy isn’t going to get there fast enough, so he throws the car in drive and races off, leaving his pal who did the dirty work to face the consequences I’m giving him.

“Looks like you’ve been left to deal with this yourself,” I snarl at the man who dared to take aim at Xava. If this happened another time, I would automatically assume someone was trying to harm me. I don’t believe that is the case here since this trip was planned at the last minute. No one knew was leaving for Grozny or even that I’m here. If the circumstances were different, I’d say someone had enough time to plan something to harm or possibly kill me. Still, I don’t believe that’s possible in this situation.

He turns around and looks right at me before aiming the gun. I scoff at him. “If you’re going to aim, you’d sure as hell better shoot.”

He might be in his early twenties, possibly even teens. I want to shake my head because I know he’s practically a child and isn’t the person who ordered the job. No, he’s the pawn they sent to do it. It almost feels unfair to go after someone who has barely experienced life, but I don’t have a choice in the matter. I have to send a message.

I’m so used to killing, sure, but the men and women I go after are very bad people.

He fumbles with the gun, and as we reach the sidewalk, he trips over the edge of it, falling directly on his back. I’m on top of him in no time. I kick the gun away and grab him by the collar of his shirt before throwing him back on the ground. “Who sent you?” I roar my question out at him.

He doesn’t answer me.

“I said, who fucking sent you?” This time, I collide my fist with his face, hoping it will encourage him to speak up, but it doesn’t.

If anything, it only gives him more of a drive to get away from me. He squirms like a wild animal desperate

to make his escape, but he won't make it. I'm not going to let him out of my fucking sight.

"If you don't talk, you're going to die."

"I'm going to die either way." Mmm, I see it now. He's afraid of us, and he's terrified of his employer.

"Maybe, but maybe not. How old are you?"

"I'm s-seventeen." His accent is thick, and he begins stuttering. I'm blown away by his age. Who in the fuck would send a child to do a man's job?

I inhale sharply and then exhale. "What's your name?"

"I... I'm Halil."

"All right, Halil. You and I are going to make a deal. You're going to tell me everything you can about your employer and who hired them, and then I'll see what I can do to make sure you aren't killed. You know who you're going after, correct? You know her family?" I arch my brows, wanting him to realize the magnitude of what he's done.

"I was told to kill Xava Umarova, the youngest sister of the Umarova family. I... I don't know too m-much. I just overheard my boss talk a little b-bit about Ruslan betraying his w-word. That's why we g-got the job. Why we n-needed to send a message."

Wait. The youngest sister... but that would mean... It can't be possible, can it?

"How old was the person driving the car?" I narrow my eyes at Halil, only wanting the truth.

"Sixteen... he's my little brother. I needed someone to drive the getaway car. Someone I could r-rely on. Please don't hurt him. H-he didn't know what I was d-doing."

Halil is nothing more than a scared teenager. A teenager who knows he made a horrible choice and can't

come back from it now. I'm not typically the type of person to give someone a second chance to fuck up, but for some reason, I feel like I need to give this kid one. I can hope he won't fuck up, but only time will tell.

"Ambros!" Xava's trembling voice calls my name from the safety of the SUV. Rolando has pulled over to this side of the road and exits the vehicle. He grabs the gun and puts it in the vehicle, tucking it away from anyone who would dare try to use it.

"Have you called anyone?" I look at Rolando first.

He nods. "Yes, Ruslan is on the way."

"Perfect. Stay here with him for a moment?"

Rolando nods, and I stand. I head right over to the SUV. Mascara is running down Xava's cheeks. I run my fingertips against her soft cheek. "Are you all right, *ελάφι?*"

"Y-yeah... I can't believe that just happened." Xava's bottom lip is trembling, and she's having a hard time speaking.

"I know. Ruslan will be here shortly, and once I speak with him, you and I can get out of here. Okay?"

"Uh-huh." Xava nods her head over and over again. She shuts her eyes as tears begin sliding out of the corners. I think she wants to seem strong for me, that she doesn't want me to see her crying, but she's allowed to. She was just shot at. Someone just tried to kill her. If anything, she has a damn good excuse to cry right now.

I wipe my fingertips against her cheeks and brush away the wetness. "I know this was terrifying, but you're okay. I promise you, you're okay."

"I know I am. It's just a lot to take in, is all." Xava licks her bottom lip, and I know she's trying to calm herself down. I place my hand on the top of her back and look right into her eyes.

“You’re okay. It’s all okay. I know it’s a shock, but you’re all right. Everything is going to be fine. I’ll speak with Ruslan when he gets here, too, okay?”

“Okay.” Xava sobs, nodding her head.

A blacked-out SUV pulls up on the other side of the street corner. Ruslan hops out the back, and then there’s another man following him, only a few steps behind.

“Ambros?” Ruslan doesn’t seem pleased to see me. He furrows his brows, and his jaw is in a clenched state.

“Ruslan, care if we have a chat?” I suggest.

He gives me a curt nod, and then we walk a few feet away from everyone so we can have some privacy. “Run me through what happened to Xava.” His tone says he’s anything but pleased. I’ve never been on Ruslan’s bad side before, and I feel like if there’s ever a time for me to be on it, it could be right now. For some reason, he doesn’t like the fact that I’m taking Xava on dates, and if what Halil said was true, it could make sense. Why would Ruslan want a man like me to be going out with his sister?

“Xava and I had just finished up dinner. Rolando was pulling the car around, and we decided to wait out front. The child over there shot at Xava and thankfully missed.”

“Child?” Ruslan whips his head around to look at Halil.

“Yes. He’s only seventeen.”

Ruslan shrugs. “Seventeen is almost a man.”

“Almost is key in that sentence. If you look at him, he’s a scared boy.”

“He should be. He shot at my sister, and you expect me to show him mercy. I’m not an idiot, Ambros. You’re coddling him for some reason. Why? You obviously have an infatuation with Xava, so why are you trying to protect the person who almost killed her?”

Sister. There I have it. I finally know the truth. Xava is Ruslan's sister, as well as the rest of the siblings.

"I thought Xava was your cousin." I look him dead in the eye.

Ruslan isn't happy he let that slip. His anger got the best of him, and he divulged information he didn't intend to.

"She isn't. She's my sister. The youngest out of us all." Ruslan looks over at the SUV and then back at me, sighing. "I'll let her know I told you, and she can give you the details if she feels like it."

"To answer your question, the only reason I'm being graceful through this horrific experience is because that child was sent to do a man's job. You and I both know he isn't who's in charge. He's not the one who ordered the hit. Someone else did. His boss accepted the job and sent him. So, are you going to hurt the man who hires children to do atrocious things, or are you going to hurt the child who got in a little over his head? A child who probably doesn't have anyone else to teach him what's right and what's wrong."

Ruslan looks over at Halil and swallows hard. "Fuck," he grits out before heading over in that direction. I walk with Ruslan, and as soon as he's over him, he's speaking.

"I want to know who you work for. Tell me, and I'll let you live."

"Yabdullah Dudiyn."

"Dudiyn?" Shock swarms over Ruslan's face. He must know this man.

"Yes, Dudiyn."

"How long have you worked for him?"

"Since I was fourteen. He... he took us out of the orphanage, and I've been doing small jobs around the city. Pickpocketing, stealing purses, and stuff like that.

He told some of the older kids that we needed to start doing more, or he'd throw us back on the streets. He brought this job to the group of older kids and said if one of us didn't do it, he'd start 'taking us out'."

"He was going to start killing you? I thought you said he was going to put you on the streets if you didn't take different jobs." Ruslan's testing the boy to see if he's lying, but I don't think he is. I think that his boss is a piece of shit human who doesn't give a fuck who he hurts.

"I did. He told us one thing, then took it to an entirely different level." Halil shakes his head and runs his hands over his face before looking back at Ruslan. "I'm sorry I tried to kill her. I really am. I'm not just saying that because I think you're going to kill me. I'm saying it because I didn't want to, but if I didn't show him that I would do something monumental, he'd hurt me or my younger brother."

There's a dense silence between us for a couple of moments while Ruslan takes in this information.

"Did he take a whole bunch of you from the orphanage?"

"Yes, about fifteen of us."

"Do you know who hired your boss?"

Halil licks his lips nervously. "I overheard a conversation... what I know is that someone was betrayed by you, and they were doing this to hurt you."

"Mmm, I see." Ruslan takes in a deep breath. "Halil, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. By doing so, I'm giving you a task. Understand?"

"Yes."

"You go back to wherever it is that you live. You tell him that Xava was shot, but you're not sure if she's dead.

I'm sure it looked like Xava hit the ground, yes?" Ruslan looks at me.

"Yes, I covered her as we went down, but she could have been hit before I did that," I answer.

"Good. You go and tell him that it was done, and then you let me handle him. Act like everything is normal for a couple of days." Ah, so Ruslan has known Yabdullah for quite some time.

"Y-yes, sir. Um... what will happen to us kids after you handle Yabdullah?"

"I'll figure that out. Now, run along. You have work to do." Ruslan stares right into Halil's eyes, and he stands right up. "Actually, wait... Rolando."

Rolando comes over.

"Give the boy the gun." Rolando doesn't seem happy with Ruslan's order but goes over to the SUV and gets the gun for him.

"Here, sir." Rolando hands the gun over to Ruslan, who then hands it over to Halil.

"Now go. There are things you need to do."

Halil darts off down the street, running as fast as he possibly can. I seriously doubt he thought he'd be getting out of this situation, but he hasn't yet. If he doesn't do what Ruslan says—teenager or not—I know Ruslan will have him killed.

"Now, what are your plans with my sister?"

I don't even know. "My intentions?" I chuckle lightly.

"Sure, and your plans for the night." Ruslan's tone grows serious, and I realize I misunderstood what he was saying.

"I was going to see if I could take her back to my hotel suite."

“There’s no way that’s happening anymore. I need her in one spot for a few days, so she needs to go back to Nazyr and Mona’s house. You and I might have known each other for a long time, but I don’t trust you with her. I don’t trust your family, Ambros, and you’re a Galanis through and through. You might try to deny it, but you are very much your father’s son. I will say this once and only once. If you ever try to harm Xava or merely even think about it, I’m going to personally ensure you suffer in the worst of ways.”

Ruslan is trying to intimidate and scare me, but there’s no reason for it. “I’m not going to. The only thing I want to do is keep Xava safe.”

Ruslan scoffs and shakes his head. “You barely achieved that tonight. I thought you were the best of the best, but now I’m not too sure.”

Ouch. That’s a damn good burn. Too bad I can counter right back at him. “You say barely, but I kept her safe. Nothing bad will happen to her on my watch.”

Ruslan is quiet for a few moments. “If, and I mean *if*, she invites you, you’re more than welcome to spend time at Nazyr and Mona’s. But she cannot leave for at least three days, do you understand? She needs to lay low while we sort this out.”

I guess I won’t be seeing much of Grozny while I’m here.

“Yes, I do.”

Chapter Ten

Xava

Ambros is sitting beside me and has an arm draped around my body. He pulls me close, yet I still feel like my heart is going to burst out through my chest. Did that really happen? Did someone really just try to kill me?

I know things like this are a possibility. I know it more than anybody else. My siblings made sure that I understood being part of our family came with great risks. Only, I didn't understand they'd actually happen. It's like when you never think something horrible is going to happen to you. You know those bad things are always possibilities, but you never think they will actually happen.

I'm trying desperately to keep my hands from shaking, but ever since I was shot at, I haven't been able to get them to stop. Ambros rubs his hand along my arm, trying to comfort me the best way he can. I also notice Rolando keeps looking in the rearview mirror, trying to make sure I'm as okay as I can be.

Rolando takes us to Nazyr and Mona's house. Ambros spoke with Ruslan, and I put the window up, so I didn't hear any of their conversation. Ruslan did come up to the car and speak to me. He told me Rolando was taking me to Nazyr's and that I needed to lay low there for a few days until things settled down. Now, I don't know what my brother has planned, but he obviously wants me to be hidden for a reason. I don't even care to know why right now. I'm so over this day. I'm over this night of chaos and fear. All I want is to be curled up under the covers where things aren't as terrifying.

Rolando pulls up to Nazyr's house, and Ambros gets out of the back first. He's on one side of me while

Rolando rushes to the other. It's like they're shielding me from being seen. I push open the door to Nazyr's house, and Ambros is right behind me, while Rolando says he's going to park the car and he'll be in momentarily.

The second the door shuts, the scrambling of heavy feet heads in my direction. "Sister, are you all right?" Nazyr's voice is laced with concern, and while I'm grateful for his worrying, I can't believe he just called me sister in front of Ambros. I told Ambros that I was their cousin, and now I look like a massive liar.

I want to respond to Nazyr, but I need to explain to Ambros. "I'm sorry I lied to you. I'm not their cousin; I'm the youngest one in the family, and I don't really advertise that I'm an Umarova because it can be really dangerous for me. A prime example of that is tonight." I make a bad joke, and Ambros presses his lips into a thin line.

"Ruslan already told me. Don't worry about apologizing. You didn't know me, and you were only protecting yourself. I can't be upset with you for that."

The more time I spend with Ambros, the more I realize what a unique character he is. I've never met another man who's so gentlemanly or understanding. He doesn't get bothered or upset easily and is like the human version of Valium. I don't know if there's anything that can shake him.

I'm relieved that Ruslan explained, and I didn't have to.

Nazyr's ignoring the side conversation that Ambros and I are having. He comes up to me and wraps his arms around my body, holding me tight. He holds me for a couple of minutes until I finally speak up. "I'm okay. I'm... startled, but I'm okay."

Nazyr releases me from his embrace and gives me a once over, checking to see if there's been any sort of

damage. “You weren’t hurt at all?”

“I scuffed my knee on the pavement when Ambros tackled me to the ground, but I’d rather have that than a gunshot wound.”

“Good choice,” Nazyr says to me and then looks at Ambros. “Thank you for being there for Xava tonight, but why were you there?” Nazyr narrows his eyes.

Ambros chuckles lightly. “I was taking your sister out on a date.”

Nazyr cracks up. “I see. And you spoke to Ruslan?”

“I did,” Ambros confirms.

“I can imagine that conversation went over well.” Nazyr’s now looking between Ambros and me.

I shrug. “I’m not sure, but I imagine it went decently.”

“Ruslan told me I could stay here since we’re keeping Xava indoors for a couple of days while you handle the situation.”

“Mmm, I see. Xava, why don’t you head up to your room so Ambros can break down everything that happened tonight for me?” I know Nazyr is trying to give me a much-needed break, but I don’t need one. Not in the least bit.

“I’ll stay right here. There’s been enough discussed behind my back or without me.” I know I might seem rather crass right now, but I promise I’m not. There’s a reason I’m doing this. I want to be privy to these sorts of situations, especially now.

Nazyr leads the group of us into the formal living room area. Nazyr and Ambros take their seats while I prefer to stand. The front door squeaks as it opens, so I turn around and spot Rolando.

Rolando walks into the room and looks directly at me. “Is there anything you need me to do?”

“No, Rolando. Thank you. I believe everything is taken care of at the moment. Go ahead and settle in for the night. I’m not going anywhere for a couple of days, it seems,” I state.

“You got it, Xava,” Rolando replies and walks out of sight.

Now that it’s the group of us alone in the living room, Nazyr clears his throat. “I know the basics. She was shot at. Other than that, I don’t know a damn thing. Was it someone trying to send a message, or was this a premeditated attack where they were trying to take her life?” Nazyr questions Ambros. I, for one, am grateful Ambros seems to have most of the answers because I certainly don’t. Though, I think I’m still in shock from the events tonight. God, I never thought this would ever happen.

“Someone ordered a hit on Xava and hired another person. That person handed the job off to a teenager to try and complete.” As Ambros speaks, there’s an aggravation in his voice. He’s angry about the hit being ordered in the first place, but I think he’s equally as angry that a child was sent to do something an adult should have.

“You’re kidding me...” Nazyr shakes his head.

“I wish I was, but I’m not.”

“Do we know who the kid works for?” Nazyr questions, narrowing his brows at Ambros.

“Yes, Yabdullah Dudiyn.”

The moment Ambros says his name, my brother’s eyes grow dark. He knows this person, and that means the rest of my family probably does, too. I wonder what the history is between them.

“Yabdullah was selling drugs to tourists. They were laced with fentanyl, and many of them died. Ruslan has an arrangement with the local police where he handles

whatever we need to be done for the family, and in turn, they keep their nose out of our business. But the police really wanted to make a spectacle out of who was responsible. Instead of Yabdullah taking the blame, he sent his brother to prison in his place. He framed his brother when he could have been a man and paid for his own actions. His brother was a good kid. He was getting ready to go out of the country to attend university. I think he was accepted at Yale over in the U.S.”

“You keep saying ‘was’. Did something happen to him?” Ambros is curious.

I never used to think the worst, but I can almost guarantee something terrible did happen.

Nazyr licks his bottom lip and nods. “Yes. Someone Yabdullah fucked over was in the same cell block as his younger brother. He was stabbed to death in the showers, yet again paying for his brother’s actions. It’s sad and unfortunate. If anyone was going to rip that family from out of the gutter, it was his brother, not Yabdullah.”

“I see. Well, Ruslan let the boy who tried to kill Xava go and gave him a task. I believe your brother is going after Yabdullah sometime in the next couple of days. He wanted it to look like Xava was actually killed. That way, the boy wouldn’t be harmed.”

Interesting... so Ruslan is prepared to do whatever he can to protect me. This is a different side to my family than I’ve ever seen before, and I’m not sure how to take it.

Nazyr nods over and over again. “I’m sure he’s coming up with some sort of plan as we speak. I need to go over and see my brother. It might be late, but no one fucks with our family and gets away with it.” Nazyr rises from his seat and walks over to the entryway into the room.

Ambros rises as well and looks me over, up and down. I'm sure he's thinking I'm going to crack under the pressure after the events of this evening. I very well might, but it will be under the water hitting my skin.

"Ambros, you're more than welcome to stay here. Thank you for being with Xava tonight. Who knows what would have happened if you weren't there."

"I would probably be dead if it wasn't for you." I gaze right into Ambros' eyes. I need him to understand how thankful I am that he was there. He's become my protector, whether he's wanted to or not.

"I was glad to be here."

"Xava's room is upstairs. I'm sure she'll show you the way," Nazyr tells Ambros before he walks out the front door. A man in a suit follows closely behind, and the door is locked from the outside.

I lead Ambros up the first stairwell and then continue up the second until I reach my bedroom door. I twist the knob and push it open, then flick on the light switch to reveal my bedroom. It's nothing overly fancy, but it works.

I walk across the bedroom and then come to a halt. I haven't said a word to Ambros since we walked upstairs. "I'm going to get in the shower. I'm... I'm so sorry. I'm not trying to be rude or cold or anything of the sort. I'm overwhelmed, Ambros. Tonight... it fucked with my head so bad. I'm just... I don't even know what I am."

"That's all right. If you need something, I can make sure you have it. Is there anything else you need?"

"I don't know what I need right now besides a shower. I feel so disgusting after what happened tonight." I look down at the ground as I try to wrap my head around what happened tonight. It feels like a sick, twisted dream. Is this my fault? Did I bring this on in some way? It can't be. Things like this happen to family members of

powerful people all the time. This hasn't just happened to me. I'm certain of it.

"I know I don't need to tell you this, but I'm going to anyway. This happens to women in your position and sometimes even men. There's no need for you to feel disgusting because you didn't warrant it. It's just a shitty thing that happened to a good person and nothing more."

I nod my head and swallow hard. "I know that. I do... it just doesn't make me feel any better. It sucks. Tonight sucked. I mean, our date was phenomenal, and I had a blast, but when we left the restaurant, and I heard that gunshot..."

I shut my eyes and suck my lips in, hoping it will somehow help me push back the memories. Finally, I take a deep breath and look right at Ambros. "It felt horrible. It felt like my stomach was sliding out of my body, and I hated that. I hate feeling so fucking weak, and God! It's like I don't even know my place in the world. You know, for years, I was lied to about who I was? It's such a relief that you know now. I was lied to my entire life, and last year, I was invited to Grozny by Ruslan, and he told me everything. That sort of shit fucks with your head. This is exactly the reason we don't go around saying I'm their sister, because of situations like this." Fuck, now I'm crying, and tears are flowing down my cheeks effortlessly. I don't want to seem weak right now. There are just so many pent-up emotions that I haven't gotten out yet.

Ambros takes a step toward me and pulls me into his arms. "I know it might not seem like it, but everything will get better. You're in shock from what happened tonight. Naturally so. It will get better. It will be okay."

I lick my bottom lip and nod my head. I know it's just a desperate attempt to calm myself down. "Yeah, I keep trying to tell myself that. I just don't know who would

want *me* dead. I haven't even done anything to anyone. For fuck's sake, I'm barely twenty years old." Now that I think about it, there is a pretty big age difference between the two of us.

"You're twenty years old?" Ambros raises both of his brows and begins laughing.

I'm grateful for the comic relief he seems to have, but I'm not understanding. "Yeah, and you're the old geezer who sought me out."

"Look at you, being all playful and everything. It's adorable."

Oh, wow. I think I've figured something out. "Maybe that's why Ruslan has been giving you death stares this whole damn time." I chuckle lightly, trying to let the seriousness of this evening wash off my back like water.

"Possibly."

I lick my lips lightly and head for the bathroom, stripping out of the light pink dress I was sure he liked earlier tonight. "I'm getting in the shower. Care to join me?" I ask, standing in the entryway as I peel off my panties and then chuck the rest of my clothes in the hamper.

I don't wait for his answer. I go to the nozzle and turn the shower on, then wait a minute for the water to kick on and get warm. By the time I step under the water, allowing my body to get drenched, there's a heat source from behind me.

Ambros towers over me and pushes me back up against the wall. His hands cascade over my body like he's molding pottery. Strong, yet gentle at the same time. "Mmm, that feels good," I comment, wanting him to know I love everything he's doing.

"That's the point. I'm sure you need a good rub down after the day you've had."

“Yeah, maybe,” I playfully agree.

Ambros snakes a hand around the front of me until he’s right at my center. He swirls around my clit over and over again. I press my body against his chest, and he begins kissing my neck, distracting me from the chaos that the night has brought.

“Yes, keep doing that, please,” I beg, needing him to keep me on this spiral. I yearn for pleasure to take hold of my body.

“I have no intentions of stopping,” Ambros whispers against my ear.

Ambros holds onto me tightly and picks up the speed. I melt into his embrace, loving the euphoric feeling floating over my entire body. I arch my ass, silently telling him I want more from him, and he’s happy to oblige.

Ambros lines himself up at my entrance and slowly slides himself inside me. It feels like the first time. My body slowly adjusts to his massive size, and he eases in and out of me. I lick my lips and gnaw on my bottom one as he fucks me.

“Make me forget about tonight, Ambros, please.”

I wake up to my bedroom door being slowly opened. Mona’s red locks greet me, and I scoot up in bed. “Xava, your siblings are downstairs in the living room. I know it’s early, but they want to talk to you.” Mona’s speaking in a whisper yell, careful not to wake Ambros, who’s still sleeping beside me.

I nod, hoping she can see it. “Okay, I’ll be there in a few minutes,” I whisper yell back.

Mona shuts the door quietly, and I turn on the bedside lamp and scoot out of bed as delicately as I can. I don't want to wake Ambros up.

I manage to get out of bed and head over to my closet, where I throw on some clothes in record time and mosey my way downstairs. Sure enough, my entire family is here, minus the wives and lone husband. Nazyr, Lom, Eset, and Ruslan are all sitting down with coffees or juices in their hands.

I walk in, and every single one of them looks at me.

Eset is the first to speak, seeming a bit more aggravated than usual. "How are you? Our brothers thought it was best to wait until this morning to tell me what happened. Idiots."

"I'm fine. I was really lucky and didn't get hurt besides this scraped knee." I point to my knee, and almost everyone seems relieved.

"I don't know how you managed that, but the kid could have been an awful shot," Lom comments.

Nazyr snickers at Lom.

"What's that about?"

"Oh, nothing. It looks like Ruslan didn't just forget to tell Eset until this morning. Did he also fail to mention Ambros Galanis was on a date with our baby sister last night?"

"Sorry, what?" Eset practically chokes on her coffee.

"Ambros Galanis," Lom repeats.

I don't know what the sudden problem is, but I'm going to be quick to squash it. "If it wasn't for Ambros tackling me to the ground, I think I would've gotten shot last night. Now, why in the hell are you all in a tizzy about me being on a date with Ambros?"

Ruslan clears his throat and motions for me to sit down. I take a seat next to Eset and look at our oldest brother. “Ambros comes from a family of dangerous men. The Galanis family... they’re heavily involved in the organized crime world like we are.”

“Okay, so are they mafia, like us?” I don’t know too much about this world, but I’m doing my best to learn.

“No, not really. They’re involved in another way.” It seems like Ruslan’s trying to figure out how to tell me what the Galanis family is known for, but he’s struggling to do it.

“Just tell her what they do, Ruslan. It’s not going to kill her,” Eset pipes up.

“They’re contract killers.”

Contract killers? Does he mean like assassins?

“They’re hitmen, Xava. They take contracts to kill people. Some of them are bad, some of them probably aren’t, but his family has been doing it for a long time. It’s what they’re known for, and they’re the best killers in the world. Ambros has never failed to complete a job,” Lom comes out with it and tells me everything I need to know.

“So... what you’re saying is that Ambros is dangerous?” I’m looking at all my siblings, trying to understand this.

“To other people, yes. I think he’s infatuated with you, and I’ve never heard rumors about Ambros harming a woman,” Nazyr speaks up, and Ruslan appears annoyed that Nazyr is speaking in Ambros’ defense.

“He’s a dangerous man, but he’s the kind of man you want in your corner.” Eset is looking right at me.

“What do you mean by that?”

“He’s the type of man who will go to war for you, as are every one of the men in this room. I know a couple of

you have a problem with Ambros going out on dates with Xava, but she's an excellent judge of character. If she doesn't want to spend time with him, then she'll stop. If she wants to keep spending time with him, then let her be happy. After all, none of you can sit here and act like you haven't been considered dangerous and deadly."

"Okay, that's a lot of information to absorb... but I want to know something," I state, making sure to look at everyone in the room. "Do we know who tried to have me killed?"

"I have it narrowed down to two people, yes, and I'm working on confirming who ordered the hit." Ruslan's voice grows deeper, and there isn't a doubt in my mind that he's going to make that person pay once he finds out. "I need you to stay here for a couple of days. I'll let you know when you can stop laying low."

"So, I'm hiding?"

"For the time being, yes, but I promise it will be worth it." Ruslan has never looked more frightening to me. His jaw is clenched, and there's this evilness in his eyes. I'm afraid for the person responsible because I know my brother isn't going to show any mercy.

Chapter Eleven

Ambros

I find it a little hard to believe that I'm currently sitting on Xava's bed in Nazyr Umarova's home. If there wasn't an assassination attempt on Xava, I'd be back in my hotel room with her right now, but even she isn't here.

I've been here for a couple of hours, using the time to relax for a while and then going through some emails on my phone. There's nothing too important, just some things I need to respond to so my father's administrative team knows if I'm taking certain assignments or not. I did agree to take a job in a few days in France. There's a rush fee on the job, which means the company will pay triple the amount, and I'll earn double my usual fee.

Since then, I've been admiring Xava's room while I relax. The deep cherry hardwood floors span the space, a different tone than the ones leading down the hallway. I wonder if this was a change that was made after she started living here or if it's always been this way. It's not an overly large room, but there's plenty of storage space with built-in closets along the wall where the door is.

Her room is in the corner and overlooks the garden, giving a bit of a city view if you look out through the window on the right. It's a modern yet contemporary design. I know Lom's wife is into real estate and interior design, so I wonder if she helped Xava decorate. If she did, I might have to hire her. The room looks amazing.

There's about an eight-foot wall between the two windows, and on the wall is textured wood behind the headboard. The wood design starts out yellow and then turns into a deep matte purple. The yellow wood

compliments the light tones in Xava's bedside tables, and different shades of yellow are spread across the room.

I get a notification on my phone and see it's a text from my brother. I really don't want to look at it yet, so I'm not going to.

Xava's bedroom door opens, and she walks in, shutting it firmly behind her. She tosses herself on the suede leather chair next to the door and inhales deeply.

"Are you all right?" Everything about her demeanor right now tells me she's stressed. From the way she's furrowing her brows to the way she's licking her bottom lip and lightly biting it afterward.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm just... in shock about everything, I guess. At least now I know *why* I was targeted in the first place."

"I'm assuming everything was explained to you?" I don't want to seem like I'm pressing her for answers, yet I am curious to know what they said.

"Yeah, you could say that. They even let me know some things about you and your family. Specifically, what you do." Xava locks her eyes with mine, gauging my reaction to what she's said. I'm not sure if she expects me to deny it, but I'm not going to. Why would I? Her family is involved in the criminal world, and so is mine. It shouldn't be too much of a shock that I'm not what I told her I was.

"I don't come out and tell anyone what I do, Xava. I hope you don't take any offense to me lying to you."

She shakes her head. "At first, I did. I was shocked, but the more I thought about it, the more ridiculous it ended up making me feel. You didn't know me, so how could I expect you to trust me with something as important as that? Maybe important isn't the right word. Heavy. What you do is extremely serious... and intense. I don't blame you for keeping that from me. How could I?"

I don't know if I've lost my damn mind or what, but I need to inquire a bit more. "Am I hearing you right? You're okay with my job?" I raise both of my brows and look at her like she's insane.

She shrugs. "I wouldn't say I'm okay with it. Killing people shouldn't be something I support, but after everything I've learned, I know there are very dangerous, sick people in this world. I guess, in a way, I think if you're someone taking out a portion of those horrible people, then why should I have a problem with that?"

She has an interesting way of thinking about it. Not everyone I kill is the scum of the earth, but a good portion of them have done horrible things throughout their lives. Those are the people I don't mind killing. The others are simply a paycheck to me.

"It's very adult of you, even though you're practically a child," I tease Xava a bit, and she rolls her eyes at me playfully.

"Maybe so, but I don't act like it. Ugh." She makes her way over to me and plops down on the bed beside me. "At least now I understand why I was shot at in the first place. It's a little hard to believe, honestly. I can't freaking... I can't believe this."

"It's a lot for you to process. The Umarova family has been powerful for many, many years. One thing that took me a long time to understand growing up as a Galanis is that there is always someone who wants your power. They'll do almost everything and anything they can to take it, so you have to be ready to fight back. I want you to know how to defend yourself, Xava, especially now that you know the risks."

"Defend myself. How exactly?" Xava laughs, taking this more like a joke than anything else. I'm not playing around with her. I'm being serious.

“I’m going to teach you how to shoot.” She knows the risks, and now she needs to know how to protect herself. God forbid I’m not around, or Rolando is incapacitated somehow. Xava will be left alone, and at least if she knows how to protect herself, I’ll feel more comfortable leaving her by herself.

“Oh, wow. Um, I guess that’s one way to scare people off. A dainty girl with a gun.” She smiles, seeming like she doesn’t have an ounce of confidence in her.

“No, not a dainty little girl. They’ll see Xava Umarova, and the moment they see you with a gun, they’ll know they should have run the other way because you and your family are not the type of people to fuck with.” Xava’s going to have to become more confident with who she is, especially now. Her and her family’s enemies will sniff out any weakness and try to use that to their advantage.

“You’re a really good hype man, Ambros. It’s sweet.” Xava gets up and begins pacing back and forth. She does this for a couple of minutes in complete and utter silence before she ultimately comes over and lays down beside me on the bed.

“I’m only trying to help you see the power within you. You’re going to need to be able to use it, Xava. You’ve got what it takes.”

“Thank you.” Xava grabs onto my arm and snuggles up against me. I pull her close against my chest and hold her while we chat.

“I heard rumors about your family’s enemies coming out of the woodwork. In my business, you never pay attention to rumors, at least not until they come to fruition. You never know what’s true and what isn’t.”

“What rumors have you heard?”

I glance down, and her eyes are boring up into mine. “They’re rumors, Xava. I don’t even know if they’re true or not.”

“I don’t care. I want to be aware of what’s being said. My family told me a little bit this morning, but not everything. I can tell they’re keeping things from me, and I’m sure they’re going to keep doing that until they feel like I can handle everything.”

I’m not sure if I should really tell her, but I’m not going to keep it from her. She’s right. She deserves to know what’s going on. What’s that old saying: knowledge is power?

“There are multiple enemies of your family who are supposedly banning together to rise against them. The two people in play are the family of Duarte, who I’m not sure if you know who he was.”

I wait for Xava to answer, but she shakes her head.

“Duarte was the man who had Mona imprisoned for years. He’s the man who raped her and who is the biological father of your nieces. Duarte was killed, and it’s believed your family is responsible. His family is the most powerful one in Portugal and has a lot of connections throughout the world.”

Xava’s mouth drops open. Did she not know anything about this? I bet she didn’t. It seems like her family kept a lot from her. In a way, they were probably trying to protect her from the knowledge of it all, of knowing how being in this life can be, but she has to know. “The other person is Julio Ramirez, who is Santos’ father. A while ago, the Umarova family was supposed to back up Julio’s claim to the Mexican cartel. In return, Eset would have a suitable, powerful husband. Eset and Santos were married, but the Umarova family has had a long alliance and friendship with Alejandro, who is the current leader of the cartel...and Santos’ grandfather. When the Umarovas pulled their support from Julio, it left him with nothing. His claim to the cartel is meaningless, and Alejandro is still in power. The rumor is that Julio is working with Duarte’s family.”

“Working with his family because mine betrayed him?”

I nod. “For exactly that reason. Julio is a power-hungry, desperate man. One who will do anything to make a claim to power. He wants to be seen as a powerful man right now, but he isn’t. He’s just trying to look a certain way, and while most people know it’s all bullshit, some don’t know enough about it. Prime example... Duarte’s family.”

“Wow.”

“Your family is practically royalty here, and there are people who are always going to want to harm you because of that. It’s why I want to make sure you know how to protect yourself.”

“I understand.” Xava nods once and looks at the ground for a moment. I’m wondering what’s going on in her mind right now. She doesn’t say anything, so I ask.

“What are you thinking about?”

She sighs heavily and releases a pent-up breath. “I’m wondering why my family kept all this from me for so long. I mean, I can think of a few reasons. Maybe they didn’t want to scare me off, or maybe they didn’t fully trust me like they do with one another. I... I just wish I could have known about all this a long time ago. I would have been more prepared if I had. I knew Mona had a rough life before she met Nazyr, but I didn’t have any clue about Duarte or her being raped. None of it. I’m sure she doesn’t like to discuss it. That’s not what I’m bothered by. It’s just starting to feel like I don’t know anything about the people I’ve grown to love and care about over the last year.” There’s a hint of emotion in Xava’s voice. She might be acting like she’s okay right now, but I can tell she’s really bothered by what’s going on.

“I know it’s difficult, but if I were you, I wouldn’t take it personally. I’m sure that they kept things from you for a reason.” In the back of my mind, I’m sure they thought if they revealed everything about their lives, they’d scare her off. But now, she’s been thrown into the thick of it. I don’t know if I would have made the same choices, but I can’t condemn them for how they handle their family situations. All I can do is be here and support Xava.

I continue holding her close against me. It’s all I can do, just be here. Hell, I’m going to be stuck here for at least a couple more days while her family handles the imminent threat at hand. If we’d been together longer, I would offer my assistance, but I have no doubt her brothers want to handle this on their own. I might not be lending a helping hand at the moment, but I am going to be asking about what happened. If they lost a lead, or somehow the bastard slipped through their fingers, I will be doing whatever I need to, without letting them know, of course.

“Yeah, it’s just hard to do that. It probably doesn’t make sense. My whole life, I was lied to about who I am, then met my actual family, and now look at me. Still discovering things that I wasn’t told about.” I glance down, and Xava’s frowning lightly.

“I’ll play devil’s advocate here. I don’t think they meant any harm. They thought what they were doing was right, even if it wasn’t.”

Xava will have to sort out her own feelings about what’s transpired, but I have no doubt that it will be okay in the end.

Chapter Twelve

Xava

Ambros left Grozny three days ago. It's a little hard for me to believe he came to the city I'm living in just to see me. That's the sort of thing guys do in romance movies when they really, really like you. I've never had a man make any sort of move like that in the past for me, and in a way, it proves to me that there are really amazing guys out there. I'm lucky enough to experience this first hand.

Over the past few days, I've been helping Mona get everything ready for Ira's third birthday. Her party is in a couple of hours, and I've already helped her a lot. The massive living room in the townhouse is decorated perfectly. Pink, purple, and turquoise balloons transform the space into a child's wonderland. Ira asked for it to be donut-themed, so Mona and I did some research into these donut towers we saw online. We managed to put them together ourselves and not hire an outside company to do it, which is pretty cool.

Mona wanted to add a little bit more than just the donut theme, so she has unicorn-themed things around the space, too. Along the back wall, there's a sign that says, 'Yippee, I'm Three!' and next to it is a giant unicorn balloon. The same pinks, purples, and turquoise colors around the living area are in all the unicorn items as well. There's even a snack bar that has food dyed to match the colors of the party. It's come together so nicely, and I can't wait for Ira to see it later.

She's out with her sister and Emily, who's been working to distract the girls all day. Emily took her oldest daughter Sierra, who's eleven and I'm sure is being a

great help wrangling the toddlers as they're off doing something I know is likely magical.

“Bloody hell, I have so much to do still.” Mona’s running around the house like Emily and the girls will walk through the door in mere minutes.

“What can I do to help?” I ask, only wanting to help her.

“Are you kidding me? Absolutely nothing. You’ve done enough. More than enough, actually.” I know the family has the resources to do what Mona wants. She could have hired a company to come in and decorate the house, turning it into what Ira wished for, but Mona really wanted to do it all herself. She’s even cooked and baked so many different things. She even made all the donuts over the course of the last twelve hours while I helped her decorate them. In all honesty, I had a lot of fun doing that.

“Mona, I’m serious. If you need more help, then let me know.”

She shakes her head over and over again. “No. I’m not taking another moment of your time. Go out and do something fun. You’re free to do so now that Ruslan handled that situation, so go take a walk. Grab a coffee. Do something fun.” Mona widens her eyes, another tell-tale sign that she wants me to get out of the house and enjoy myself.

“Fine, I’ll head out for a little bit.” I sigh dramatically, totally playing around.

Mona smiles brightly. “Good! Maybe bring me back an iced caramel macchiato?”

“Sure thing,” I tell her as I walk toward the front of the house. I grab my purse off the hook on the wall and see Rolando sitting near the door. He glances up and looks at me.

“We heading out?”

“Yeah, for a little bit. I’ve been cooped up in the house for the last few days.”

Rolando gets up from his seat and fishes the keys out of his pocket. We both exit through the front door and walk out onto the sidewalk, heading to the car he chauffeurs me around in. Just as we walk up to the car, he gets a call. Rolando pulls the phone out of his pocket and answers.

“Hello.”

There are a few moments where there’s nothing but silence, and eventually, Rolando speaks. “Do you need me to bring her there right now?”

More silence.

I wonder who he’s talking to, but I know deep down it has to be one of my brothers.

“Okay, text me the address, and we’ll be there soon,” Rolando says, then a few moments later, he hangs up the phone.

He unlocks the car and opens the door for me.

“Who was that?”

“Lom. He needs me to bring you somewhere immediately.”

I draw my brows together. “Do you know why?”

“No, I don’t. All he said was that I needed to bring you across town, and it needed to be as soon as possible.”

“Okay, let’s get a move on then.” I slide in the back seat, and Rolando shuts my door, walks around the vehicle, and gets behind the driver’s wheel.

I stare out at the city as Rolando drives. We go from the wealthy area of well-kept townhouses to skyscrapers and luxury apartment or condominium complexes. As we pass all this, we end up going through the rougher parts of the city, where the homes aren’t nearly as nice. In this

part of town, I see so many broken windows, doors with paint peeling off them, and even some roofs that have caved in. It's so sad, and it makes me wonder why the city lets the homes get this way. Not all the homes that look this bad are vacant either, and that is not only dangerous but also so depressing.

Rolando continues driving until we're outside of Grozny's city limits. We keep going for a few miles until we pull up to a long, tree-lined driveway. It's very isolated, and before we get to the end of the driveway, there's a chain link gate with a box.

Rolando drives right up to it, rolls his window down, and types in the code. A few moments later, the chain link gate opens for us, and he drives through. I glance behind us, and the gate closes. Whatever this place is, it has a lot of high-tech security measures. There are even cameras on the outside of the building, and I notice a few cars by one of the entrances.

Rolando pulls the SUV up and gets out of the vehicle, walking around it to open my door for me. As he helps me get out, I look around the space and can't help but ask him. "Where are we?"

I've never been to this place before, yet it feels like it should be familiar. Out of nowhere, the door opens to the old cinderblock building, and my brother, Lom, comes out, approaching me with haste.

"Xava, I'm going to get in a lot of shit with Ruslan for doing this behind his back, but you want to know how we're handling your assassination attempt, right?"

I mentioned to Lom a couple of days ago how I want to know what's going on and be a little more included in these sorts of family decisions. Maybe not the business per se, but I wanted to be a bit more involved. All I really want is to be communicated with and have more knowledge about what's going on behind the scenes.

“Yes, I do.” Now, I realize I don’t know what the hell I’m really getting myself into. One thing I’ve had to remind myself of as of late is that even though I was adopted into the Beno family, I am an Umarova, and the blood running through my veins is powerful. It’s a great reminder that helps me realize I’m not weak in the slightest bit.

“All right. Come with me.”

Lom leads me up the sidewalk into the building. It looks like, maybe at one time, this was some sort of office. There’s a reception area in the front where we are right now, and then there’s a stairwell leading to the second floor with an elevator beside it.

Lom takes me left, and we walk all the way down the hallway until he stops. He licks his lips nervously and looks directly into my eyes. “There’s no turning back after I open this door, Xava. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing, but if it means the family is being more honest so that I know more, then yes. I’ll be fine,” I assure my brother, not wanting to seem weak. I really hope there isn’t a dead body behind this door. I’m new to this life, and I haven’t been desensitized like the rest of my family members.

Lom pushes open the door, and we both walk into a pitch-black room. He shuts the door behind him, and then there’s a *click* of a light switch. In the middle of the room, there’s a man tied to a wooden chair. His dark hair is the first thing I notice, and then it’s the bruising and swelling. Purple, blue, and bits of yellow are scattered across his face. Dried blood covers one eyebrow, and underneath it, the eye is so puffy. I didn’t even know a face could swell this badly.

“Who is this man?”

“His name is Yabdullah. He was the one hired to ensure you died. Luckily for us, he hired a child to do a man’s job, and the boy wasn’t successful. Yabdullah, well... he’s tried denying his hand in all of it, but Ruslan caught him in many lies. All we need to know now is which person ordered the hit.”

“Are you thinking it could be Julio Ramirez?” I question Lom, and he pulls his head back in shock.

“How do you know that name?”

“I have my sources. Now answer the question. Someone is trying to kill me, Lom. I deserve to know the truth.”

Lom sucks in a heavy breath. “He’s one of the people we think could be behind it.”

“He’s the one who has the biggest reason to hurt someone in the family besides Duarte’s family, right?”

Lom blankly blinks at me. “Who told you about all that?”

“Does it matter? I don’t think so. What matters to me is that the person responsible is dealt with. I’ve barely been alive, Lom. I don’t want to die yet, not when I just started living.”

“You’re not going to die, Xava. We’re making sure of that.” There’s a darkness in my brother’s voice. One that tells me he’s going to do whatever it takes to keep me safe.

“Why did you bring me here?” I’m changing the subject on him very quickly, but I want to know.

“I wanted you to see what we’re willing to do for you so you don’t live in fear. You asked to be included a bit more, and while Ruslan doesn’t think it’s a good idea, I think he’s wrong. You cannot speak of this to him. I will tell Ruslan when the time is right, but now isn’t that time. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do,” I confirm. I appreciate how my brother is willing to cause issues with our older brother so that he can make me a little bit happier. I never thought anything like this would happen.

“This is where we bring people like Yabdullah. It’s also where we conduct some business, depending on the occasion. If we think a meeting will go badly, we bring our client here so we can do whatever is necessary.”

I’m learning a lot more about my family and what they’re willing to do when someone crosses the line. “Whatever is necessary” is code for “take them out if it comes to that”.

“I see.” I nod, and Lom exits the room. I follow him, and we head down the hallway until we’re in the receptionist area.

“I’m sorry to drag you out here, but I wanted you to see we’re willing to do whatever it takes. This will stay a secret for now. I will be honest with Ruslan soon. In the meantime, if you have questions, you come to me and me only.” Lom searches my eyes for some sort of acknowledgment, and I nod.

“Okay. Thank you for showing this to me.” I’m not exactly “supportive” of what my siblings are doing for me, but I realize this is a dog-eat-dog world. There aren’t any other options. There’s only eat or be eaten.

Rolando approaches me, and Lom thanks him for bringing me all the way out here. Lom mumbles how he needs to tie up some loose ends here before he sees me later at the birthday party and walks off.

“Did you need to stop anywhere before we head back, Xava?” Rolando asks as we leave the building’s parking lot.

“Yeah, I need to get Mona an iced caramel macchiato.”

“All right. Do you want to stop at the coffee shop around the corner from her house?”

I like the way Rolando thinks. “Yes, that would be perfect. Thank you so much.”

Rolando and I head outside and get back in the SUV. He then proceeds to drive me across the city, and then we stop at the coffee shop around the corner from Nazyr and Mona’s house. I end up getting a coffee for Nazyr as well, figuring he’s going to need it with children running around the place.

Rolando and I arrive back at the house and head inside, only to hear children’s laughter flooding throughout the space. I find Mona and hand off her coffee, then walk around until I find Nazyr and give him his.

“What’s this for?”

“There are tons of kids running around. I figured you could use the extra caffeine.”

“*This* is why you’re my favorite baby sister.”

“I’m your *only* baby sister, Nazyr.” I shake my head and laugh. Eset might be younger than anyone else, but I’m the newfound baby of the family. Nazyr seems to be in the middle of a conversation with Danill, one of the security men who work for our family, so I walk off and check out what’s going on.

Sierra is chasing Karim, and he’s giggling ever so loudly. His birthday party is next weekend, so I’m sure this will be a lot of fun for him. It’s kind of really cool that so many of my nieces and nephews are around the same age. Meanwhile, Vanina is coloring in a coloring book as she sits on the floor. Amelia is carrying Aldan around, who’s about four months old, and Emily has a little boy named Kolson, who’s nine months old. There are so many babies and toddlers in our family who seem to constantly keep everyone on their toes.

Ira comes running out with a unicorn-themed cone birthday hat on the top of her head. Her copper red hair is as bright as ever with the light mint-colored dress she's wearing. There are blue, pink, and purple polka dots all over the dress, and it's adorable for a toddler to wear something like this. If an adult tried to, it would look like a whole bunch of colors threw up all over the dress.

"I thought you would have been one of the first to be here." Eset's voice comes from behind me.

"I was, but I had to run out to get some coffee."

"Mmm... is that why I saw you on the cameras?" Eset licks her bottom lip as she asks me this. Now I feel a bit awkward. I wasn't trying to lie to her, but Lom said we needed to keep this between us.

"Lom said to keep it quiet, so I am." In no way, shape, or form am I throwing my brother under the bus, but I want her to know I'm doing this for a reason.

"I figured as much. He and Ruslan have been butting heads a bit lately on how much we should include you. I, on the other hand, as well as Nazyr, don't really give a damn. If you want to know more, then you should be able to know more. It's as simple as that."

"Then why does Ruslan want to keep it from me so badly?"

"In his own way, he's trying to protect and shield you from it. I think the rest of us are going to put a kibosh on it since someone tried to kill you, though. That's been our argument. There's no keeping you in the dark after what someone tried to do. Don't worry, though. I'm not going to say anything to Ruslan about it. He doesn't check the cameras anyway, so that's his own negligence."

"Thank you." I stare into my sister's eyes and doubt she has any idea just how much I'm really thanking her for. I want to be included in this family completely, not just partially or for certain aspects. I am glad to hear that

she, Nazyr, and Lom are sticking up for my right to know what's going on within the family and the family business.

“There’s no need to thank me. I have been wondering if you’ve given any more thought to what you want to do for school or for the rest of your life. Ruslan has been asking if any of us know about that as well.”

Meryem comes running up to Eset and pulls on her pants leg quickly before running off to play with the other children. Leave it to Meryem to lighten up the mood. She’s Eset and Santos’ adopted daughter, who turned three back in February. On paper, she doesn’t look like she’s an adopted daughter since they had a birth certificate made for her. Both Santos and Eset are listed on the birth certificate, and I sometimes wonder if they’re ever going to tell Meryem the truth.

“I’m not sure. One day, I think I’ll know that something is right for me and that I want to do it, but right now, I don’t know what that is.”

“You’re going to figure it out. I’m sure it’s just hard right now because of all the changes you’ve had over the last year. Don’t let any of them pressure you into making a decision, especially Ruslan. He means well, but sometimes he can be so overbearing without even realizing it.”

Chapter Thirteen

Ambros

It's been about a week and a half since I saw Xava face-to-face. In the meantime, I completed a rush job, and now I'm back in Greece. I don't want to stay here too long because my family always seems to aggravate things rather quickly. At some point in my life, I know I'm going to stop giving a damn about whatever the fuck any of them are doing. Linus is the only exception, as my brother isn't constantly on my ass.

One thing he constantly does is try to play the middleman between my father and myself, which can be extremely frustrating. All I want is for my father to let me be, yet he feels the need to constantly butt around in my business. If that isn't frustrating, I don't know what is. Sometimes, I think my father creates the problem just to have to deal with it. Almost as if he gets bored.

I know the Organization is going to be mine one day, and yet my father does anything he can to make my life difficult. Part of me thinks he doesn't want to let go of it and will hold onto the reins of the business until his very last breath. I've been training my entire life to take it over and feel as if I deserve to be the one to do it.

I try to push thoughts of my father away as I sit on my back deck, overlooking the sea. I'm shirtless in nothing but a pair of light blue swim trunks. My only plan for the day is to lay out here and catch some sun, maybe take a dip in the pool later. Today is all about relaxing, and I wish Xava was here to bask in it with me. I don't believe she's been to Greece. Man, how I yearn to show her the beauty that is Mykonos. There is no city like it in the entire world. The beauty simply does not compare.

My phone begins ringing, and Xava's name flashes across the screen. I tap on the green button to accept and then chat with her. "Hello there, *ελάφι*." I find that every time I call her "fawn" in my native tongue, she blushes or smiles brightly. I think it's such a good pet name for her. Xava is innocent like a fawn, yet strong like an ox, even if she might not see the latter.

"Ambros, ugh, how I've missed your voice. I know we've texted today, but I had to call you." Xava and I often text because we're rarely ever around each other in person. I try to call her once every couple of days and planned on calling her when I went inside later. I'm not bothered that she called by any means. I like that she took the initiative to reach out to me. It's a great feeling. It shows she wants to communicate with me as much as I do with her.

"Is everything all right over there?"

There are a few moments of silence before Xava responds, the kind of silence where I wish I could see her facial features. I'm not sure if she realizes it, but she has a way of wearing her feelings on her face all the time.

"Yeah, I think I'm just itching to get away for a bit. Being in Italy was amazing. However, there's a lot of pressure from Ruslan for me to figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life. I did get an apartment, so I'm no longer living with Nazyr and Mona. Maybe that will help me figure it out."

"What do you mean pressure?" Ruslan is a very dominant, authoritative man. I understand it in some respects, but Xava is still getting her footing with understanding who her family is.

"It's not anything bad. He wants to know if I have plans to go to university or if I want to be involved in the family business, those sorts of things. I don't know what I want to do yet, and I think he wants me to make a decision to be more certain of my future."

I understand he wants an answer from her, but pressuring Xava is going to keep her from making a decision, not escalate it. “You have plenty of time in the world to figure it out. I know he’s your brother, but don’t let him bully you into deciding something before you’re ready.”

“I’m not, and he isn’t bullying me. He vocalizes his thoughts and then asks me.” There’s a bit of intensity in her voice. I hope she didn’t take what I said the wrong way.

“Xava, I’ve known your brother for a long time. Ruslan has a habit of bullying people into what he wants them to do. It goes hand-in-hand with having as much power as he does. Now, do I think he’s being a major dick and forcing your hand? No, I don’t. I do think he could be bullying you by applying some slight pressure on you for an answer when you’re not ready to give him one.”

“I guess he expects me to know what I’m going to do, but I just don’t. I wish I did. I wish I had a passion for something that totally blows my mind, but I haven’t found something like that.”

“You will one day. It might not be now. It might not be next week. It could be a year from now, but when you find it, you will know it’s right for you.” I try to be as uplifting and optimistic as I can for her. Xava has had the luxury of not being forced into a family business, but at the same time, she was lied to her whole life. These are the circumstances when I need to put myself in her shoes.

“Thank you. This is the kind of stuff I need to hear. I do think being out on my own and no longer living with Nazyr, Mona, and the kids will be good for me. Maybe it will force me out of my shell a bit more.”

“I think so. Have you officially moved everything out?”

“Yeah, there’s just a couple more boxes worth of clothes that I have to take over, but otherwise, I’ve got a little bit of furniture in here, and it’s looking pretty good.”

“Awesome. I can’t wait to see it.”

“Yeah, me too. It’s really unique, kind of my style.”

“You’ll have to show me the next time I’m in Grozny. Do you have any plans on Friday?”

“Not that I know of. We just had Karim’s birthday party yesterday, and I haven’t been told about any more family events.”

“How would you feel about coming to Mykonos? There’s an event on Friday. A charity gala, and I’d love for you to be my date. It’ll be a great excuse for me to show you around Mykonos over the weekend as well.”

Xava’s tone lightens up a bit. “I think that would be great. I’d love to go. Do I need to fly there, or how will we work out the logistics of travel?”

“I’ll come pick you up Friday morning and will let you know which airport to expect me at. While the jet refuels and gets another safety check, we can go grab breakfast, then head back to Mykonos.”

“That sounds amazing. I’m really excited to see you again.” I can practically see the adorable smile spreading across her face right now, even though she’s over a thousand miles away from me.

A natural smile tugs at my lips, and then I spot movement coming from my right. Linus is approaching me in a bright yellow shirt and classic khaki shorts. It looks like we’re both having a relaxing day. “Likewise. My brother just showed up unannounced. I’ll give you a call later, all right?”

“Okay. Have a good day, and I’ll chat with you later,” Xava says before she hangs up the phone.

I put my phone on the table beside my chair, and my brother comes over, sitting down in the lounge chair beside me. “You usually call before you show up.”

“Now, why would I give you the opportunity to avoid me like you do our father?” Linus has turned his head and is looking right at me.

I cock a brow. “Unlike our father, I actually enjoy speaking with you.”

Linus scoffs and shakes his head. “At least you don’t play the same games with me as you do with him. I’m surprised to see you’re even here. With your track record lately, you’ve been leaving the country more often than not.”

“Mmm, and for good reason. I am curious, though. Why are you here?” There has to be some reason. Linus is either acting as a mediator again, or he has something he wants me to know.

Linus inhales deeply through his nose. “I don’t know how to tell you this, so I’m going to come right out with it. Our father keeps asking me about prospective women to set you up with since you’re so adamant about not moving forward with Zoe Drakos.”

“It won’t matter. I’m not going to see any of the women he wants me to because I’m already dating someone. Plus, Zoe is a much better match for you. We both know that, and how he doesn’t see it is beyond me.”

“You’re seeing someone?” Linus arches his brows in surprise.

“Yes, I am. Someone whose family is powerful in their own right.”

“Are you serious with her, or is this some fling? If it’s a fling, keep her around through the summer and then give in. You’re the one who’s going to end up leading the Organization, Ambros, so you have to pick and choose your battles. I am by no means telling you how to live

your life, but trust me, if you want to lead one day, then you need to placate him every once in a while.”

I lick my lips and take a sip of my drink, then sit up and throw my legs over the side of the chair. Linus knows at this point that I’m not screwing around. “Look, I know you’re trying to keep the peace between everyone and all that. I respect you for what you’re trying to do, brother. I really do. However, I will not stand by and let our father dictate every part of my life. His father did that to him all those years ago, and while I understand he believes it’s natural, that it’s what should happen, it isn’t. I’m happy with the woman I’m seeing, and I will be speaking with her to make our relationship official. She is a great match, and I’m sure whenever I bring her around, our father will see that.”

“Mind if I ask who it is?” I don’t think Linus will report the information back to our father, but I have to be sure.

“You can’t breathe a word of this to our father until I’m ready.”

“Okay,” Linus agrees.

“I’m seeing Xava Beno-Umarova, the youngest sister of the Umarova family.”

Linus blinks a couple of times and furrows his brows. I know he’s trying to put their family tree together in his head. He’s never heard of Xava, and a lot of people haven’t. “Isn’t Eset the youngest?”

“Everyone thought so, but no. Xava was a hidden child who was recently introduced to the Umarovas and their world.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Linus is in complete shock. I can’t blame him in the least bit. I would be, too.

“No, I’m not. She’s a good match, a powerful one. But I didn’t pursue her because of who she’s related to. I

went after her because I had a connection with her. It hasn't fizzled out, and I'm going to keep exploring that."

"I don't know if I believe what you're telling me." Linus chuckles lightly, and I understand where he's coming from. What he doesn't know is that I didn't know who Xava really was when I met her the night of Lom and Emily's wedding. All she was to me was a gorgeous woman who could hold a great conversation.

"It's all right. I'm not asking you to. I'll naturally assume our father is really pressing Zoe, above all the other potential women?"

Linus nods. "He has made up his mind that you're going to marry Zoe."

I crack up laughing. "He's delusional. I've told him once I'm not interested, and I'm not. I've made my choice, and I'm sticking with that."

"I don't know what to do, man. I'm trying to help you as much as I can, but the two of you make it difficult as fuck some days."

"You don't need to help either of us, Linus. The bottom line is we're going to be forced to figure it out. It's not your job to jump in the middle and try to save either of us."

My father will have to realize that he isn't the most powerful man in the family at some point. He wants me to take over the Organization, and I have to keep showing my strength. The only reason I push back so much is to show him that the business our grandfather built isn't going to be in the hands of some weakling. I'm going to make my family proud by how I handle the business, and I'm only going to bring more power to the Galanis name.

Chapter Fourteen

Xava

“It’s a little hard to believe you came all this way just to take me on a date.” I smile before I take a sip of my freshly made hot latte. Ambros and I are at a new breakfast joint just outside the heart of Grozny.

Ambros is in a fancy blood-red dress shirt with black slacks and matching black Oxfords. “I told you I was coming. Plus, there wasn’t a way in hell I was going to make you fly out to visit me by yourself.”

“To be fair, I wouldn’t be by myself. I’d have Rolando with me.” The second I say it, Ambros’ expression drops. He knows better than anyone that Rolando has to be with me. There isn’t a choice in the matter. He goes with me everywhere for my own protection, and after this assassination attempt, I know better than to go anywhere by myself.

I dig my fork into my *syrniki*, which are like pancakes but much fluffier. They’re made with cheese, which gives them a much better taste, in my opinion. They’re sweet yet mildly cheesy. And a raspberry topping on them makes them mind-blowingly amazing. If I could, I’d eat these every damn day.

Ambros and I are sharing *draniki*, a fried crispy potato pancake, and then he orders some *vatrushka* buns. You can eat them at breakfast or dessert, and either option is a great one. They’re slightly sweet and are never overbearing at all. The filling is made up of cream cheese and cherries, and I think there might even be some cherry jam in the kind Ambros ordered. Of course, we’re drinking coffee with our breakfast, both of us enjoying it so much. They’re soft and sweet but also have a golden-brown chewy texture when you bite into

them. Ambros has been demolishing his food, and I chuckle at his shenanigans.

“Ah, yes. Very true. We really need to order more of these so we can take them with us.” Ambros motions to the *vatrushka*.

“Get some different flavors. You haven’t even tried the blueberry ones. They’re my absolute favorite.”

“I’ll make sure we order a variety pack. Is there anything else we should take back to Greece with us?”

I think about what Ambros is asking me but quickly know I don’t want to bring anything from Grozny. “Honestly, I want to explore Greece and have a whole bunch of foods that are from your country. I can have my normal stuff when I come back home.”

“Okay. When we’re done here, we’ll head back to the airstrip. I’m sure everything will be finished by the time we’re done here.”

“I really do appreciate you coming out here to get me.”

“Xava, you can stop saying that. I was going to come here anyway. There’s no way I’d make you fly all the way to Greece like that.” Ambros takes a sip of his coffee and then clears his throat. “How is your new apartment? Do you like it?”

“Oh, I love it. It’s really giving me my own sense of independence while still being close to the rest of the family. Ever since I left Prague and moved to Grozny, I’ve been living with Mona, Nazyr, and the kids. In a way, I felt kind of like I was stepping on their toes. They said I wasn’t, but I don’t know if I really believe them. I think they were just trying to make sure I was happy.”

Ambros picks up his hot coffee again and takes another sip, holding the coffee mug in his hands. “In your case, family comes above all else. I’m sure them saying you weren’t a bother is the truth.”

I take another bite of my delicious food and follow it up with some coffee, nodding in the process. “You’re probably right. Still, it feels so nice to be out on my own. Even back in Prague, I was still living with my adoptive mother. I never moved out of the condo we shared back home.”

“That’s okay. There’s no golden rule that says you need to leave home by a certain age.”

“Very true. I don’t know if I told you, but the apartment I have is in a historic building. They renovated a good portion of it but saved a lot of the old charm the building had, too. The previous owner of my apartment had done some really cool upgrades.”

“I can’t wait to see it. Is it big enough for you, or is it small? A lot of the time in the Greek market, you find those hidden gems, but you’re sacrificing your space to get it.”

I shake my head. “No, there are three bedrooms, which is perfect. One for me, one for a guest, and one for Rolando. It really seemed to work out.”

Ambros draws his brows together and purses his lips for a few moments. “What do you mean, one for Rolando? He’s living with you?”

Uh-oh. I didn’t think that through. Not about Rolando living with me, but the part about me telling Ambros. “Yeah, he’s constantly around since he’s my security detail, and I thought it would make more sense if he had his own room. That way, he wouldn’t have to run back to wherever he lived and get relief for a few hours. I don’t really like the people who would come over and replace him while he’s sleeping and handling his affairs anyway. I’m much more comfortable with Rolando.” Rolando sits a couple of tables away, enjoying his own breakfast, occasionally looking over every couple of minutes. Then it hits me. The way I worded that last bit didn’t sound too great. “Not that I’m overly

comfortable with him. He's been working as my security for the last year, and I'm confident in his capabilities to protect me."

"I'm glad you are, but I'm not. Rolando should have done more the day of your assassination attempt."

I throw my head back in shock at what Ambros has just said. "What? He was getting the car, Ambros. You were the one right beside me, so of course, you took the brunt of the responsibility that day." I don't think it's fair that Ambros is picking on Rolando. If I had to put my finger on it, I'd say it's coming from a jealousy standpoint, and that's frustrating for me.

"I haven't been impressed by his skill set, and that's all I'm saying."

"I guess not everyone can be as good as you, now can they? I heard you're the best in the business, and I'm not sure if that's something I should be wary about. Is it, Ambros?" Now I'm getting annoyed. I haven't completely lost it yet, though I don't appreciate the attitude I'm getting from him. I get he's this top-notch assassin, contract killer, or whatever you want to call him, but I'm confident in the man who's actually being paid to protect me at all costs. Ambros just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

"You weren't wary about it when there were bullets headed your way." Ambros puts his hand up, calling the waitress over, and we pause our conversation. I'm having a really hard time biting my tongue right now as he puts in an order for some food to go, likely for us to enjoy while we're in Greece. I did mean what I said about enjoying Greek food, and hopefully, this little scuffle we've gotten into doesn't completely ruin our trip.

I finish my coffee, and we sit in silence until the waitress comes back over with the rest of Ambros' order. He pays for our food and leaves her a hefty tip, then we're on our way.

Rolando drives us in silence to the airport, where we board Ambros' private jet and begin our journey to Mykonos. We don't speak too much, and I know it's from the tension of the last conversation we had while we were eating breakfast. At some point, I doze off as I sit next to Ambros and wake up with his arm around me, holding me close against him as the plane lands in Greece.

I've been on a couple of flights in the last year, and that had to, hands down, be the easiest one. "We'll head to my home and rest for a couple of hours, then go to the charity event," Ambros tells me as we exit the plane.

He has his own driver now that we're in Greece, but Rolando sits in the passenger seat once he has our luggage loaded, and we sit in the back.

Ambros' house is only a ten-minute drive away from the airport, and to access it, you have to input a keycode to get his gate to open. We roll up to one of the most extravagant homes I've ever seen. This is the kind of mansion interior designers and architects rave about. I know Emily would be mind-blown by how beautiful this looks.

Ambros proceeds to tell me everything he can about the mansion when he bought it, what he had done to it, the furniture he added, and every single little detail. I even meet his housekeeper, who is also his private chef. Her name is Marsala, and she had the biggest smile on her face while she was being introduced to me. Maybe she thinks I'm good for Ambros, or maybe she's just happy he's with someone.

Ambros shows me to his bedroom and says we need to leave within an hour for the event, so I change into my sexy yet stunning evening gown and touch up my make-up. My entire look is going to cause everyone to stop what they're doing and look at us. By the time Ambros comes back into the bedroom and gets a good look at me, his jaw nearly hits the floor.

I'm in a sea-green skin-tight dress with a high thigh slit. The front of my dress doesn't show much cleavage at all and is like a tight, straight line from spaghetti strap to spaghetti strap. We are attending a charity event, so I did want to be classy but still ensure I can keep Ambros' attention.

"Wow. You look... breathtaking," Ambros rakes his eyes up and down my body. I'm not even going to lie. I love the attention he's giving me right now and really hope he doesn't plan on stopping. Things might have been a little tense earlier today, but I know we can agree to disagree from time to time, and Rolando's ability to protect me is something we will likely have different opinions on. Ambros has no say over it, so he'll have to learn how to deal with it. It's not like I'm going to toss Rolando aside because Ambros orders it.

"Thank you. You do, too."

Ambros chuckles lightly. "I'm changing my shirt since you're in this. I think I'll go with a dark slate gray."

"That would look really nice," I add.

Ambros goes into his closet, and I keep my eyes glued on him as he slowly unbuttons his red shirt and tosses it in a clothes basket a few feet away. He picks his new dress shirt out of the closet and slides it over his perfectly toned muscles. God, I now understand why there's always been a stereotypical notion that all Greeks are hot—because they are.

He's quick about buttoning up his shirt, and once he's finished, he grabs my hand and escorts me downstairs. Rolando and his driver are in the foyer and open the door as we walk through, but I can't help noticing that Ambros has his eyes on Rolando. Is he really jealous? Does he think that I want Rolando sexually in some way?

I try not to focus on it too much as we get into Ambros' vehicle, and then his driver sits behind the

wheel, and we're on our way. We go to the completely other side of the island, where we pull up to a mansion a lot like Ambros', though it does have some differences. This mansion is a bit more traditional and isn't so new and updated.

His driver pulls up to where there is a load of other cars, and then it's our turn to exit the vehicle. Rolando and Ambros' man tag along with us, keeping a few feet away. They're close enough to be here if we need them but aren't hovering. Though, I'm not certain why Ambros has anyone with him like this. He's one of the best killers alive, and surely, he can handle himself.

"The one thing I love about this property is the beach access. Come, I have to show you." Ambros takes my hand, and we walk across the backyard to the level area leading down to the sand. Just as he's about to take me down the stone set of stairs, there's a man's voice calling his name from behind us.

We both turn, and as we do, I notice out of the corner of my eye that Ambros doesn't seem too thrilled. "Ambros, my boy! I wasn't sure you'd be here tonight." The older man has strong facial features like Ambros and a jawline that's just as strong as his. Their high cheekbones are nearly identical. The more I stare, the more I see Ambros in him. There's no doubt in my mind that these two are related.

"Father, I told you I was coming," Ambros comments, and bingo. I knew it.

His father sighs, "Yes, well, you've started to disappoint and lie to me a lot lately, but we won't get into the thick of that mess. I do have someone who came a long way to meet you." Ambros' father hasn't looked at me or even acknowledged I'm here once... which I find a bit odd.

Ambros clenches his jaw the second he spots a woman walking up in a long, white, flowing chiffon

dress. I see the immediate recognition on his face, and he's livid. The woman is drop-dead gorgeous. I guess it's not just the men who are incredibly hot here.

"Zoe, you remember Ambros, don't you?"

"I do. It's so great to see you again. What's it been, years?"

Ambros doesn't bother to respond to her. Instead, he looks directly into his father's eyes. "Why won't you stop meddling in my love life? If you haven't noticed, I'm extremely happy, and you're being a rude fool in front of the woman I'm dating."

I swallow hard, realizing I inadvertently stepped right into some family drama.

His father looks right at me, slowly dragging his eyes up and down my body. "Where did you get this one? From the club? She won't be anything you need her to be, Ambros. Stop wasting your time with women this low on the totem pole."

Zoe finds the perfect opportunity to butt in. "I hate to be rude, but you and I know an arranged marriage between us could bring such unity to our country. We'll be a staple, Ambros. There's never been another union like the one we could have... and this woman, while I'm sure she's nice, isn't what you need. She isn't powerful, and you need a powerful, strong woman by your side when you take everything over."

Okay, I don't know what comes over me... but I refuse to stay silent right now. "An Umarova isn't enough for him?" I blink at the woman and then look at his father. "I'm sure you both know my siblings. Ruslan. Lom. Nazyr. Eset. I can't wait to go back home and let them know that you both think I'm not what Ambros needs."

Chapter Fifteen

Ambros

I can't hide the shit-eating grin spreading across my face. Xava's blown me away by coming out of her shell and putting both my father and Zoe in their place.

"That's not possible. There are only four Umarova children," my father points out, and Zoe begins laughing.

"What in the hell are you laughing at?" Xava asks, her tone proving how aggravated she's becoming.

"Achilles is right. It's not possible." Zoe shakes her head a couple of times and then looks directly at me. She widens her eyes. "She's obviously a crazed lunatic, Ambros. How can't you see that?"

Xava pulls her cell phone from her small clutch purse, and I glance at the screen. She calls Ruslan and puts the phone on speaker. My father will be able to recognize his voice, and I know the second he hears it, he's going to be very, very confused.

"Xava, everything okay?" Ruslan immediately questions, voice full of concern.

"Mmm, it will be in a second. Achilles Galanis and Zoe..."

Xava obviously seems to be waiting for someone to tell her Zoe's last name, so I fill her in. "Drakos."

"Zoe Drakos seem to think that I'm not your sister and that I'm a weak woman who doesn't belong by Ambros' side." I know her family isn't exactly keen on me seeing her, though Ruslan and I do have mutual respect for one another. It happens after years of running in the same social circles, plus I purchase a lot of product from him in order to do my job correctly.

“Ah, noted. I’ll cancel any contracts I have going with the Drakos or Galanis family to send a message,” Ruslan declares, and the look on Zoe and my father’s faces is laughable. Zoe’s eyes are wide, and she swallows hard while my father glares at me like I’ve done this. If he and Zoe had just left Xava and I to ourselves, none of this would have happened. This is karma in its finest form.

“I didn’t mean any offense by what I said.” Zoe is quick to try and save her ass, but I don’t think that’s going to happen. She’s too far gone at this point.

“I’m sure you only meant to be offensive by what you said, Zoe, and that’s why I won’t be doing any more business with your family. You were disrespectful to my sister, and it’s the last thing I’ll tolerate,” Ruslan speaks up, standing up for Xava.

“I’m sure we can fix this,” Zoe’s quick to say. Meanwhile, my father looks between me and Xava as if I should say something to smooth over his error. He and Zoe got themselves in hot water, so I refuse to be the man giving them the life jacket to get out of it. This is exactly why people shouldn’t make assumptions. Though, I am glad that Linus didn’t run back to our father and tell him who I was seeing. If he had told our father, he wouldn’t have walked into this situation. I have a front-row seat to him pissing off someone who he’d like to do more business with, and man, I am loving his discomfort.

“No, there is no fixing it. I don’t give anyone another opportunity to disrespect my family. Xava, I’ll speak with you later. Have a good time while you’re in Greece.”

“I will. I’ll text you in a little while,” Xava tells her brother before she ends the call.

My father swallows hard and looks right at Xava. “I apologize for doubting what you said. I don’t know if you’d find it possible to explain to your brother that I—”

“No,” Xava cuts him off.

“I’m sorry?”

“You want me to tell my brother you didn’t know who I was, and that’s why you spoke to me in the manner you did. What you want me to do is rebuild the bridge you just burned, and I refuse to do it. No one should speak to someone like the two of you just did, and I wouldn’t be surprised if my brother never renewed the contracts he had with your families. You both acted like schoolyard bullies, and man, how old are the two of you? How embarrassing.”

I slide my arm around Xava’s waist and pull her closer to me, having a complete “that’s my girl” moment. “Maybe we should get out of here?” I suggest, and Xava nods.

“Yeah, I think that would be great,” Xava says, and within a moment, I have a hold of her hand, and we’re walking away. Neither of us bother saying a thing to Zoe or my father. As we walk around the crowds of people, I spot my brother near the bar, sipping on a drink. He smirks at me and raises his glass while I give him a chin lift. I appreciate his loyalty and understand why he puts himself in the middle all the time. He’s trying to keep this family together so it doesn’t blow up in all our faces, yet one day, I think it will happen. I don’t want it to, but our father has to constantly meddle and stir up trouble. At some point, Linus will reach his breaking point, too.

We’re in Elia now, and my home is in Ornos, which is close to the hustle and bustle. All the tourists go through Ornos and the surrounding areas. Because of this, there are plenty of places to eat, but Xava’s made it apparent she wants to experience a lot of Greek cuisine while she’s here.

There’s one place specifically that I think she’ll enjoy called Porto Ornos Greek Cuisine. It’s not far from the beach, and patrons can enjoy their dinner on the beach

in Ornos. This is what we're going to do, and we leave my father's estate. Rolando and my driver must have been close because they were both a couple of feet behind us as we left the party.

We all get in the vehicle and drive over to Ornos. I tell my driver where we're going, and the trek isn't too long at all. "Where are we headed?" Xava asks.

"We're going to a Greek restaurant that I think you're going to enjoy."

"Ooooh, perfect." There's a flare of excitement in Xava's eyes, and that's what I want to see. Now, I did like seeing the side of her that I saw when we were at my father's estate. I don't think anyone can get away with calling her weak. Xava is anything but that. For fuck's sake, she's a fucking Umarova. Weakness is the one trait none of them have.

We arrive at the restaurant, and I go over to the hostess station and let her know we'd like to eat on the beach. The sun has already set at this point, and they have small fairy lights hanging through their outdoor eating area. I get a table for Xava and myself, then one for Rolando and my driver so they can enjoy some food as well.

The hostess takes us over to our tables, which aren't too far away from each other, yet they're far enough away to give both of us privacy. I haven't been here in a couple of months, and it seems that they've updated their decor. The tables and chairs look newer, plus their linens aren't what they used to be. Now they're a blue and white checkered pattern. Throughout Greece, you will see restaurants and businesses using our country's colors. We are proud to be from the best country on Earth.

Sparkling water is brought to us, and I order a bottle of their best wine to accompany our meal.

“What do you think I should get?” Xava asks while her eyes roam the menu.

“Mmm, that’s a bad question to ask me. Everything here is amazing. If you want, we can get a few dishes and split them all?”

“I think that would be a great idea.” Xava smiles and takes a sip of her water.

A couple of minutes later, our waitress comes back with a bottle of chilled wine, opens it, and pours our drinks. “Do the two of you know what you’d like?” our waitress asks us.

“Yes, we’re going to get an order of the *tzatziki*, eggplant salad, *saganaki* fried cheese, steamed mussels with garlic and wine, *choritiki* pizza, stuffed tomatoes with pepper rice, and sea bream.”

“Okay, a small feast. Is it your first time here?” The waitress looks over to Xava.

She nods. “Yes.”

“That’s what I thought. You’re going to love everything he ordered for you, I promise. They’re all so good. It’s almost a shame I work here. I go home and never want to eat anything my husband fixes. I guess I’m spoiled. Anyway, I’ll put this order in for you and will be back shortly. Until then, is there anything else I can get for you?”

I look at Xava briefly, and she doesn’t give me any indication she needs anything else. “No, I think we’re good. Thank you,” I tell the waitress. She walks off, and I take my first sip of the chilled white wine. It will go perfectly with the food we’ve ordered.

“I do want to apologize for taking you to the charity event. If I ever thought my father was going to act that way, I never would have taken you.”

Xava arches a brow and laughs. “You have nothing to apologize for. You weren’t the one acting out of line. Your father and that woman take the cake for that.”

Still, I feel foolish for not thinking he’d try to pull something off like that. “I appreciate it, but I know my father. I should have known. He’s been pressuring me to choose a Greek woman lately.”

“Really? I couldn’t tell.” Xava’s sarcasm is adorable.

“My father is old school. He believes things should be done as they were done to him many years ago, taking away mine and my brother’s freedom in the process.”

“Do you want to be married to a Greek woman, or that one specifically?” It’s a little hard for me to read Xava right now. I’m not sure if she’s upset or if she’s only curious.

“No. The person I want to be with is you. There’s no other woman who calls my attention like you do. I know we’ve only seen each other a few times over the past month, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to see more of you. We connect very well. We have since that very first night.”

Xava licks her bottom lip and smiles sweetly. “I want that too. Everything you’re saying is accurate for me, too, and I’m so glad you feel the same way. I... I was a little bit worried you would grow bored of me or not want the same thing as I do.”

I shake my head. “That could never happen.”

“In a perfect world, it never would.” There’s a sense of uncertainty in her words. She’s been thrown around so much her entire life that I wonder if she has a problem understanding what’s real and what isn’t. For a woman who’s had the rug pulled out from under her many times, I think she’s doing exceptionally well.

“Then you’re lucky we’re in a perfect world. Don’t let anyone tell you anything differently.”

Xava and I spend the next three hours enjoying our food and wine, having a great conversation, and getting to know one another better than we already did. There's nothing that ceases to amaze me about her. Every time we connect this way, I'm blown away by the heart she has. I was a bit worried that she wouldn't be able to stick up for herself after knowing what kind of good heart she had. Luckily, I have witnessed firsthand that she's completely capable of sticking up and defending herself.

Rolando and my driver take us back to my place and make themselves scarce. I make it a point to take Xava around my home, showing her the different rooms and areas so she knows where everything is and that she's free to spend time wherever she chooses. I even showed her the outdoor seating area that's covered, only a few feet away from my infinity pool.

"I didn't know you were such an art fan," Xava says out of nowhere.

"Hmm?"

Xava motions toward the paintings I have in the covered area. "I've seen paintings and sculptures throughout your home."

"I guess I do like art. It's not like I'm someone who has an appreciation of certain styles. If I see something and I like it, I buy it. Simple, but a lot of art collectors would be aggravated with me for lack of not appreciating the true beauty and dedication." I add a flare at the end, making it a bit theatrical, and Xava laughs.

"My sister isn't like that. She wants to sell to dealers and collectors, but I think she's the kind of artist who cares about her artwork meaning something to someone, resonating with them, stuff like that."

"That is exactly why I buy art. If it doesn't make me feel something, or if I don't like it, I don't buy it."

Xava and I keep going through the rest of the property and eventually make our way back upstairs after she yawns. I figure she has to be tired, but as I shut the door to my bedroom and turn around, I realize she must not be too exhausted.

A few moments ago, she was in her silky tight dress, and now it's crumpled up in a pile on the floor. "I thought you were sleepy?"

"I never said that. You assumed, Ambros. I've missed you, and this is what I want." Xava motions with her hand between the two of us.

I take slow steps until I'm right in front of her. Xava delicately unbuttons my dress shirt and helps me take it off. Her dark eyes glow with heat, and I'm having a really hard time holding back right now. All I want to do is pick her up and toss her on my bed.

As I'm thinking about it, I realize there's nothing wrong with my thoughts, so I slide my hands under her ass and pick her up. She wraps her legs around my waist and arms around my neck, holding onto me for dear life. She's so petite yet curvy. God, the way her dark locks frame her face makes her look like an innocent schoolgirl. College-age, nothing too young, of course.

Xava brings her lips up against mine and kisses me softly. I kiss her back with the same intensity, slowly bringing more ferociousness to her lips. I walk us over to the bed and plop her down on her back. She lets go of my neck and goes for my belt, pulling it off with record speed. I know exactly what she wants, and fuck if I don't want the same thing.

I caress one of her breasts with one hand while I capture her taut nipple in my mouth, sucking and pulling. She arches her back, making me feel like she wants more.

I do just that, switching up her breasts now. I'm on the alternate one and tug on her nipple. She moans softly and runs a hand through my hair. Her nails rake against my scalp. I've never had a woman do that before, and goddamn, it feels good.

My cock is about to burst at the seams. I unbutton my slacks and tug them down with one hand, kicking them off as quickly as I can. Xava shimmies herself down and crushes her lips back against mine. Damn, I've fucked a lot of women in the past, but some undeniable passion arcs between us every single time I'm with Xava.

She reaches down and palms my hard cock, squeezing against my shaft as she pumps up and down. The pressure feels amazing, and I wish I could let her do this for a while, but the truth is I've been thinking about Xava for days, so I don't know how long I'm actually going to last.

I pull her hand away from my cock and bring it up my chest while I hike up one of her legs and get closer to her center. "I've been waiting too long for this, Ambros," Xava whispers, staring right into my eyes.

This is the type of shit I love that she does. I look right into her eyes as I line myself up at her entrance. I slowly push myself inside her and watch her expression change as my size forces her open for me.

"You're not the only one. These are the days where I hate how far we are from each other," I whisper in her ear, suckling on the bottom of her ear lobe.

My field of work constantly keeps me traveling, though I do find myself wishing Xava was by my side at the end of the day.

"Me too," Xava confesses.

Her walls tighten around me, and I pick up my pace. I know her body well enough to know when she begins tensing up, she's getting closer to the edge, and I want

her to go over it for me. Knowing I can bring her so much pleasure is such a turn-on in itself. Tonight, I want it to be long, with many rounds of sex. Even if I find my own release soon, it won't be the last time. I'll wake her up and ravage her body over and over again, for as long as I want.

Xava yanks my neck down and forces her lips against mine once more. This is what sex should be. Don't get me wrong, I love a good fuck, but there's meaning behind this. It's better sex than I've had with anyone over my entire life, and I don't want to lose that. I have to tell her this now before I get too distracted by her body. I pull my lips away from hers slightly. "I want you to be mine, Xava. Be my girl. Be my woman. Be my girlfriend."

"Yes, Ambros. That's all I want." Xava meets her lips with my own again, and the taste of peach with white wine enters my mouth. God, I might have met my match with her.

Xava Umarova is the kind of woman I never want to let go.

Chapter Sixteen

Xava

I've spent the last two days in Mykonos with Ambros, and I had a better time than I thought I was going to have. I was really excited to come to Greece and spend time with him, but after the issue with Ambros' father and that woman, Zoe, I didn't know if there would be more drama during the rest of the trip.

Luckily, there haven't been any other issues. Ambros ended up telling me that I blew him away when I stood up for myself so boldly the other night. If this was a couple of years ago, I don't think I ever would have stuck up for myself the way I did then. I was never really sure of myself when I was younger. I didn't have a lot of confidence. Being with my siblings over the last year has been good for me. It was the first time I left Prague and was able to dive into my culture. In Prague, I could never understand what it was like to be Chechen. My adoptive mother tried, but there are some things you can't teach your children when you no longer live in your home country.

Speaking of her, she called me yesterday, and we spoke briefly. Our relationship has been strained since I found out she kept everything from me. At some point, I thought she would have confessed everything. I confronted her about it, and she told me she promised my biological mother she'd never tell me unless my biological mother gave her explicit instructions to do so. I told her how screwed up the entire situation was, and all she told me was that she did what she had to do.

I didn't understand that comment at first, but the longer I thought about it, the more I figured she had some sort of incentive for raising me. So, yesterday,

when we were finally on the phone again, I asked her point blank: “Was anything given to you for raising me?”

She told me my biological mother gave her two million dollars as a one-time payment for “adopting” me and that she sent one hundred thousand every year as a bonus to keep her happy. So, if you add all that up, my adoptive mother was making roughly two hundred and eleven thousand per year, and she had a job on top of all that. She was making bank, truly.

Ambros was around when I took the phone call. I spoke in Czech since that is my first language, with English as my second, and I’ve been teaching myself Russian over the last couple of years via an app on my phone. He didn’t understand one word I was saying, so I explained after I got off the phone with her. I was naturally upset, and he wanted to help, to be there for me in case I needed to vent.

The truth is, I didn’t even know what I should have vented about, so I explained it to him. I told him every single detail I knew. By the time we got down to the nitty gritty about the whole thing, I was questioning whether or not my adoptive mother even cared. Was I just a job to her?

So now, I’m sitting in Ambros’ living room texting my best friend, Yara, when out of nowhere, she calls me. “Yara, hey!” I haven’t actually spoken on the phone with her in a couple of weeks. She’s been so busy, and my life has been crazy too.

“Hello there. Tell me, how are you? I’m so sorry I haven’t called. Things have been nuts, and I’m in desperate need of a break... so do you know what that means?” There’s a playful tone in Yara’s voice, and I can only think of one thing.

“You’re coming to Grozny?” Please let it be true. God, please let it be true!

“I sure am! I’ll be there in a few days around dinner time.”

“Okay, awesome. You know my family normally does our weekly dinners together on Sundays, but since I’m in Mykonos with Ambros, they moved it to later in the week. We’re actually heading back to Grozny today.”

“How was your trip? Did you guys do anything fun?”

“Did we? The entire trip was a blast. I did meet Ambros’ father and had some words with him.” I don’t know how much information I want to give Yara, but I don’t want to lie to her either.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I need details.”

I suck in a sharp breath and huff. “Let’s just say his father didn’t think I was good enough for his son.”

Yara’s silent on the other end of the line, and then I hear her unmistakable laughter. “You? Not good enough. That’s absolutely ludicrous.”

“Exactly, and I put him right in his place, too. There’s no way in hell I was going to let someone make me feel like I’m not good enough.”

“Good for you. I have to be honest with you. I think finding out about your real family is the best thing that ever happened to you. When you were only Xava Beno, you didn’t really give a damn. You let people walk all over you, left and right. It’s like when you discovered you were an Umarova, it gave you this backbone. You needed it. It’s the one thing I always worried about with you.”

“That I’d be a pushover, really?”

Ambros is sitting across the room texting on his phone, and at my words, he looks up at me, almost as if he’s concerned. I wave my hand in dismissal so he knows everything is fine.

“In a way, yes. You’ve been the kindest person I’ve ever known throughout all our years. I’ve always been

worried about you in a way, but I'm not worried about you anymore. Not in the least bit."

Ambros rises from his seat and comes over to me. "Xava, I'm sorry to interrupt, but we need to head to the airport."

"Shoot, Yara. I have to go. I'll chat with you later, though, okay?" I say to her, and we quickly say our goodbyes before we leave the house. Rolando already packed the vehicle, so my bags are right where they need to be, and we're heading to a private airstrip on the other side of Mykonos.

Ruslan had a plane the family owns come in late last night so I could be taken back home today. Ambros offered to have one of his take me home, but Ruslan said since Ambros' plane is what we used to go to Mykonos, we should use one my family owns to bring me back home. I don't really care whose plane we use as long as I get back home.

The private airport is only a ten-minute ride, and I soak up all the scenery while I can. I doubt it will be my last time here, yet I want to enjoy it all the same.

We arrive at the airport and get out of the vehicle, then we all head inside as Rolando checks in with the people who work here, letting them know we're ready to leave. Rolando's stuck speaking with someone, and Ambros slides a hand around my waist, then takes me over to a seating area where we can look out at the airstrip.

I spot our plane and point it out to Ambros, and almost on cue, it explodes. Ambros grabs onto my body, and we hit the ground. The windows break around us, and sirens go off, screeching and echoing through the space. The plane wasn't too close to the building, yet the force of the explosion was enough to cause the windows to burst and these sirens to go off.

Ambros stands up and grabs my hand, pulling me off the ground, and I stick close to him. The plane is nothing more than pieces of metal.

Everything happens in the blink of an eye. Ambros keeps me with him, and Rolando is already in the car. I don't even know where Ambros' usual driver is. Maybe he's having Rolando drive us because he finally realizes Rolando will be going everywhere with me. Nevertheless, at least we're getting out of here.

"W-what the fuck just h-happened?" I stammer out, completely overwhelmed by what just transpired.

"I'm not sure. I'm calling your brother right now," Ambros tells me as he fishes his phone out of his pocket, taps on the screen, and then presses it against his ear.

Ambros ends up putting it on speakerphone, and as soon as Ruslan answers, I speak. "Ruslan, our fucking plane just blew to bits at the airport!" There's no hiding the shock and fear in my voice. I'm terrified, and rightfully so. This is the second huge thing that has happened around me in the last couple of weeks. First was the shooting attempt, and now this. What else is going to happen?

"Are you okay? Did you get hurt?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. No, no, we got really lucky. I'm just... I'm just..." I can't find the words, so Ambros interjects.

"She's terrified out of her mind. I know the plan was for her to head to Grozny today, but I don't know if that's feasible. I want to get her out of Greece, though," Ambros states, looking right at me.

Why would he want to get me out of Greece?

"That's a good idea. I doubt whoever is behind this did it would do it when the plane was in Grozny. It means whoever is responsible has someone on the ground in Mykonos. Can you get off the island? Can you get somewhere safe?" my brother asks.

“Yes, I’ll get her out of Greece and take her to Italy. We’ll head to Messina and catch a ferry over to Reggio Calabria to start.” Ambros has already developed an action plan, and I’m certain we’ll be getting out of the country as soon as possible. Even knowing this, it doesn’t slow down my heart as it continues beating intensely in my chest.

“Okay. Ambros, I’m trusting you to protect my sister with your life. Can I do that?”

“Of course. I won’t let anything happen to Xava, and if anyone tries, the last thing they’ll see is a bullet flying toward them.”

“For the first time since finding out you and my sister have been going on dates, I’m relieved. There’s no one else in the world outside of this family who is more capable of protecting her than you are. Don’t disappoint me, Ambros. If you do, you’ll have hell to pay for your mistakes. Xava is irreplaceable to us.”

Ambros takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. “Relax, Ruslan. Nothing is going to happen to your sister.”

“Are you okay, Xava? You’re being awfully quiet,” Ruslan points out.

“Yes, I’m okay.” I nod a couple of times even though he can’t see me. “I’m just shaken up. I’m so sorry. I’m just... I can’t believe that happened just now.”

Ambros grabs ahold of my hand and gives it a reassuring squeeze. “You’re okay, Xava. Nothing bad is going to happen to you. Rolando and I are going to get you out of here, and then we’ll head somewhere safe. All right?”

I nod over and over again. “Okay. I’m sorry, I... that was just so much to process. If we had been any closer to that, a piece of the plane could’ve flown at us and decapitated us, hurt us badly, you never know.”

“God, you have quite the morbid imagination.”
Ambros chuckles, appreciating my dry humor.

Ruslan sighs on the other end of the line. “I need to let the rest of the family know what happened and get people in Greece to see if we can figure out what actually transpired. Keep in touch so I know where and how you are. For now, you’re safe, and I know Ambros will do what he can to keep you that way. Try to relax, Xava, okay?”

“I’m trying,” I reply.

“Okay, I’ll reach out in a bit.” Ruslan hangs up the phone, and a thought runs through my mind. We think the person who tried to get me killed is either a member of Duarte’s family or Julio Ramirez... but Ruslan just said the person who did this had to be in Greece.

“Could your father or that Zoe woman have anything to do with this?” I ask Ambros point blank.

He says nothing at first. “I’m not going to act like they couldn’t. Anything is possible, but if they did, they’re going to want to get the fuck out of the country before I find out they were responsible.” Ambros looks like he’s angry enough to tear the limbs off their bodies, one at a time.

This is what Eset must have meant when she said it’s good to have a monster in your corner.

Chapter Seventeen

Ambros

We have been in Udine, Italy, for about twelve hours now. Rolando and I took shifts driving so we could get here as soon as possible. We picked this because it's a smaller city in Northern Italy and close to Slovenia, where I believe we can safely get a flight to Grozny. I haven't spoken to Ruslan recently, though Xava has been texting her brother updates on how we are doing every few hours.

I put in a call to a friend and have rented a small home outside of Udine, which has a privacy fence and is on its own property. It's close enough to the city but isn't directly in the heart of it either. We need to lay low for a while, especially while Ruslan and I both try to figure out what happened.

I'm lying down in bed next to Xava, who's curled up under the covers. The last few days have been very draining for her. She hasn't spoken to me much about anything in particular, but I can tell she's anxious. She keeps tapping her fingers against her arm when we're downstairs in the living area or out back. Not to mention, she's been getting overly quiet. I've noticed that she only gets quiet when she's thinking too much.

It isn't too early in the morning, and the birds are already chirping. Sun floods in through the window leading into the bedroom, and while I don't want to get up and leave Xava alone, I'm in desperate need of some coffee.

I slowly remove the covers and slide out of bed, putting them back where they should be if I'm not lying beside her. I have a pair of pajama pants on and a black T-shirt. Rolando stopped in town and got me some

clothes after we arrived so I'd have something to wear since I didn't bring anything with us. With the plane blowing up the way it did, we didn't have time to return to my house so I could pack a little bit. It was far too dangerous to do anything like that, especially considering the person responsible for this had to have been close by.

Ruslan's plane was fine when it left Grozny, but it stayed overnight at that private airstrip, and something was obviously done to it. The question is, what was done. Hopefully, within the next couple of days, Ruslan will let us know if he's heard anything about it or if there have been any updates we should be aware of.

I head downstairs to where the kitchen and living room are, only to find Rolando sitting at the small breakfast nook table against the large window in the kitchen. "Good morning," Rolando states.

"Morning," I reply.

"I made some coffee a few minutes ago if you want any. I wasn't sure when you and Xava would be awake, so I didn't make too much."

I glance over at the counter and see there's a decent bit of coffee left, so there's enough for me to have at least one cup. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

I go over to the cupboards and grab a mug, then pour myself a cup of coffee and lean against the kitchen counter. The massive window in the kitchen offers a beautiful view of the Italian countryside. Through the window, you can see some of the farm animals the property owner has, or possibly the neighbor. There's older wooden fencing containing three horses and some cattle. They all seem so peaceful, grazing on the grass in one of the most serene settings I've seen.

I'm so used to living in Mykonos, where there's a mixture of locals and tourists from around the world.

Travel agents would argue in certain months, things are slower there, but I'd have to disagree. It's constantly busy, so in moments like this, I really savor what I'm seeing. So much free space is a rarity. The green hills go on for acres and acres, yet in Mykonos, we aren't so lucky. There are mansions, clubs, spas, restaurants, resorts, boutiques, and things of that sort.

I take my first sip of coffee and am genuinely impressed by how well Rolando's done. But there are things on my mind when it comes to him. I've been beating around the bush by not saying anything for the last couple of days, though if I keep doing what I'm doing, I know I will burst at some point. "Xava told me she recently got an apartment."

Rolando's just taking a sip of his own coffee. He has one leg over the other as he sits back in a chair and looks right up at me. "Yes, she did."

"She told me you have a room there."

Rolando snickers. "I do, and I know where this conversation is going. It's my job to protect Xava. As soon as she came into the family, I was given my assignment and have been doing my job since then. If you're wondering if there's ever been anything romantic between us, there has not. We might be in one another's proximity a lot, but she is my job. I'd call her a friend, but nothing more than that."

"I don't know many people in security work who live with their assignment. I found that a bit weird. I still do."

"Well, as weird as it might look, it was Xava's choice. She didn't like my replacements who'd come to relieve me when I went back to my place. She felt like they constantly hovered around her, making her uncomfortable. We all have different ways of doing our jobs. I give her space, but I am still close when she needs me to be."

I thought I'd get some sort of inclination that Rolando's interested in Xava, but I'm getting quite the opposite. He doesn't seem like a man who's interested in her whatsoever, and that strikes me as odd. Xava has a natural sort of beauty, one you don't find too often anymore since many women have been following all the plastic surgery fads.

"I know I don't have to tell you this, but I'm going to so you really understand I'm of no threat. You're more my type than Xava is."

It takes a few seconds for my brain to process what he's just said.

"Ah, I get it." Rolando bats for the other team.

Rolando smirks. "I haven't officially told Xava that, but I will at some point. I grew up in a very religious household. Because of that, I don't go out of my way to tell people."

"I understand, and I appreciate you shooting it straight with me."

"No problem. I figure it's better for us to talk about it now than beat around the bush when we don't need to," Rolando states, and I agree. In the back of my mind, I would've been thinking about this shit if we didn't squash it. Little did I know there was nothing we needed to squash in the first place.

Footsteps can be heard coming from behind us, and Xava walks into the room in some silk pajamas.

"Morning, you two."

Xava comes right over to me and snakes her arm around my waist, then gives me a kiss on the cheek.

Rolando and I both tell her good morning, and then she speaks again. "Do either of you want any food? I'm starved."

"I could definitely eat," I reply first.

“Me too,” Rolando adds.

“Okay. Let’s see what we’re working with.” Xava goes over to the fridge and opens the doors. She begins pulling out a variety of items like bacon, orange juice, milk, and eggs and then grabs some herbs and spices. I don’t know what she plans on making, but whatever it is, I know it’s going to be delicious.

“I’m going to hop in the shower, but I’ll be back down in a little while,” Rolando tells us before leaving the kitchen.

Xava looks over at me while she’s getting out pots and pans. “Is everything okay with you two?”

“Yeah, we spoke a little bit this morning. I don’t think we’re going to have any issues moving forward.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Sometimes, men need to talk it out among themselves to get to the root of the problem. Rolando and I are good now.”

“Okay, well, awesome. It would’ve been really difficult for me if the two of you kept having problems. I care about you both deeply, and if you two stayed at odds, it wouldn’t have been good long term. We would have had to deal with it at some point.”

“The good thing is that you’ll never have to worry about it anymore,” I promise her. She might not realize it, but I do mean it.

“It’s such a relief. How do you like your eggs?”

“Any way, honestly. I’m not picky.”

“Okay, dealer’s choice it is.”

Xava’s in her element for about fifteen minutes while she makes breakfast. She ends up making some bacon gravy and then grabbing some freshly made bread out of the bread box on the kitchen counter. I honestly can’t

remember if we had bread when we got here, but I think Rolando grabbed some groceries last night when he was out getting me some clothes.

“I’m going to make sure the rest of my family knows that we’re together when I get back to Greece. I want them to know you’re more than a fling, that you’re important to me, and that I don’t plan on letting you go. I know we haven’t spoken about this in great detail, but I can see a future with you, Xava. Things are easy with you. Things flow naturally. They aren’t difficult like they have been with other women I’ve been with in the past.”

Xava’s just finishing plating my food and hands it to me with a fork already on it. “No lie, it’s a relief to hear you say that. I know we’re together, but I was curious how serious you really were about us.”

“I’m very serious about us. Truthfully, I can see you by my side for years. It might be a little too soon to say that by some people’s standards, but I’m speaking the truth.” I haven’t ever been someone who speaks from the heart like this, but Xava brings out a different side of me. She’s making me realize it isn’t bad to trust and just let shit be. I’m not guarded with her, though. I can find myself talking to Xava for hours upon hours about any subject. I’d even start discussing the Organization with her because that’s how comfortable I am.

“I’m going to tell my family soon too. Now that I know how serious you are about me, I feel more comfortable with telling them.”

“Awesome. I heard you talking to someone the other day at the house, and I kind of am curious what was going on.” I’m not trying to be nosy, but Xava did seem to be stressed a lot more than usual. I never really gave a damn about many women before her, but the thought of Xava being stressed really bothers me.

“I’d bet that was my adoptive mother,” she states as she makes her own plate.

Rolando comes into the kitchen, and Xava makes him a plate as well, but he walks off and goes to eat by himself.

“Do the two of you have a complicated relationship?” I don’t know too much about it, but I want to learn more. I want to learn everything I can about Xava.

“We didn’t before, but after everything came to light, it got a lot more complicated. I felt like she lied to me for so long, so it made me... have an issue trusting her, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?” Did she have an issue because her adoptive mother hid her true identity, or is it something else entirely?

Xava takes a bite of her food and ponders her thoughts. “It’s hard to explain to outsiders because you’ve known who your family is your entire life. There hasn’t ever been an ounce of uncertainty or even a split second where you’ve felt like you weren’t a Galanis, right?”

“You’d be correct.”

“That’s what makes it so difficult for me. I always felt a little off. It’s probably because I was adopted, but it meant something completely different when the truth was finally revealed to me. I felt like I was living a lie. Not to mention, it hurt that she knew everything the entire time. I asked her so many questions over the years, and she chose not to say anything to me. She chose not to be honest and to instead continue lying. That hurt me deeply, deeper than she could ever know.”

“That makes sense. Are you working on your relationship with your adoptive mother?” I’m not trying to pry, but I am curious.

“Yes and no. It’s hard. Complicated. She feels like she didn’t do anything wrong, and that messes with my head.

She was paid for taking care of me, Ambros. I was literally a job to her.”

Ah, and now I see why things are so complicated. Xava isn't sure if her adoptive mother gave an actual fuck about her or if she was only a paycheck. God, I can't imagine being put in that position. I'm sure it makes her doubt a lot. “The only way you'll know for sure is if you communicate with her. I don't think you'll find out quickly. It's going to end up being something that takes a lot of time, but if she proves herself to you and is persistent, then it means that she actually does give a damn. You know?”

Xava nods and takes another couple of bites of food. “I just wish things weren't so complicated.”

“Life is complicated. Look at the situation we're in now.” I chuckle as I finish a bite of my eggs, and Xava laughs. She tosses her head back lightheartedly and makes me feel like she actually found it funny. Things have been so stressful as of late, and all I want for her is to relax a little bit and have a good time.

“What about your family? I'm talking about mine, but I haven't really heard much about yours.”

“Mmm, well, mine is complicated in our own right. You know my father is old fashioned, and my mother falls in line behind him. Whatever he wants to do, she automatically supports him even if it doesn't make any sense. Neither of them wants to make modern changes to the business or other matters. If they don't adapt, it's going to cripple us. I'm hoping I take over before that starts to happen.” I'm sure Xava can read between the lines.

“They're really pressuring you to be with someone Greek, huh?” She raises both her brows, and there's a somberness in her eyes.

“Yeah, they haven’t adjusted their views, and I doubt they ever will.”

Xava takes a moment to process that information, then licks her lips slowly. She gnaws on her bottom lip for a moment before she speaks up. “What does that mean for us? What’s going to happen to us... if they never support the two of us being together?”

“I don’t know, and I honestly don’t care. They won’t take my birthright or my job from me. They’re too family oriented. I think they’re going to be forced to accept us at some point or another.”

I hope she realizes I’m willing to do whatever we need to do as long as we’re happy together. I don’t care if I piss my family off. I’m my own man, and no one is about to tell me how to live my fucking life.

“I hope they do. I don’t want them holding me against you, Ambros.”

I place my fork down and head right over to her, capturing her cheek in the palm of my hand. “There is no way I’d ever let them try. If you think I would ever regret being with you out of fear of losing my birthright, I won’t. I would gladly make the sacrifice if I’m forced to. I ... I haven’t been this happy in years, Xava. You’ve done that. You’ve made me love life again. Before, I was simply surviving, and with you by my side, I am living.”

Xava stands up, and I wrap my arms around her. She leans in and presses her lips against mine, kissing me deeply. We stay here for minutes, locked in each other’s arms, showing one another just how much we care.

After a few more minutes of passionate kissing, I no longer care about breakfast and only want to take her back into the bedroom, so I scoop her up into my arms and carry her there. I walk through the small entryway and shut the door behind us, sure to lock it so we’re not disturbed. We’ve gotten away with not locking the door a

few times now, but I know it's bound to happen at some point.

We're a good bit away from anyone else, and all I want to do is show Xava a different side of me. A side where she can experience some kinkiness yet still be in a safe environment.

I start by peeling every shred of clothing she has off her body and then strip myself until I'm not wearing a thing. I am a bit forceful with my hands as I back her up against the window. She sucks in a sharp breath as the chill of the glass touches her skin, and I drop down onto my knees.

I place a hand between her thighs and force her legs open. Her stomach rises and falls in anticipation as I dive straight for her center. I spread her wet lips with my fingers and stick my tongue out, making sure it's as wide as possible while I lap her up and down. I insert two fingers inside of her and pump in and out slowly. I try to stick with a rhythm as I do so, and Xava leans back against the window even more, tensing up at certain points.

"Mmm, just like that." She encourages me to go on, and I continue what I'm doing, but there's something I've been itching to do. It's something I'm not sure she's tried before, and I'm eager to see if it's something she'd enjoy. What better time than the present?

I place my lips over her clit and tease it, licking up and down while I inch a finger closer and closer to her ass. She continues moaning, and I feel like this is my opportunity to show her something different and how it can bring her pleasure. I very slowly insert my finger inside her asshole, pumping in and out of her like I'm doing with her pussy.

She's tense at first but slowly begins to give in to me. I start pumping in and out of her faster and faster until she's digging her nails into my shoulder. "Slow down,

Ambros. I don't want to get there yet," she pleads, but I'm not going to stop. I don't want to stop.

I keep fucking her with my hand while I tease her with my tongue until the walls of her pussy tighten around me. She's so close, and I know it. I quickly thrust my fingers in and out of her until she's practically shaking in my hands. Her orgasm takes over her, and only a few moments later, I slide my fingers out of her.

I rise, turn her around so her bare breasts are forced against the window, and whisper in her ear. "You loved that, and don't try to deny it."

I hike one of her legs up and line my cock at her pussy, burying myself to the hilt. I don't want to go slow at all. I want to fuck her so she knows her body belongs to me. The more I think about it, the more I know I've been breaking Xava in slowly. I want her to see me. The real me. The man who will bring the most pleasure to her that she could ever imagine.

Chapter Eighteen

Xava

After a week in Italy, I'm finally back home in Grozny. I never thought I'd miss this place the way I did, but goodness, the last week has been so stressful. Well, maybe that's a lie. Deep down, I think I've been a little too stressed out since that teenager tried to kill me. It showed me the lengths people are really willing to go to hurt me in some way. Then the plane incident happened, and it made every single fear I had come back in full force.

Ambros and I arrived back at my apartment a couple of hours ago. Rolando did, too, but he said he wanted to get out of the house for a bit because one of his "friends" was in town. In all the time he's worked for me, he's never once asked for any time off, so of course, I told him to go and enjoy himself. Plus, I have Ambros with me, and I know there isn't anything that could happen to me with him by my side.

Ambros took a stroll around my entire apartment and said it suited me. He liked the feminine flare and all the historical components of the place but mentioned how there were a few blank walls. I told him I asked Eset to draw or paint me some pieces to hang around, and since they're custom, they'll take at least a few more weeks.

Yara's also in town. She arrived a couple of days ago while I was still in Italy and ended up staying at one of the best hotels in Grozny before I returned home. I texted her an hour ago and told her to pack her bags and come stay with me. She was elated, and it was her first time seeing the apartment in the flesh. She saw it when I video-chatted with her a couple of weeks ago after I officially signed the paperwork.

It's been almost two weeks since I've seen my family for dinner, so it wasn't really a surprise when I got a text from Emily earlier saying she and Amelia were making dinner and bringing it over here to my place. It would double as dinner and a time to catch up with everyone whose life has been so crazy.

Ambros is staying in town for a couple of days, but he did let me know that he has to leave for a work commitment. I do wonder what he's going to do. Well, I know what he's going to do, but I do wonder why he's going to do it. I think that's the one thing I'm constantly curious about—why he does what he does. He doesn't speak about his job very often, though I do understand that there isn't much of a choice in what he does. I understand the basics: He's given a contract, and he has to do it. I just feel a little better knowing it's happening to horrible people.

“Did you need to make anything for dinner tonight?”

I shake my head. “No, but I did have Eset grab some cherry turnovers. It looks like she dropped them off before we got home. Want one before everyone gets here?” I wiggle my eyebrows playfully.

“Dessert before dinner? How scandalous. Of course, cough one up.” Ambros chuckles, and I take out two turnovers from the box. One for him, and one for me. He bites into his turnover and moans as the sweet yet tart taste floods his mouth.

I take a bite of my own, and it's just as great as I thought it would be. Flaky, yet fucking amazing.

“I've been thinking about something,” I state between bites.

Ambros cocks a brow. “And what would that be?”

“You know how Ruslan has been pressuring me to figure out what I want to do with my life and all that?”

“I do,” Ambros mutters, taking another bite of the pastry.

“Well, I kind of love baking. I was thinking about pursuing that, maybe opening a bakery and whatnot. I need to start by going to pastry school first, though.”

Ambros sits back in his chair a bit more. “How long have you been giving this some thought?”

“When we were in Italy, Rolando would go to that bakery in town. It made me realize just how much baking is important to me. I used to do it all the time with my adoptive mother when we were back in Prague, and I miss it. I miss being able to be in the kitchen for hours on end.”

Ambros tilts his head and presses his lips together. “Do you miss being in the kitchen, or do you miss the experience with your adoptive mother?”

Ouch. I wasn’t expecting that. I lick my lips and think about what he’s asking me. “Maybe a little bit of both.”

“I see. Well, if you’re asking for my advice, you know I’m going to tell you to follow your dreams. Life is too short to live with regrets. If owning a bakery or being a pastry chef will make you happy, then you should do it and not let anyone talk you out of it either.” I don’t know who Ambros thinks is going to talk me out of this, but no one is going to be successful at it, even if they do try.

“I won’t. I really think I could be so happy doing this,” I declare with a smile. I feel like a child on their birthday, when they know they’re about to get some of the best presents in the world.

“Good. That’s the only thing that matters,” Ambros declares.

The doorbell to my apartment rings out, signaling some of my family members are here.

I stop what I'm doing and tuck away the remaining bit of my turnover, then head to the door. Ambros comes with me, always sticking close by when Rolando isn't around. It's Ruslan, Amelia, and the kids. They also have their security guard with them, who is carrying a few platters of food.

"Hey! I'm so glad you both finally made it back," Amelia states, pulling me into a hug and then giving Ambros one. Friendliness is so natural to her, and I sometimes wish I could be as welcoming as Amelia is. I have far too many trust issues for that.

"We're both happy you made it back safely," Ruslan adds, looking at me and then over at Ambros. "I appreciate everything you did to ensure Xava made it back in one piece. I will never forget what you've done for my sister, Ambros."

"It was nothing. I would have done it anyway," Ambros states.

Amelia bites her bottom lip as she tries to hide a smile, looking at me and then at Ambros. "I have to know... does this mean what I think it means?" It does, and I can't wait until we officially say it.

"Depends on what you're asking," Ambros replies.

"You two are an item, right?" There's a glint in Amelia's eyes, which gives away she's hoping it's true.

She wants me to be with Ambros, which makes my heart flutter. For the first time, someone in my family is being completely supportive of this. When I spoke with my siblings a couple weeks ago, it seemed like my going out on dates with Ambros could create some conflict, though I'm glad it isn't. Maybe my family is finally starting to warm up to the idea that Ambros makes me happy and might be good for me.

"Yes, we are. Officially," Ambros says while grabbing my hand.

My heart swells three times as big, and I don't know if I've ever been this happy before. I'm elated, and I can't wait for the future with him. I feel as though we've already gone through so much together, and going through more will only make us stronger.

"Congrats! I'm so happy for you." Amelia is all smiles, while Ruslan is a bit quieter on the issue.

"Can we speak in private?" Ruslan asks.

My stomach immediately drops because I don't know what he wants. Is he about to tell me he doesn't think Ambros is suitable for me or that he's bad news? I guess I should have expected it, but I'm just going to have to stick up for Ambros.

"Sure. Let's go this way," I say as I release Ambros' hand and walk through my apartment. I head into my bedroom, and once my brother is inside, I shut the door behind me so we have some privacy. "Now, if you're going to lecture me about being with Ambros, I really don't want to hear it. He's a great fit for me, and he makes me happy. So whatever you're going to try to do to deter me from being with him won't work."

Ruslan raises both of his brows and begins laughing. "I wasn't bringing up Ambros at all. If anything, I was going to ask you if you've thought about anything career or school-wise. I thought maybe being away for a little while might have helped you think better or at least figure it out." Ruslan shrugs, and I take a breather.

Okay, so I don't have to be in defensive mode right now. Cool.

"Um, I actually have an idea. Something I want to explore at least."

"Go on," Ruslan urges me.

"I want to go to school to become a pastry chef. I'm not sure if I want to own my own business or work for someone else, but I have a lot of fun doing it, and it's

something I can see myself doing for many years to come.”

There’s not one peep of sound transpiring between us, and the quieter Ruslan is, the more I begin to worry.

“Have you looked into many schools?”

“There’s a couple in France that I like. I haven’t made any decisions yet, though.”

“Okay, that’s a good start. If you decide to open your own business, what would your plan be?”

I don’t know how everything would work, but I start rolling the ideas past my lips anyway. “I think I’d open cafés in every major city to start. Get as much money as I can from the cities where tourists flood through but keep it affordable for the locals as well. I don’t really know what I’d be doing... these are all just ideas that I have. Okay?”

“That’s fine. I’m going to pay for your schooling, and when you open your own business, I want to invest in it and help fund the project. In return, I’m going to ask to funnel money through so some of our family business cash flow is legal. But I’ll give you time to absorb and think that over,” Ruslan says, heading for my bedroom door.

He opens it and walks out of my room like we didn’t have one of our most serious conversations to date.

What in the heck just happened, and why do I feel so much better now that I’ve talked to him about this?

Honestly, I think, in the back of my mind, I thought Ruslan would think being a pastry chef wasn’t as prestigious enough of a job for me. He blew me away by supporting me, but it just goes to show me that this is yet another reason why my family is the fucking best.

Chapter Nineteen

Ambros

Ruslan pulled Xava away before we had dinner, and now, dinner is over. Emily and Amelia brought over some American food. Pork BBQ sandwiches with coleslaw, potato salad, pineapple baked beans, lobster mac and cheese, and southern-style green beans.

I've been to America a few times, but I haven't ever had Southern food. I usually end up going for seafood or steak whenever I'm there. The ladies really blew me away. I figured they'd have chefs at their homes, and maybe they do, but they know how to cook. I'll give them that.

The entire dinner went very well, and there wasn't one person who spoke up against me. I knew I was a family friend before I started dating Xava, but ever since I've gotten close to her, I've felt like there's been a change between us all. Nothing has changed on my part. I still have the same respect for them as I always have, but they don't. They're like wolves waiting at the edge of the forest to attack someone getting too close to their baby wolf. That's the best way I can describe the way things are.

All the women are packing up the leftover food and washing the dishes in Xava's kitchen. Lom, Nazyr, and Santos are keeping the children preoccupied, and I'm in the living room making conversation with the group of men. Ruslan's standing a few feet from me, leaning against the wall. I can feel his eyes boring into me, and the longer I stand here and chat with the guys, the more I feel like Ruslan has something he wants to say to me.

“Are you going to keep staring at me like that all night, or do you want to have an actual fucking conversation?” I'm not trying to be so confrontational,

but if he has something to say, he needs to damn well say it.

“I’m a little curious to know if your father’s aware that you’re seeing my sister.” Ruslan’s dark eyes are gauging my reaction.

I nod and take a sip of my Chechen wine that the women served with dinner. “He does.”

“How does he feel about it? Wasn’t he looking for a Greek woman for you?” I guess Ruslan does really know everything. There have always been rumors that he has eyes and ears everywhere. I’ve just never paid much attention to them.

I scoff and smirk. “Yeah, he was. He tried setting me up with Zoe Drakos.”

Ruslan nods, seeming impressed. “The Drakos family is the second largest powerful family in Greece. It would have been a good match.”

“It would have if I wanted it to be. I put my foot down because I won’t be forced into a marriage that I don’t want.”

“I can imagine he handled that well.” The sarcasm is thick in his tone.

“He didn’t. He tried to put a wedge between me and her by making her not feel worthy enough to be by my side. Xava is more than worthy, and she’s the one I want. I’m making that abundantly clear to anyone who questions me.” I can’t express how angry I was when he acted the way he did. I am happy with the way Xava handled herself. She put my father in his place and executed it so eloquently.

“Is that why she called me that night?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Mmm, and she made your father look like a fool, didn’t she?”

“Yes, she surely did.”

Ruslan chuckles. “Good. It’s about damn time someone did. Your father needs to get knocked off his high horse a couple times. It’ll be better for his ever-growing ego.”

My father has a notorious reputation, but it is not anywhere as intense as Ruslan’s. Achilles Galanis is known for his ego and how he acts when other people are around. He likes to throw his weight around and puff his chest out so people know how big and powerful he is, but if you ask me, the men with true power don’t act that way. Why? Because there isn’t a need to. In my opinion, if people try to make a spectacle out of anything, it means that they really don’t have any control over what they say they do.

“You know my father’s always so used to getting his way. He wasn’t going to this time. There was no way in hell I was going to let him. Speaking of, have you found anything out about what happened in Greece?” It’s been eating away at me that we haven’t gotten any definitive news. I want to know what transpired. If Ruslan feels like something happened in Greece, it makes me wonder if my father had anything to do with it. He does want me to be with Zoe Drakos and not Xava, so I wouldn’t put anything past him.

“My people are still trying to figure it out.” Ruslan presses his lips together in a firm line and doesn’t seem happy about the status of the investigation.

“Do you think you know who’s behind the attack?” I really want to know if he thinks it is my father or not.

“I think it’s Julio Ramirez. He’s the one who has the most motive to want to hurt my family in any way right now. He still feels burned by everything that’s happened, and word on the street is that he wants his revenge. He might try and get it, but I’ll be damned if that two-faced son of a bitch is successful.”

I don't know why, but I want to get involved. Maybe it's because I'm dating Xava now, and an attack against her family is an attack against her. I want my contacts to keep an eye out and see what they hear or know about already. "Do you have any plans on how you will deal with him?"

Ruslan takes a sip of his drink and then nods. "An idea came to me earlier this evening, actually. I'd like to hire you directly to take out Julio. Everyone knows you're the best in the business, and you've never missed a target. I want to make sure he's dead. I want to make sure he won't be sneaking around a corner trying to harm my loved ones. We have wives, children, and there isn't time to screw around anymore. There's no margin for error."

"Consider it done."

"How is your fee running these days? It's been a minute since I've hired anyone from the Organization, but I assume your fee will be much higher than the others."

"You're not paying me for this one, Ruslan."

He draws his brows together and cocks his head slightly. "Why not?"

"I'm dating your sister. Julio is just as much a threat to her as he is to the rest of you. I'm not going to let anything happen to her, and now that you've told me who I need to be going after, this is a piece of cake. I am curious, though, do you not think Duarte's family could be part of the problem?" As soon as I ask this, Lom looks over at his brother, almost like these are his thoughts as well.

"Mmm, that's a tough one. I'm going to be meeting with Duarte's family here this week. I believe they're being influenced by Julio, and once I speak with them, I'm sure their opinion of him will be tarnished. They're

naming one of his distant cousins as the new leader, and I intend on being as persuasive as I can be.”

I hear heels click against the floor, and I turn to see Xava and Amelia behind us. I know we’ll stop discussing the serious issues now that the women are around us. We’ve all had a good night, and there’s no point in ruining it by talking about these stressors.

“Finished the dishes already?” I question Xava.

She nods and comes up beside me. I wrap an arm around her and hold her close against my body. “Yeah. Were you guys playing nice?”

“Of course,” I comment.

“It’s adorable how you’re worried about it.” Ruslan pokes fun at his sister, Amelia goes to grab Adlan from Nazyr, and then Ruslan picks up Karim.

“I don’t mean to cut the night short, but I’m exhausted,” Amelia speaks up.

Over the course of the next ten minutes, every single one of Xava’s guests says their goodbyes and then is on their way out the door, leaving only her and me here. Rolando returned earlier and is back in his bedroom.

I take a seat on the couch, and Xava comes walking over a couple of minutes later. She hikes one leg up and straddles me, placing her legs on either side of my body.

I rake my eyes up and down her body, in awe of how beautiful she is. Her skin is smooth like silk, not even showing one imperfection.

Xava brings her hand up and caresses my face, then drags the pad of her thumb over my lip, pulling it slowly. “I had a lot of fun tonight, Ambros. Thank you for being a good sport.”

“There’s no need to thank me. I’m always going to be on my best behavior around your family,” I promise her. Taking my own hand, I caress her hip, feeling the curve

of her ass. She might be a petite woman, but fuck if she isn't the most beautiful woman in the world in my eyes.

Xava leans down to me, dragging her hand until it's against my neck, and kisses me soft and slow.

This is the shit I never thought I'd ever experience. It feels right being with her. It doesn't feel like a quick, meaningless fuck. When I'm with Xava, all I think about is her being by my side for years to come.

I snake a hand around the back of Xava's neck and pull her closer to me. She's seated right over my cock, and only my trousers and what seems to be a very thin piece of lace keep us from one another.

She begins grinding herself against me, and I'm a goner. There's only one thing on my mind, and I know she's thinking about it too. I unbuckle my belt with my other hand and yank my fly down. Xava shimmies out of her lace thong, and I scoot my pants down to my knees. She even begins unbuttoning my dress shirt and pulls it back.

"You like what you see?" Her eyes light up like it's Christmas whenever she sees me shirtless. I don't mind being ogled by her in the least bit, and she really has a way of making a man feel confident about himself.

"No, not at all." Xava giggles playfully.

My hard cock presses up against her mound, and she continues grinding against me like we're two lovestruck teenagers. I can't handle the foreplay right now. I want to get straight into the thick of it, so I do.

I release my hand from the back of her neck and use both of them to lift her up and line my cock at her entrance. I ram myself inside her without warning, and she gasps, falling against me for a moment. I thrust in and out of her slowly, and she moans into my ear until she's finally adjusted to the fullness.

Once the shock of it all wears off, she pulls her dress over her head and tosses it on the floor behind us, revealing her perfect breasts. She bounces up and down on me, and I have one hand placed on her hip, holding onto her flesh while I dive straight for her breasts with my mouth. There's nothing more I love than ravaging her body, and I could do this until the end of my days.

"Fuck, this feels so good," Xava moans lowly, but she has no idea I'm about to make her feel so much better.

I take my thumb to her clit and begin teasing and taunting the little nub. She rolls her head back and increases her movements, and so do I. I want her to feel how amazing this is. I want her to know every single time we're together that I'm going to make her entire world come apart, so I do.

I pick up my pace as she rides me, and every time she rolls her hips, I thrust inside her. It's not very long until she comes undone around me, and I find my own release inside of her.

I'm pretty sure I haven't used a condom since the first or second time we were together, and I'm not even scared if she gets pregnant. Xava is the kind of woman I want to raise my children. Honestly, at this point in my life, I can't imagine anyone else doing it.

Chapter Twenty

Xava

Okay, there's absolutely no going back after this.

I'm in my apartment, sitting at the small desk inside my room while on my laptop. What I'm looking at could very well change the rest of my life. I stare at the "submit application" button to attend École Lenôtre next year. It's one of the most world-renowned pastry schools and accepts students from over one hundred countries every single year.

The only way I'm going to know if this is what I want to do is by clicking the button and at least trying it if I get accepted. In theory, I think this is something I could love doing for a long time, but just like anyone else, I think you have to be thrown into it to really know if something is for you or not.

After I click the "submit application" button, I close my laptop. Almost on cue, my phone goes off. It's a text message, so I unlock my screen and go to my messages app. Only, it's not anyone I expect to hear from right now.

Mom

I'm in Grozny and would love to go out to lunch with you. Can you meet me somewhere?

Yara's still in town, so I walk out of my room and shout for her. "Yara!"

"In the living room!" she shouts back with her thick accent. It's funny how, after being in Grozny for a year,

my own accent has softened.

“You’re never going to believe who texted me just now.” I widen my eyes and raise my brows.

“Who?”

“My mother.” It almost feels surreal saying it. Things haven’t been great with us as of late, and I’ve tried reaching out from time to time to get some answers and maybe even some closure from her, but she’s been avoiding me. It’s left me with a lot of questions that I don’t have the answers to, and unless I do see her face-to-face, I don’t think I’m going to get the answers I seek.

“Wow. That’s unexpected. What did she say?”

I read off exactly what she sent me. “I’m in Grozny and would love to go out to lunch with you. Can you meet me somewhere?”

“Hmm, maybe she’s trying to turn over a new leaf. Are you going to meet up with her?”

I know if I don’t, I won’t be able to get the answers I want so badly. “Yeah. I need to. She and I have some things we need to discuss, and she’s been really good at avoiding me lately.” Avoiding me except for the conversation where she told me she was being paid to take care of me. That conversation has completely screwed with my head. It made me doubt so many memories we made together and wonder about so much more.

“Okay, so set something up,” Yara says as I text my adoptive mother back.

Xava

Meet me at the Grozny Hotel in an hour?

Within a few seconds, I get a reply back.

Mom

Okay, see you then.

The fact I scheduled a lunch with her should make me feel better, right? I should be happy that I have the opportunity to speak with her and discuss anything else I have questions about. Yet, instead of being happy, it feels like my stomach is on a roller coaster ride.

“Do you need me to go with you, or do you want to be alone?”

I love Yara for being as supportive as she is. When all this happened with me finding out I was really an Umarova, she was my rock. She’s the person who made me feel like my entire world wasn’t being pulled out from under me. Without her, I would have been a mess the entire time everything happened.

I shake my head. “No, I think I’ll be okay. It’s probably better if I have this lunch with her alone anyway.”

“Understandable. I’ll be here relaxing until you get back. I... I did want to talk to you about something if you have a few minutes, though.”

“Yeah, I do. What’s up?”

Yara sits up a bit straighter on the couch and puts her tablet down. “So you know I do a lot of my work from my tablet or my laptop. They’re closing the office I work at in Prague, and in doing so, they’re making our jobs remote. I was wondering how you felt about possibly having a roommate?”

I can’t hide the smile that starts to cross my face. “Wait, do you mean that... you mean that you’re going to move here?!” I can’t help it. I’m practically screaming in pure joy.

“Yes, if you’re okay with it. If not, I can find another place to live that’s close by. I saw online that there are a few apartments that are actually within my budget in this very building.”

“You’re not getting an apartment. You can live here with me. It’ll be so much fun! God, I’ve missed you so much, and this has seriously become the best day ever!”

Yara smiles brightly, and I walk over to her and give her the biggest hug in the world. Yara isn’t only my best friend. She’s like a sister to me.

“Okay, I just didn’t want to impose. Now that I know you’re cool with it, I’ll start making some plans on how to get my stuff here. I probably won’t be completely moved in for a month or two, though.”

“That’s okay. The bedroom you’re staying in now will be yours, so do whatever you want with it.” This is so freaking awesome.

I decide to share my own news with Yara. “There’s something I need to tell you, too. I applied to a world-renowned pastry school in Paris. I don’t know if I will get accepted or anything, but if I do, I’ll be in Paris while I take classes.”

“You mean we’ll be in Paris because there’s no way I’m letting you go to Paris by yourself! I’ve actually never been, either. It’s on my bucket list. I guess we should be really happy that I can work from wherever the hell I want to. Shouldn’t we?” Yara wiggles her eyebrows and giggles.

“Yeah.” This is so awesome. I never thought this was the kind of stuff Yara and I would ever talk about or do. We never really knew what we wanted to do with our lives, but look at us now. Everything is falling into place perfectly.

Yara and I hang out for a little bit longer, and then I go get changed. Rolando takes me into the heart of

Grozny to where the Grozny Hotel is, and I meet my adoptive mother inside their restaurant. She's already been seated, and Rolando walks up with me but veers off to a nearby table.

"Who is that?" my adoptive mother asks as I take the open seat across from her. She hasn't met him yet.

"That's Rolando. He's my security guard," I tell her, and she looks him up while he sits at the table a few feet away.

"Mmm, so, they've really accepted you into their inner circle?" Her tone makes me feel like she's taking a dig at me.

"Why wouldn't they?" I'm not trying to be so aggressive, but there's some part of me that feels like I need to be.

"You weren't around them growing up, Xava. I thought they might think you're an outsider, or maybe you might grow bored of being with them by now. I actually came here to ask if you're ready to come home."

My mouth falls open in complete shock. "Sorry, what?"

"I'm trying to figure out if you're ready to come back to Prague. We have a life there. Your siblings miss you. Your father misses you."

That's bullshit, especially the last part. My father always looked at me differently, and when my paternity came out, I finally understood why. It's because I wasn't his daughter, and he knew it. My entire life, he treated me differently and tried to act like he didn't.

"I don't know why you think I'd go back to Prague." I'm blown away by what she's saying, honestly.

"Really? People are trying to kill you, sweetheart. You aren't meant for this life. It doesn't suit you."

Okay, I'm not staying here for a moment longer. I get up from my seat and look right at her. "You didn't want to come here and catch up with me. You planned on bullying me into agreeing to go back to Prague. Newsflash—it's not going to happen. I'm very happy here, Mother. I'm where I was always meant to be. If there's somewhere I wasn't supposed to be, that would've been with you in Prague. I finally know what it means to be with family, and I thank you for raising me and keeping me safe... but at the end of the day, I know all I've ever been to you is a job. That's all I'll ever be."

I don't let her say another word and walk out. Why would I want to hear anything else she has to say? It would just be another lie or another way she could try and manipulate me.

I was really hoping this conversation could have gone better, but it didn't. Instead, it was a waste of time, and I don't know if I'm ever going to have a good relationship with her ever again.

I know I shouldn't be in shock because of what just transpired, and my phone ringing only takes my worries about the situation away. I dig for my phone and answer it without even looking at my caller ID. "Hello," I say into my phone.

"Xava, it's been a while."

I almost drop the phone. It's Dominika, my friend whom I haven't heard from in a very long time. "I'm so surprised. You haven't spoken to me in weeks. You've ignored my calls. Ignored my texts. What's going on?"

Is Dominika even a real friend to me? That's something I'm still trying to understand. Yara has been by my side through everything, and I thought Dominika and I were close ... but now I can't be too sure. What kind of friend ignores you for weeks on end?

“I’m sorry. I was going through some things and needed some time. I... I’ve been going to therapy and decided I should come right out with it, so I’m going to do that. I put up a wall between us because I was starting to view you as more than a friend, and I don’t know if I can continue being your friend when I look at you in a different light. I’m just being honest. I felt like it was better to remove myself from the situation entirely, so I did that. I know you don’t. I mean, I know you’re not attracted to women, so I needed to cut the cord, and I’m calling because I at least owed you an explanation. Therapy has made me realize that.”

Holy crap. I knew it had to be something big for Dominika to want to no longer speak to me, but this is so crazy. I never expected this.

“Wow. That’s a lot to process,”

“Yeah, so I was just calling to let you know that’s why I haven’t been communicating. I don’t want anything from you. I just wanted to give you answers because I know you, and I’m sure you have been wondering why I went silent on you.”

She’s right, and I have. “Yeah, I was curious.”

“That’s why. And as much as it might not be the best thing to do, I think I should stop speaking with you, at least for a while. Communicating with you would just make me want you. I’m sorry, and I hope you can forgive me.”

Before I can say another word, Dominika has ended the call. I stand here in complete shock for a few moments before I decide to call her back, but I get a generic message that the caller cannot be reached.

She blocked me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ambros

“Hey. How was your flight?” Xava asks as I finally walk into my hotel room. Even hearing her voice over the phone makes me feel good.

I traveled from Greece all the way to Mexico so I could complete one of the most important kills of my life. Ruslan asked for my help, and within twelve hours, he’ll no longer have to worry about Julio Ramirez attempting to harm anyone else in his family.

“It wasn’t bad. I had a couple bouts of turbulence because of storms. Other than that, it was fine. How are things going today?” Xava applied to a very prominent pastry school in Paris. She’s talked about it non-stop for the last few days, and I know she’s going to be accepted. There isn’t a doubt in my mind that she will be. Honestly, I’m sure Ruslan has already made a couple of calls to the school to ensure she does get in.

“Good. I’m relieved.” Xava’s tone drops, and I’m certain if I was right there with her, I’d notice her staring off into the distance. She always has such an intense stare when her tone of voice drops like this.

“You okay? Sounds like I lost you.”

“I’m okay, just annoyed. I didn’t tell you about this yet because I was trying to wrap my own head around it, but I met up with my adoptive mother for lunch the other day. I thought it would be good for me to speak to her face-to-face. I figured we’d chat, and then we’d hash out some of our conflict points, maybe even get some closure or clarity.”

“How’d the lunch end up going?” I don’t know why Xava thinks she needs to tell me about things straight

away. If she struggles with something, she can speak to me whenever she's ready. She shouldn't have any guilt associated with that.

"It didn't." Xava scoffs. "We were barely five minutes into it when she told me I needed to return to Prague. That's why she wanted to see me, not so we could talk or try to repair our relationship, but because I didn't belong in Grozny in her eyes. I grew up in Prague, and my family is there, so she thought that's where I was supposed to be, too. It's fucking ridiculous. I didn't even get to ask her about some things I've been wondering about. That's the part that really pisses me off. She didn't even give me the opportunity to speak about important things we needed to talk about."

"Well, I'm sure there will be another time when you can discuss it."

"I don't think so. I think I've realized that she's not someone I want in my life, Ambros. As much as it saddens me to say that, I don't know if I'm supposed to have her in my life. Then she mentioned how she heard people have been trying to kill me, and I thought to myself, 'How does she know that?' I ended up talking to Eset, and Eset confessed that my adoptive mother had reached out to her to 'check' on me. Eset told her what was happening."

"Let me play devil's advocate here, but do you think she was asking you to go back to Prague because she was worried about you? She did raise you, Xava. Deep down, she has to care about you in some way."

"I honestly don't know. I really don't. I just think, at this point in my life, I need to step away from my relationship with her. Maybe in a couple of years, we can push our differences aside and try to talk it out, but I don't think I can do that right now. I feel like our relationship is based on lies and mistrust... and I want some space from the situation."

“Okay, I won’t push you to do anything you don’t want to.” It’s not my job to force Xava into anything. Family issues are complicated, and God knows I have my own fair share of those.

“Thank you. Yara and I are going to head out and get some food with Rolando, but call me in a few hours if you’re not too busy?”

“I will. Have a great time out,” I tell Xava, and then we both hang up the phone and say our goodbyes.

I get settled in my hotel room and make a couple of calls to people who work with the Organization. I’m able to find out that Julio has three cell phones, and they’re all pinging from a tower not too far away from me.

My job is simple: kill Julio.

I know he’s in El Conejo, so he can hide out. It’s a smaller town in the Tamaulipas region of Mexico. Directly located off Route 116, it gives anyone the ability to jump on the interstate and get the hell out. I doubt Julio knows anyone is actively looking for him. He probably thinks this is a good place to stay while he’s doing everything he is to the Umarova family. I can’t wait to see the look on his face when he realizes they’ve sent one of the big dogs after him.

I get a text from one of my hackers at the Organization, who tells me he’s been able to ping Julio’s actual location. He sends me a link, and I tap on it, seeing a blue dot on a map. Anywhere Julio moves, even slightly, shows up on this link. God, I’m lucky to work with some of the best men in the business.

I’m at a smaller hotel on the edge of town and paid for the best suite there. I even paid the receptionist in the front a bit extra for discretion, not wanting her to talk about me to any of the locals. The last thing I need is for her to talk about me, then say to a friend how a Greek

man is here. Julio knows my family, and I'm certain he'd be alarmed if the news got to him.

Before I left, I thought about what I was going to do. If I was going to shoot him, or if I'd strangle him with my belt. So many options ran through the forefront of my mind, and I thought of something better. A bit bloodier, and it will send a message that going against the Umarova family is not tolerated whatsoever.

The dot on my phone moves closer to the Iglesia Catolica De La Virgen Del Carmen, the only church in town. I'd hate to kill him in a church, but it's not the first time, and it won't be the last that I take someone out this way. At least when I kill them inside a religious building, they're not too far from the cemetery.

I leave my hotel room and proceed to exit the building, taking my rental car from the hotel all the way out to the church. My phone still tells me he's here, but now he's inside the building, so I park my car and exit it. I lock it in the process and slide my keys inside my pants pocket before I reach the church door.

The church looks like it's been here for a long time, maybe a few hundred years. The outside is made up of some sort of concrete block, and there's been more concrete painted over it, so you can't see the lines. On top of that is a very faded-out cream color. My guess is it's sun damage over the years.

There's a small veranda on the front steps to shield patrons from the blazing sun or maybe the occasional torrential downpour. Placing my gloved hand on the old, worn-out bronze door handle, I push the door open. It's green and looks like it had a lot of life left in it many years ago. Now, the wood is starting to bow in the middle, and the different parts of it are swelling and cracking. Either this place hasn't been taken care of because of people's choices, or they don't have the money to make the upgrades they need.

After I'm inside, I shut the door, and the inside looks just as bad as the outside. The floor is a mixture of what looks to be vinyl, and then that material narrows out while dirt takes its place. Church pews sit on either side of a central aisle in six rows, and even they look like they've seen better days. This is a Catholic church, so why isn't the Catholic Church helping them fund upgrades?

Near the front of the church is who I can only assume to be Julio. He's kneeling at the front, praying to someone while holding a rosary.

I slowly walk up behind him and notice he's speaking lowly in Spanish. I'm not sure what he's saying because his words are coming out in a mere whisper, though as I grow closer to him, I can tell he's worried. He tenses up and straightens his back up a bit, beginning to turn. The moment he fully faces me, I collide my closed fist with his nose. A loud pop rings out between us, and he jolts backward as he tries to process what just happened.

Blood spills from his nose onto his hands, and he's damn well confused that I'm here. "Ambros Galanis... someone paid a pretty penny for you." Julio coughs.

"No one paid a dime. I'm here on a personal matter, Julio," I state, taking a seat in the first pew. The fact I'm sitting down only makes him more nervous. He doesn't appreciate how comfortable I am doing what I do.

"I don't understand." Of course, he doesn't because he barks out orders and doesn't even bother looking into people's personal lives. If he had, he might have refrained from ordering a hit on Xava, especially after she and I had a known association with one another.

"You ordered a hit on Xava Beno or Xava Umarova, didn't you?"

Julio takes in a deep breath. "I did, and the Umarova family hired you because of it." Julio shakes his head. "I

should have hired you to take her out in the first place. Fuck. Look at where things are now.”

I begin laughing because this is laughable. He thinks I would have killed Xava for money? No. Hell no. “You really are as dumb as you look. I would never kill Xava.”

Julio draws his brows together as he tries to figure out why I wouldn't. “You're an assassin. It's your job to kill people when you're paid to do so.”

I nod a couple of times. “You're right, but I wouldn't kill my girlfriend.”

Julio rises to his feet and pathetically tries to run. I'll give him credit. He realizes how badly he fucked up right now.

He has to know there isn't any coming back from this. I take my time rising from the church pew and stalk toward him. “You tried to have her killed in Grozny, and then you went and screwed with their plane.”

“No, I didn't. I hired an idiot to kill her, who obviously didn't do the job... but I never messed with anyone's plane.” As much as I don't want to believe him, for some reason, I do. There's only one other person who would have reason to kill Xava—my father. He wants me to marry Zoe Drakos, and it looks like he's prepared to do anything to make sure that happens, even killing an innocent woman.

I close the distance between Julio and me, grabbing the blade I've had concealed in my left pocket. I jam it into the center of his throat and watch as he grabs onto the handle and thrashes. He slowly begins to choke on his own blood and knows the only thing he's going to be able to do here is die. He'll either die slowly and gracefully, or he'll freak out and beg for my help, dying the way a coward would.

I'm curious as to which one it will be.

Julio coughs up blood, and it splatters against the bits of vinyl that are left on this side of the church. He looks up at me almost in a silent way of pleading with me to help him, but it's no use. I'm not going to. He tried to take Xava away from me, and I will show no mercy to anyone who fucks with the woman I'm growing to love.

Julio pulls the blade out of his throat and continues coughing, but now, as he breathes, it sounds wet, and I know what's going to happen next. He coughs and breathes, making everything worse for him. He can't help himself. It's his body's natural reaction... but it doesn't last for long.

“If you had just left her alone, I wouldn't have had to do this. That's where you fucked up, Julio. You tried to have my girl killed.”

I debate letting him die slowly in only this amount of pain, but the darkness inside me is begging me to make him suffer greatly. I pick up the blade Julio yanked out of his throat and jam it into his body over and over again. First, it's his shoulders, then his chest, then I dig it into his stomach and yank until I feel the tension of his intestines against it. He coughs even more now, and every single time he does, I can hear the distinctive sound of blood in his lungs.

His eyes go wide, and he hits the ground with a thud. I watch to see if there's any sign of life, but there isn't. I hold my bloodied blade and take out my wallet, leaving a stack of cash for the church. Maybe they'll actually do some upgrades with it. It's really my apology for leaving such a gruesome mess.

I leave the church, wiping my blade off with a handkerchief I have in my other pocket, and conceal my weapon. There's one person I need to call, so I grab my phone and dial Ruslan.

“Yeah?”

“It’s done.”

“Did he suffer?”

“I made sure of it.”

Now, none of them need to live in fear anymore, especially Xava. Julio is dead, and he will no longer bring any torment against the family. Sure, they have other enemies, but I know the Umarovas can handle their own.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Xava

“Come on, sleepyhead! We have a whole day planned!” Yara throws a pillow at me and stirs me awake.

“God, what time is it?” I ask with narrowed eyes as I try to muster the courage to wake up. I need coffee. I need it so bad it isn’t even funny.

“It’s three in the morning, but I promise you won’t want to kill me in a little bit! It’s your birthday, after all, and we’ve planned something really special for you. Plus, I have coffee.” I feel pressure at the end of my bed, and sure enough, as I manage to flutter my eyes open, I notice Yara does, in fact, have a cup of coffee in her hands.

I take it swiftly and begin sipping on the hot liquid. “If you didn’t bring this, you’d probably be dead.” It’s been a couple of weeks since Yara said she would move in, and while she doesn’t have everything here yet, she has a few of her things. She’s only going to be here until next Tuesday, and then she has to fly back to Prague for another week or two. After that, she’ll be here permanently, and I can’t wait.

“Yeah, well, what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t bring the birthday girl her coffee?” Yara offers me a sweet smile, and I continue drinking it. “I can’t believe you’re twenty-one now. The last couple of years have really flown by for us, haven’t they?”

“Yeah, they really have. Not to change the subject, but what are we doing? You woke me up before sunrise, so I know it has to be something big.”

“Oh no. I’m not telling you anything. You’d better get up and throw some things in a suitcase because we’re

heading to the airport.”

I blink at her over and over again, trying to process what she’s just said. “Sorry, what?”

“You heard me. Now come on!”

“What do I need to pack for? Hot weather? Cold weather?”

Yara begins laughing. “Oh no, I’m not telling you anything and spoiling this. Bring a bit of everything.” Yara gets off my bed and walks toward the door. “You have fifteen minutes, and then you’d better be at the front door ready to roll out. Everyone else is waiting on us, too.”

Everyone else? Goodness gracious. What in the hell did Yara plan?

Yara, along with my sister and sisters-in-law, planned a girl’s birthday trip for me to Barcelona, Spain. I’ve never been here, and I once mentioned to Amelia how it was one of my bucket list cities to go to. Never did I expect they’d do something like this for me. I even told them they didn’t have to do something so big, and Amelia told me to “shut my yapper” and accept it because I only turn twenty-one once.

The flight was long but well worth it. We arrived late yesterday, and since we’ve been here today, we’ve been lying by the pool enjoying ourselves. I’ve had one too many mojitos, but goddamn, they’re delicious.

I lean back on my chair, soaking up the sun, when suddenly, darkness comes directly over me. I cock open an eye to see a silhouette of a shirtless man, and after my eyes adjust, I have the biggest smile on my face. “Ambros, I had no idea you were going to be here!”

“I didn’t know if I was going to make it either. I was supposed to be here early this morning, but I had a couple of flight issues.”

“I’m so freaking happy right now. Thank you for coming,” I say as I rise from my chair and hug him. Ambros holds me tight against his body for a couple of minutes before he presses a kiss to my forehead.

“Anything for you, *ελάφι*.”

Ambros and I hang out at the pool with Yara and my family for the next couple of hours. Eventually, the two of us break off from the group so we can go have a date night.

“You haven’t been texting too much the past couple of days. I wanted to talk to you about that. Is everything okay?” Ambros questions me.

I suck in a deep breath through my nose. “I’m okay. I’m just... stressed out, I guess. I applied to that pastry school, and I’ve been having nightmares about what happened with the plane. It’s like when I don’t have nightmares about that, I’m having nightmares about being shot at. It’s all catching up to me, I guess.” I don’t know why it never really bothered me too much up until now, but I really don’t like how badly it’s affecting me.

“It makes sense. You went through something heavily traumatic, Xava. That sort of stuff doesn’t just stop messing with your body. You might not even realize it’s doing it, but deep down, your body recognizes the trauma and how scared you were. That’s why you’re having these sorts of nightmares, but I will tell you it’ll get better. It might not seem like it now, but it does.”

“I just wish it wasn’t ever anything I needed to go through in the first place.”

“I know, and you should never have had to.” Ambros slides his arm around my waist and holds me close against him as we walk down the streets of Barcelona.

I figure I should probably change the subject because I don't want this night to be ruined by my anxiety. "What were you thinking for dinner?"

Ambros whips his head around to look at me. "What I think doesn't matter in the least bit. You're the birthday girl, so naturally, you decide where we're going."

I look around the street and see a fancier-looking restaurant. It appears to be a Spanish steakhouse, and I've never been to one. "What about that place?"

"If you want to go there, then let's do it."

"Okay, come on." I lead the way, and we both head into the restaurant. My twenty-first birthday has already been the best, and I can't help but wonder what the rest of my birthdays will look like. Are they going to be this amazing because Ambros is by my side? I sure hope so.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ambros

It was adorable that Xava wanted me to pick where we went to dinner tonight. I had to remind her that it wasn't my birthday. Therefore, she was the one who could pick wherever she wanted to go. I expected us to walk for a few more minutes until we saw some more options, but Xava noticed this steakhouse, and now we're inside, sitting back in a quiet, tucked-away corner with a single candle lit between us. We're sipping on red wine and overlooking a magnificent view of the city. The nightlife is alive and well, with neon lights, apartment lights, and people walking along the streets.

This is Xava's first time in Barcelona, but it's my sixth or seventh time in this wonderful city. There aren't many places where I'd want to come back time and time again, though Barcelona is one of them. The people and culture are always so welcoming. It doesn't matter where you're from in the world, the citizens of Barcelona are happy to have you here and your deep pockets, so your money is spent in their city. They have a mind-blowing tourism system here. More cities like it should start adapting some of their ways.

Xava has her wine in her hand and looks out the window. She's so picturesque. So peaceful. She looks as though she's having the time of her life, and I'm glad. For a while now, she's been stressed, and while she doesn't enjoy speaking about it, she doesn't have to with me. I can read it all over her face when something is bothering her.

"You've been awfully quiet since we got here." I'm careful to choose my words because I don't want to upset

her or cause her any unnecessary stress. We're here for her birthday, so I want to ensure she has a great time.

"There's just a lot on my mind. After we arrived, Ruslan called me and updated me on a couple of things."

"Ah, anything good?"

"Depends on your definition of good, I think. He went to go speak with Duarte's family in Portugal."

"Mmm, how did that go?" Knowing Ruslan, I'll bet he found some way to finagle things to be in his favor. He's been a powerful businessman for many years and knows exactly what he needs to do and say to keep people happy. Things with Duarte's family are no exception.

Xava shrugs and takes a sip of her wine. "Good, I suppose. They've agreed to back off after understanding why things happened the way they did. I ended up finding out a lot more about what Duarte put Mona, the girls, and my brother through. Ruslan confessed those things to his family, and they've agreed that they won't come after our family any longer. They did tell Ruslan that Julio Ramirez wouldn't stop. So, in the back of my mind, I'm worried about that. I'm worried about him hurting me somehow because Duarte's family made it seem like Julio won't stop."

I lick my lips and nod, hearing every word Xava has to say. "He wasn't going to stop, but I made him. He won't hurt you at all anymore, Xava. No one will."

Xava blinks a few times at me and scoots back in her chair. She sits up straight but looks like she's taken aback by what I've said.

"I'm sorry. I'm not following."

"Xava, you don't have anything to worry about any longer. Julio is dead, and he won't try to kill you as a way to get back at your family."

Gratitude mixed with a somberness washes over Xava's face. "You did that for me? To keep me safe?"

"Of course, I did. There was never any question in my mind. It's my job to keep you safe, Xava. I will never let anyone harm you, whether it's something serious like what Julio was trying to do or something on the completely opposite side of the spectrum. You're... you're very well becoming the most important thing in my life. I cherish you today and every day."

Xava grabs onto my hand and gives me a reassuring squeeze. How she looks at me with those Bambi eyes speaks to my soul. If I had to go through everything I did in my years to get to her, I'd gladly do it again. I'd go through every good and bad thing if it meant I'd be with her.

I haven't vocalized this to Xava yet, but the more time I spend with her, the more I can't imagine anyone else being in my life. I'm falling in love with her, or so I keep saying... but what if I'm already in love with her?

What if that's the reason I feel so intensely about her?

"I've never had anyone like you in my life. I... I hope you know I'll never take you for granted."

"I don't think you ever would." There's not even a moment in my mind where I think that could be possible.

"God, it feels so wrong of me to say. I'm glad he's gone. I'm glad he's dead and that he's not going to try and hurt the family any longer. Eset told me not to be worried about him, but how couldn't I after what he tried to do? He tried to fucking kill me, and as much as that terrified me, it's like I knew other things were going on behind the surface. Ruslan doesn't like to talk to me about that sort of stuff, but I'm not an idiot. I could see something else was going on. I just didn't really know the

magnitude of it all at first. Now I'm starting to see how things really are in this criminal world."

"They aren't always so conflictive. A lot of families like yours have issues every once in a while, but for the most part, people respect them, and shit like this doesn't arise. If I were you, I wouldn't let it get to you."

Xava smiles at me softly as she takes another sip. "I'm not. I know I have a man by my side who will do anything to keep me safe. You've taken away every worry I've had or possibly could have. I feel safer than safe with you, Ambros. I know how ridiculous that sounds, but that's the God's honest truth. You're sent from the heavens. I don't doubt it for a second."

I do.

There's nothing heaven sent about me, but if Xava wants to think that about me, then who the hell am I to argue with her?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Xava

We spent a very long, amazing weekend in Barcelona with Yara, my sister, sisters-in-law, and my boyfriend. At the end of the weekend, I thought we'd all go our separate ways and head back to our normal lives. Or maybe as normal as they can be. I was wrong since I assumed that Ambros would have a job or two lined up that would call him away. Only he didn't. While Eset, Amelia, and Emily went back to Grozny, Ambros asked me to come with him to a city in Greece that I'd never been to before.

He invited me to go to Corfu. I'd never even heard of it until he asked me if I wanted to go. Corfu is an island located off the northwest coast and looks over the Ionian Sea. Ambros told me that the beaches there were much better than on Mykonos, but I didn't believe him until I set my eyes on them firsthand.

The beaches aren't overpopulated like in Mykonos, which is a popular tourist destination. In Corfu, there is a tourism market, but it's not quite as popular as Mykonos, and I'm glad about that. I'm lying on a towel on the beach, and Ambros is beside me, lying and soaking up the sun as well. There's a slight breeze, and the scent of sea salt wafts through the air.

"I hope you're having a good time here," Ambros states.

I turn over slightly and look right at him. "I'm having the best time here with you. Thanks for inviting me here. It's... it's so beautiful."

Ambros smiles slightly. It's that sweet, sexy smile that tugs right at the corner of his lips ever so slightly. "I

figured you might want some time alone and with me after being with the girls all weekend. You all partied a little hard for your birthday, and being in Corfu is about resting and relaxing.”

See, this is exactly why I know Ambros is the right man for me. He’s so kind and goes above and beyond to make sure I’m taken care of. All weekend was about me, and he was more concerned that I didn’t get enough rest, so he asked me to go somewhere else with him.

“Do you think I’m exhausted, or are you just trying to spoil me?” I have to play with him a little bit.

He chuckles lightly and licks his lips. “It might be a little bit of both.”

“That’s what I thought.” I smile back and grab his hand, giving it a squeeze.

We’re having such a blissful, romantic moment when my phone starts ringing. It’s sitting in my purse, which is on the sand beside me. I think about ignoring it, but deep down, I feel like I shouldn’t. You never know when someone is going to call about something important.

I grab my phone and notice Yara’s name, so of course, I have to answer. “Hey.”

“Hey there! I’m so sorry. I’m not trying to ruin your time with Ambros, but... something came in the mail for you.”

“Okay, is it important or something?” I don’t know why Yara would call me about it, so I wonder what it is.

“I think it might be. It’s from École Lenôtre.”

“Oh, my God. Open it up right now, please.” My heart pounds inside my chest. It’s been a while since I applied to join their school for next year, and I’m praying I got in. In the back of my mind, I’ve been anxiously awaiting the results to find out if I’ve been accepted into their program.

“Okay,” Yara comments, and I can hear the ripping of paper in the background.

For a long time, I haven’t really known what I wanted to do, but I do want to do this. I want to create food that people will love and want around the world. Ever since I applied to pastry school, I’ve given a lot of thought to how I want to run my business when I’m finished. I’m going to pastry school, and then I will open my own bakery in the heart of Grozny. From there, I’ll expand to other cities across Europe and maybe even the world.

I want my first two bakeries to be in Grozny and Mykonos because I don’t see myself leaving Ambros. I don’t see the two of us ever being separated because of how deeply we care for each other.

“Ms. Beno-Umarova, we here at École Lenôtre are pleased to accept you into the fall semester. There is much more information to come, so please watch your emails for other news and announcements.”

“Wow. I... I can’t freaking believe it!” I’m so ecstatic right now and can’t stop smiling.

“What happened?” Ambros asks.

“I was accepted into the pastry school I applied to! They’re taking me in for next semester.” I can’t fucking believe this. It feels like my entire life is changing in the best way possible. Finding out I was an Umarova was terrifying. I’ll always admit that. It was scarier than anything else, knowing that my entire life was a complete lie. Still, I threw myself into the thick of it and decided I would learn more about my family. I decided I was going to be with these people and try to understand where I came from.

Doing so has been the best decision I’ve ever made. Not just because I’ve been in a good financial position but because I’ve created relationships and bonds with my siblings and their partners that will never be broken.

“That’s awesome, Xava. I’m so happy for you.” Ambros smiles, and there’s a glimmer in his eye. A glimmer that makes me feel like he’s proud of me, too, and I really love that.

“I’m not going to keep you, but have fun with Ambros. I’m so freaking happy for you, Xava! We can talk about all the logistics when you get back to Grozny, but you obviously know I’ll be going to Paris with you while you’re taking classes. Have fun, and we’ll chat later.”

Yara and I say our goodbyes, and as I hang up the phone, I’m all smiles.

“You know what this calls for, right?” Ambros questions me.

“What would that be?”

“A celebratory dinner.”

“Really?” I don’t think I’ve stopped smiling since Yara called and gave me the news.

“Obviously. Just let me know when you’re starting to get hungry, and we’ll head out.” Ambros rolls over and presses a passionate kiss to my lips. The way he kisses me is straight out of a romance novel. There are so many unsaid words between us when he does it like he’s telling me how much he cares with every brush of his lips.

“Mkay,” I murmur as he pulls away. I scoot closer to him and cuddle against his body as we lay on the beach. After a point, I end up falling asleep, and Ambros stirs me awake as the sun is slowly starting to set.

“I’m sorry to wake you up, but we should get ready and head to dinner.”

“Ugh, right.” Ambros and I grab our things and walk back from our private beach to the villa a few hundred feet behind us. We’re right on the water and have the best view. It’s like one of those you’d see on a travel

agent's website or on Pinterest. That's how picturesque this is.

We go inside the beachside villa, take a quick shower, then change into our date night attire. I'm in a floral red and white maxi dress, while Ambros has chosen his typical black slacks and a white dress shirt. He's so dark in comparison to his light shirt. I don't think I'll ever tan the way he does, but that's genetics for you.

Ambros and I head to dinner at a local bistro, but halfway through, he gets a call from Linus. We transfer our food into to-go boxes, and then he drops me off at our villa. I go inside and lock the door behind me as he instructed, but my heart is pounding in my chest. What in the world happened that Ambros has to drive to go meet Linus? Shouldn't Linus be on Mykonos anyway?

We came from Barcelona straight here to Corfu. This makes no sense to me. Unless Linus could be around? That would make sense.

"Ugh, I'm so ready for bed," I mumble to myself as I make my way through the villa to the bedroom. I flick on the light switch and see a woman's silhouette against the sheer curtains facing the ocean. I think she's on the outside of the room for a moment until she turns.

It takes me a few seconds to recognize her, but when I do, a deep, uneasy feeling settles in the pit of my stomach. "You'll get your wish soon enough. Only, you won't be waking up."

Zoe Drakos wants me dead, and I can only assume it's because Ambros wants me and not her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ambros

I race as fast as I can from Corfu to Limni, which is about a fifteen-minute ride away. I got a call from Linus' phone, which was followed by a text message saying he was in trouble and needed me to get there fast. He sent me a location, and I'm about two minutes from the pin he dropped for me.

I pull up to the Rodostamo Hotel and Spa, where Linus' pin is.

I park the car and walk inside the front lobby, looking for my brother and whatever sort of situation he's in... only I can't find him anywhere. So I call him, and the phone continues to ring until he ultimately answers. "Linus, where are you?"

"At home. What do you mean?"

"I got a call from you, then a text. You said you were in trouble and needed help. Stop fucking around with me, Linus. Where are you?" I'm not in the mood for any sort of games right now. He obviously needs my help, so what's going on? The more I think about it, the more I think he might have people in front of him. Maybe that's why he's acting like he's at home.

"Linus, I'm serious. You sent me your location for a reason. Stop fucking around and tell me what's going on!" I'm trying not to raise my voice while I'm in the middle of the hotel lobby. People around me are starting to pay attention and listen to what I'm saying. I have no patience for it. If someone dares ask me one thing, I'm going to snap them like a fucking twig.

"Ambros, I'm not fucking with you. I have no idea what you're talking about." Linus is adamant, and I know

he isn't lying to me. I can tell, based on his voice, that he isn't.

“Send me a screenshot of your text messages,” I order him, and within a few moments, I have a screenshot back.

It shows me the last conversation we had a couple of days ago while texting. Nothing about today. “What the fuck is going on...” I ask, not my brother specifically, but more so the universe. I don't understand what's happening right now.

“I don't know, man. This shit is weird, and I don't know about you, but I don't like it.”

“I don't like it either. I left Xava back at the villa I rented for us while we're here,” I murmur, and then my instincts take over. I end the call with Linus and immediately call Xava. The phone rings and rings, ultimately going to voicemail. I know there's a good chance she could be asleep right now, and my dumb ass told Rolando to go enjoy Corfu for the night. His boyfriend came into town, and I wanted to make sure they could both go out and get some dinner. While I don't want to ruin his evening out, I'm going to need help.

I shoot him a quick text message and let him know I need him back at the villa as soon as possible. Within a few moments, he calls me, and I'm walking to my car. I answer my phone as I get inside and start my car, knowing damn well he's going to want me to explain the situation.

“I need you to tell me everything,” Rolando states, sounding as if he's in a rush, too. Yep, that's a natural instinct for you.

“I got a call from my brother, followed by a text message that said he needed help. He then sent me his location, and I drove like a bat out of hell to get to the

hotel where the pin was. Only Linus wasn't here at all. I called Linus, and he acted like he didn't know anything that was going on. I don't like this, Rolando. I have one hell of a sick feeling, and I'm racing back to the villa now."

I mean it, too. I'm driving faster than I think I ever have in my entire life. Leaving Xava alone wasn't my preferred choice, but I thought Linus was in trouble, and of course, I was going to race and go to him. If something serious was going on, I wasn't going to leave him to deal with that by himself. There was no choice. I had to go.

Now, I feel like an idiot because I left Xava by herself. After what happened with Ruslan's plane, I should know to be more careful... but I figured my father stopped his dumb games. Now I'm not so sure. Why would anyone send me texts and call me under the guise that it was Linus' phone other than to hurt her in some way?

"Fuck. I'm on my way. Meet me there," Rolando states before he hangs up the phone.

I continue driving like a maniac until I finally pull up in front of the villa. Most of the lights are off inside, but through the front door, I can see some illumination from the piece of glass above the door.

I use my key and push the door open, grabbing my gun from the back of my pants and holding it in front of me. I drop my key back in the pocket of my pants and scan the area, assessing the situation. Nothing seems to be out of place, and it's eerily quiet.

"Xava, where are you?" I call out, still feeling like something isn't right. I can't put my finger on it, but I have a gut feeling.

"We're in your bedroom, sweetheart," a woman's voice calls back to me, but it isn't Xava. I think I know who it is... but I can't be too sure.

I walk through the villa and enter the bedroom to find Xava on the bed and Zoe sitting in a chair on the opposite side of the room. She has a gun pulled out, aiming it right at Xava. “What in the fuck are you doing here?” I ask Zoe, having a hard time holding back my anger. I know if I act too furious right now, I might inadvertently put Xava at more risk. I have to be careful with how I speak to Zoe, even if I don’t want to.

“What do you think? I’m getting rid of your little fucking problem.” Zoe drags her eyes up and down Xava, who’s sitting on the bed. Her hands are shaking, and I know she’s absolutely terrified. “Your father and my father already set up an arrangement. One that will benefit my family greatly. I’m not just going to let you ruin it because you think you’ve found yourself something special. Look at her... could she really be special? She’s pathetic. She’s weak. She is nothing.”

“You’re telling me Xava is all those things, but it’s quite the contrary. You’re weak for not standing up to your father. You can’t honestly say that you want to marry me, Zoe. From what I heard, you have a little boy toy in Spain you visit every couple of weeks. Has that changed?”

Zoe rears her head back in surprise like I shouldn’t have known that information. “How do you know about that?”

“I have eyes and ears everywhere,” I comment, looking at Xava briefly before I turn my attention back to Zoe. “What was the plan? Were you keeping him, or did you cut him off completely?”

“We created an arrangement so I could make this marriage work.”

I lick my bottom lip and nod. “Did you think I’d really let him live if we were going through with this? That I’d let you slip off and fuck your little boyfriend while we were married? No. I would’ve visited him and ensured he

suffered a slow, miserable death. Why is it you want this marriage to go through so badly, Zoe? There has to be some sort of reason.”

“My father is ruining the Drakos name. In doing so, he’s taking me down with him, and I don’t want to be part of a sinking ship. I need to become a Galanis. It’s the only thing that will protect me. The only fucking thing. He’s turning our people against us, and if I’m a Galanis, I think the people will see I have seen my father’s bad ways and made my own choice to leave it and him behind in a sense.”

“You and I both know this isn’t going to work. You don’t just get to come here and try to kill my girlfriend or even threaten her, for that matter. I understand the position you’re in, Zoe, but do you realize what you’ve done?”

“I need to get out, Ambros. Please, I can’t stay there... I can’t be taken down by what my father plans to do. He will be the death of me.”

“You’re going to bring death right to your doorstep, not your father,” Xava says out of nowhere, looking right at Zoe.

It’s almost like Zoe forgot she was here. “Sorry, what?”

“You came here threatening to kill me, waving a gun around in my face, and you expect Ambros to help you? That’s insanity right there.”

“You wouldn’t understand. Underneath the surface, Ambros is a great man, and if he’s so sure about marrying you, then he has no other choice but to help me. I was thrown into this engagement because of our fathers. The least he can do is help me get out of it or find something better.”

“It’s not my responsibility to help you at all.”

“Yes, it is.” Zoe scoffs and rolls her eyes.

“No, it isn’t. Especially after you said you might keep me around just to torture me, then let me go at some point.” Xava looks right at me. “She said she’d wait around until I was happy again and then pick my children off like pigs going to slaughter. That she’d slit their throats right in front of me.”

What kind of sick person says these sorts of things?

Zoe is looking right at me, completely distracted by what Xava just admitted to me. In that time, Xava lunges for Zoe. She grabs a sharp crystal from the bedside table and slams it down on her forehead as soon as Zoe’s on the ground. I rush over and grab the gun from Zoe’s hand so she can’t fire it at us. Luckily, I’m able to free it from her grip... but as I’m doing so, I watch Xava slam this crystal down on Zoe’s face over and over again.

The first hit must have taken her out because she hasn’t moved since. I give Xava a minute, but Zoe is gone. She isn’t coming back, and she isn’t ever going to hurt Xava or anyone again.

I place a hand on Xava’s shoulder in an attempt to bring her back to reality. “Xava, it’s okay. You’re safe now,” I whisper lowly, wanting her to know everything is okay. She’s okay, and she needs to believe that.

Her hands tremble, and she drops the bloody crystal on the ground. Falling back against the bedframe, she begins sobbing. “I... I d-don’t know w-why I just d-did that.”

“Yes, you do. She was a threat to your life, and you know it. Zoe wasn’t going to walk out of here anyway. The only way she was leaving was in a body bag, just like she will now.”

The front door clicks open and closed, and a set of feet rushes toward us. Rolando appears in the doorframe of the bedroom and looks down upon the bloody sight

before us. His eyes drift to Xava, and concern washes over him. “Is she hurt?”

I shake my head. “No, she’s okay. She’s just in shock from everything that’s happened,” I explain, and Rolando nods.

“I take it we need a clean-up crew.”

“Yes. Do you mind calling one? I need them to keep this very quiet. We can’t have anyone know that Zoe Drakos is dead, especially by our hands.”

“Say no more. I’ll make sure discretion is crystal clear to the team.” Rolando doesn’t know that what he’s said has great significance right now, but my eyes lock with Xava’s.

I don’t think anything could be more crystal clear than it is right now.

Hopefully, with Zoe’s death, it means that our enemies are limited, and we can live in peace. Knowing how our lives go, I doubt the serenity will last long term, but I pray it does.

All I want is peace with Xava.

I know it’s all she wants, too.

Epilogue

Xava

Ten Years Later

“Phoebe!” I holler in my closed café. She’s running around like an absolute lunatic, chasing her little brother, Cosmo. Phoebe just turned eight, and Cosmo will turn five in two months. If they don’t keep me on my toes enough, I know the twin girls in my belly will. Ambros and I really wanted to have three children, but getting pregnant this last time was difficult. So, we went to a fertility clinic and did two rounds of IVF. The first round resulted in a miscarriage before six weeks. By the time the second round happened, I told them to put two eggs in to increase our chances. Little did I know that both of the eggs would actually stick.

Now, Eleni and Astra will be here a few weeks after Cosmo’s fifth birthday. I’m pretty sure we’re done after these two make their grand entrance, but knowing Ambros, I can’t be too sure. He’s always talking about wanting to have more children, but I think I will convince him that we should adopt. I might only be thirty-one, but this pregnancy has been the hardest on my body by far. It could be because I’m carrying twins, or it could be the mere fact I’m getting older. Regardless, it’s something the two of us need to discuss after the girls are here.

“Mom, Cosmo’s the one being a little turd. He won’t stop chasing me around or pulling on my shirt. Look, it’s going to get stretched out!” Phoebe reminds me far too much of myself. She has my hair color and complexion but her father’s beautifully captivating dark hazelnut eyes.

We're currently in Grozny for the next couple of weeks, and my café has gotten its first major upgrade in about eight years.

I look right at my son and kneel down so he knows I mean business. "Why are you chasing your sister around like a little warrior, hmm?" If I approach him this way, I know he will react much better.

Phoebe huffs, likely not happy about how I speak to her brother, but she can get over it. I'm the parent here, not her.

"I... I thought it would be fun." Well, his answer is good enough in his eyes.

"Well, it might be fun for you, but it isn't for Phoebe. It's also not very nice to be tugging on her shirt and antagonizing her, is it?"

Cosmo's eyes flash with joy as I talk about what he just did, but at least he's smart enough to agree with me. "No, it isn't. Mama, I'm sorry."

"You need to apologize to your sister, not to me," I state.

"I'm sorry, Sissy," Cosmo murmurs and looks down at the ground.

"It's okay. You're a brat sometimes, but I still love you."

The door to the café opens, and I'm about to turn around and tell whoever it is that we're closed, but to my surprise, it's my husband. "I didn't know you were going to stop by," I say with the biggest smile on my face.

"Yes, well, I wanted to check in and see how our little heathens were. To see if they were driving their mother up a wall yet. To me, it looks like they have been."

"Papa, I haven't done anything. I promise. It's all Cosmo!" Phoebe's quick to point the finger right at her brother.

Ambros chuckles, and I have a hard time hiding my smile. “See, my intuition is always right.”

The door to the café opens again, and I whip my head around to see who it is. Surprisingly, it’s Karim and Adlan with Nika and Sasha, who are their younger sisters. Nika just turned eight, and Sasha’s second birthday party is this upcoming weekend. I don’t see Amelia or Ruslan with them, but Danill walks in right behind the children. “Where are your parents?”

Karim shrugs. “I don’t know. They’re arguing in the car about something. Told us to come inside.”

I invited my brothers, sister, and all the kids over to taste the new menu at the café and let me know how they enjoyed everything. We open back up tomorrow, and I’m really excited. The business has never done as good as it has been. I’ve been able to open up cafés across the world in Grozny, Mykonos, Sicily, Hong Kong, London, Paris, Barcelona, Sydney, New York, Atlanta, and Los Angeles.

Eset and Santos are flying in with Meryem, Nadia, and Zlata within the next hour or so. Nadia is seven, and Zlata is four. Eset is pregnant right now with a little boy, and Santos is overjoyed. She’s made it very apparent that this pregnancy is going to be her last, and I don’t blame her one bit. Pregnancy is no joke.

I’m sure in no time, Lom and Emily will be here.

The kids all go over to mine, and they sit in a cushioned corner booth near the back. It’s crazy to think that I came into this family when Karim was just a little boy, and now he’s a teenager. Time flies by, and it will only continue to do so as we’re all getting older. I think having kids makes the time go by faster, too.

Amelia and Ruslan end up coming inside, my sister-in-law seeming very annoyed. She goes right over to the children and greets them all, not even saying a word to

me. I don't understand what's going on, but Ruslan sighs when he comes up to Ambros and me. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I've just pissed my wife off... so I'll be kissing ass for the rest of the day."

"The kids know you two were arguing," I point out. For the most part, whenever they do bicker, Ruslan prefers it behind the comfort of closed doors, and I totally understand that. I don't think it's their job to have to deal with adult things. Ruslan and Amelia would never split up, but they do fight a little bit. It's only been since Ruslan's been traveling a bit more for work lately. A couple of smaller issues have required the head of the family's attention, and we recently had a conflict with another up-and-coming arms dealer. He's young, but he's cocky too.

Ruslan's going to end up crushing him like a bug, and we all know it. I think that Amelia is just getting worried that something bad is going to happen to Ruslan, which is completely understandable. I do think she sometimes forgets how deadly he is and that he knows his way around weapons better than anyone else in the world.

The door opens again, and in comes Lom, Emily, Sierra, Kolson, and Niklaus. Niklaus is the baby of their brood, and he's only four. Sierra, though... she's practically a grown woman now. I'm so grateful that we've all been able to come together over the years, and we make it a point to raise our kids together so they can be close. I was never close with my siblings growing up, and that's the one thing in the world I wish I could have changed. Our children won't have the same experiences. They'll know that they're part of an amazing family unit.

"You need to make it a point to be home more, Ruslan. She probably feels like she's doing this alone." I keep my voice quiet so no one overhears me. Ruslan has been around for the most part, but in the last couple of months, he's been dealing with business-related issues.

It's not like Amelia doesn't understand. She does, but I know she misses my brother. It's like he always makes time for the business and the kids but is pushing her to the back burner. There are some hard-core relationship issues right now, and I just know that they will work things out soon. All they need is a little time together and some communication.

“Actually, take Amelia out of the country for a week. Ambros and I will watch the kids. You need to go and be with your wife.” I stare right into his eyes because I want him to know how important this is.

“Xava, I can't ask you to do that.”

“You're not asking. I'm telling you what's happening, so you're going to do it.” I get firm with my brother, and Ambros chuckles.

“Fine.” Ruslan smirks and shakes his head.

Ambros digs into his pocket, and his phone is vibrating in his hand. I figure it's work, so I'm not surprised when he takes it and walks away... but his face drops as he's on the phone, and he looks right at me. He's only on the phone for a couple of minutes before he hangs up and puts his phone back in his pocket.

He walks back over to where Ruslan and I are, letting out a pent-up breath. “Linus called. My father passed away a few minutes ago.”

Over the years, Ambros and his father could never repair their relationship. Ambros was supposed to be getting the Organization, but it never happened. Their father handed it over to Linus, who then gave Ambros a big part of it. Their father was furious when Linus included Ambros, but Linus made it crystal clear that Ambros busted his ass for years and deserved a piece of the pie. All that happened a few years ago, right after Phoebe was born. I feel awful for him because I know he

cared for his father. Even if they didn't have the best relationship in the world, he still loved him.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart." I grab onto Ambros' hand and hold it, giving him a reassuring squeeze so he knows I'm here for him.

"It's okay. It's been a long time coming. My father has been dead to me since after Phoebe was born, and he never wanted to see her. I should have cut him off after he didn't show up to our wedding, and I'm sorry I didn't."

"Your relationship might have been strained, but he was still your father. I'm so sorry for your loss, Ambros," Ruslan states, and Ambros nods, accepting his condolences.

"Xava, we're about ready for everyone to try the small bites. Eset, Santos, and their children will be here in about an hour, right?" Matilda, my Grozny shop's manager, asks me.

"Yes, in about an hour or so. Should I get everyone seated?"

"Yeah, that would be amazing."

I nod, and Matilda goes into the back of the café. "We'd better go sit down. We're about to have some delicious new treats," I tell the group of adults and the few children around me. The kids run over to where Amelia and the rest of their cousins are.

This is what life is about—being as happy as you can for as long as it's possible. There's only one thing I'm missing here, and that's my best friend, Yara. She'll be here to visit next week, and I can't wait to spend some time with her. She flies back between France and here, but she's been spending a bit more time in France lately. I wonder if she's met a Frenchman, but I can't be too sure.

It's just crazy how much time has passed and how things have changed. In the beginning, I felt like I didn't belong in this family, but I've never been more wrong. I've only ever belonged here, and I'm so glad I took a leap of faith to get to know them. If I never had, I never would have met the man of my dreams or had my beautiful children.

* * *

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