

GUZUN
BRATVA



BOOK 4

ANDREI



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LINZI BASSET

ANDREI

The Guzun Bratva Book 4



A Dark Mafia Novel

By

Linzi Basset



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ANDREI: THE GUZUN BRATVA #4

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Contents

[Author's Note](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Blurb: Zafira](#)

[Excerpt: Dominant Nature](#)

[Books by Linzi Basset](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Stalk Linzi Basset](#)

Author's Note



Dear Reader,

The Guzun Bratva family is wrought with enigmatic members. Some were taken into the heart of the matriarch, only to betray the trust she had in them. This is Andrei's story—the man who Zafira took in as a son and the one who broke the heart of her daughter, Vanya.

Andrei Balan

Once upon a time ... too many stories start with those words—fairy tales, all of them! So, who would've thought that mine fell into that category? Not me, the now-undisputed Pakhan of the largest and cruelest Bratva in Russia.

For years, I was mastered by puppeteers. I played their game. How else? It was the only way to achieve my goal. The time has come to rewrite history and finally take charge of my own life. No matter who ends up as collateral damage—even her, Vanya Guzun, the only woman who could have made me happy—under different circumstances, and at another time, in another place.

Vanya Guzun

And they lived happily ever after ... only fairy tales ended with those words. Once, I thought mine would too, until *he* died. Or rather, he faked his own death. Fate played the Joker card and turned my life into a living hell.

No more. It's time to take control of my own life. Andrei Balan, aka Smirnoff, my once true love, made himself my worst enemy. Two can play the game. I know just how to even the playing field.

Amid a raging Mafia war that shook the entire EU, these two people struggled to survive. With the fragile shard of trust shattered between them, would hate pave the path to their future?

In the end, only one thing mattered...

Who will survive the wrath of a man finally taking control of his own destiny?

This series must be read in order because if you think you know how it's going to end... you're wrong.

I sincerely hope you will enjoy this story.

Warm regards,
Linzi Basset

Prologue



The wedding day of Arian Guzun. Ferma La Guzun, the residence of Zafira Guzun, nestled on the banks of the Dniester River, Dubasari, Moldova...

“It seems I missed the *I do* part of the wedding.” Derision drowned out the tinge of regret in his voice. His eyes were as cold as the Arctic wind and as sharp as a sword’s edge. They remained fixed on Arian Guzun through the scope of the XS1 TrackingPoint sniper rifle.

“Trouble in paradise already, Pakhan?” He snorted, paying little attention to the man striding purposefully toward the bedroom where his newly acquired wife had disappeared moments earlier.

The man was not his target.

“Oh no, I have something much more entertaining in mind for you.” An ominous Cheshire grin crept across the assassin’s face as he stared at his target through the scope. “As for her, she’s the perfect catalyst to accelerate the war. No more procrastinating, Guzun.”

Having arrived during the ongoing ceremony, he occupied his time by observing the proceedings through the scope. His gaze was momentarily diverted by a low-level bridge leading to the driveway of the house. An

insatiable investigator by nature, his mind wandered, pondering how many bricks were used to construct it and how the imperfect blocks of clay had come together to create a resilient structure that had withstood the test of time. His eyes scanned the golden-yellow surface, appreciating the variations in hue, some parts appearing more earthen brown. In his imagination, the water flowing beneath represented an immortal, fluid vein of the planet—guarding the entrance to the Guzun’s nest.

“*Destul!* Get your mind back in the game,” he quietly cursed himself for wasting time on such trivial matters as he returned his gaze to the grand mansion. Guests were gaily celebrating the union of the happy couple with music and dance. “How quaint to celebrate such a farce, or how say I, Arian?”

Not everyone was enjoying the reception—the target he was there to eliminate was one of them. Unfortunately for her, that was a judgment error. First, she segregated herself from the masses, setting herself up as an easy target. Next, she gave in to emotional distress rather than having fun at the reception—worse, she forgot to pay attention to potential dangers.

“Isn’t there a saying that one should savor every moment of life, as you never know when it might end?”

Or was that his philosophy?

“Yeah, you should’ve drowned your sorrows with the overpriced bubbly, danced, and had some fun because your moment has come.” His finger curled into the trigger guard, briefly caressing the metal before locking onto his target through the scope. “You make it so easy, *Comare.*”

There was a time when he was known as one of the world’s deadliest assassins. Tapping into the mindset that had earned him that accolade, he cleared his thoughts with his gaze steady as he watched the elegant woman walking toward the window. At this moment, she meant nothing to him. Any

emotional connections they had once shared were now severed. No empathy softened the icy gleam in his eyes as he observed her wiping tears from her cheeks.

“As you sow, so shall you reap,” he grunted, his words eerie amid the hummingbird’s cheerful chirping overhead.

The slight hesitation before he squeezed the trigger wasn’t deliberate, but in that brief moment, the outcome of his mission was unintentionally altered. The birds continued to twitter, undisturbed by the soft click and whirr as the bullet left the rifle’s barrel.

He released a slow exhale as he watched the impact forcefully propel the fragile woman off her feet. Grimly, he witnessed her hurled against the wall like a ragdoll before crumpling to the floor.

By the time she fell, the disassembled rifle was stowed in its case. Unhurriedly, as if without a care, he mounted the hidden dirt bike, kick-started it, and sped away. A smug smile played on his lips as he glanced back toward where he had just come.

“Now, the real war begins.”

Chapter One



Current day.

Six weeks later, Medpark International Hospital, Chisinau, Moldova...

Awareness, being mindful of her surroundings regardless of the situation she was in, had been ingrained in her since she was a little girl. In her opinion, it was an essential tool for every human being. Over time, she honed her skills and knew how to anticipate and react to potential dangers or opportunities, and in doing so, she made informed decisions. Using those senses was the best weapon and defense mechanism for man. Some had a better grasp of using it to their advantage. Others failed miserably, and because of that, they found themselves caught in undesirable situations.

Her entire life, she had been trained and prepared for the unexpected. Nothing ever unsettled her—well, if it did, no one would know. An untenable ability to hide her thoughts behind a mask of indifference or feigned joy had been both her strength and her weakness.

Confidence fueled success, but too much of it led to downfall.

Exactly what had happened to her.

She had been exposed, compromised in a power struggle no one could have foreseen. It was also the reason why she was stuck in a hospital bed,

swathed in bandages like a mummy.

She was weary of the charades, the pretense of playing dead, of keeping her eyes closed. If not for one man, she would have been dead. She wasn't sure if her suspicion was correct, but if it was, it was a man she had believed to be a betrayer. Now, she owed him her life.

How fucking unfair is that?

Cognizance surged as her body reacted to the external stimuli. She was immediately on alert. Keeping her muscles relaxed with her eyelids unmoving, she appeared as a lifeless figure.

Movement.

She was no longer alone.

“You’ve become quite skilled at feigning being a comatose woman, *Comare*.”

At the sound of that familiar voice, shock coursed through Zafira like electricity. It threatened to unravel her composure. However, years of rigorous emotional control proved to be her saving grace at this critical moment. She lay perfectly still, not allowing a muscle to twitch in response to the tide of emotions flooding her heart and mind.

“Ah, so that’s your game,” he drawled near her ear. “You intend to continue this charade of comatose. Rest assured, I’m not fooled.”

What’s he doing here? Did he come to finish the job he botched, or are my suspicions correct about him? Her heartbeat quickened, a wild symphony of anxiety, surprise, and disillusionment, but her face remained inscrutable. Every fiber of her being urged her to react, to confront the owner of that voice, but her unwavering discipline held her in check.

“No, *Comare*,” he said, as though reading her thoughts. “I’m not here to kill you. To the contrary, I came to ensure you remain alive.” His tone turned somber. “I tried getting to you earlier on the day you were shot, but

you were surrounded by people the entire time. If I hadn't followed you to your room, this conversation would be taking place at your graveside."

Zafira's face concealed her inner turmoil and hid any hint of a frown that threatened to surface. She delved deep into her memory, desperately sifting through the fragments that might explain her presence in this hospital room. Yet a painful void gnawed at her chest.

Like so many times before, vivid flashes of the events leading up to this moment raced through her mind. She recalled a relentless pursuit that had driven her to seek refuge in her bedroom, away from the turmoil in her life. It was a chase through the corridors of her mind, like a storm threatening to tear her apart. For the first time, flashes of a conversation echoed in her memory, shedding light on how she had ended up here in the hospital.

"When did you turn into a martyr, Zafira?" Bogdan's voice carried a hint of sadness, which was a perfect complement to the expression of disillusionment on his face. "You have always known Viktor was no saint, but by God, if there's one thing he never would've done, it was fuck you over with another woman." He shook his head. "What he did was done in a moment of weakness that defined his drunkenness. He would never have consciously been unfaithful to you. It was over forty years ago. Viktor was my best friend, and you..." His eyes turned dark as he straightened his shoulders decisively. "The woman I have always loved. How could I have broken your heart by disclosing something I know he would never do if he hadn't been piss drunk?"

"Because I trust you with my life, Bogdan! I always have, and because I... because I... Blyad'! Just get out of my sight. I don't want to see you. You're darkening my mood, and I won't allow it. Not today when I'm supposed to celebrate my son's marriage."

“I’ll go, but know this, Zafira, I will not accept the blame for your husband’s mistake.” He leaned closer until she could feel his breath on her lips. “Nor will I walk away from you. I will always be your protector. Not even you will prevent me from doing my heart’s duty.”

“Stop it!” Zafira’s voice turned as frigid as a winter’s breeze. “Don’t you get it? I don’t give a fuck about your... your heart’s duty or your... your supposed love! You betrayed my trust, and for that, I’ll never forgive you.”

With her posture rigid and unyielding, she strode away. Head tilted back in a manner that exuded regal grace, her demeanor was as impervious to emotion as a statue, a façade that masked the turmoil within her heart. Deep inside, emotions waged a ferocious battle. Bogdan had been the one man she had always trusted without reservation. So much so she had allowed him entry into the most sacred chambers of her heart—a trust that now felt like the deepest betrayal.

That was what hurt the most. That he had betrayed her heart.

The pain she felt was unlike anything she had ever experienced. It wasn't the physical wounds that stung but the emotional laceration that cut deepest. She forced herself to banish all thoughts and concealed her desperation beneath a usual veneer of sophistication as she navigated the crowd of guests with forced composure.

Her surroundings went unnoticed as she struggled to keep the tears at bay, an unfamiliar sensation for Zafira, who had never been one to cry. She yearned for solitude, a place where she could release the torrents of pain cascading in her chest.

“Thank God,” she sighed as she closed her bedroom door moments later. Kicking off her shoes, she walked toward the window. The trickle of tears on her cheeks felt cold, colder than any winter snow that had ever touched her skin—a perfect companion to the chill in her heart.

“I was such a fool to have believed I could find happiness again. Love and be loved. I should’ve known—”

A sudden intrusion disrupted her thoughts as the door clicked closed behind her a second time. As she turned to see who dared invade her privacy, a powerful force pushed her off-balance. If not for already being twisted in movement, she would surely have ended up on the floor.

“What the fuck—”

The words were cut short as something struck her with brutal force, flinging her against the wall. Her chest felt as if it had been torn apart, and she struggled to breathe.

Collapsing to the floor as her legs gave way, panic surged through her as she fought to comprehend the sudden, horrifying reality.

I’ve been shot. God, no. I’m not ready to die. I can’t leave things between Bogdan and me like...

But the black void of unconsciousness wrapped around her like a cocoon and dragged her from the living into a dark abyss.

Someone had been in the room with her—and that person had saved her life. How could everything be so insanely crazy all of a sudden? She hated this man for all he had done to her family, to her little princess. Now, all of a sudden, it seemed she was beholden to him.

Hold on, Zafira. How do you know it was him in the room? Sanity intervened and stopped her from acting impulsively. He could very easily have been the one who shot you. Obviously, he would’ve seen someone arrive to push you out of the way, right?

The room was shrouded in silence, broken only by the sound of her controlled breathing. She remained frozen, wrapped in layers of apprehension and resolve. Her subconscious mind was right. She had no way of knowing.

At the time, she hadn't seen who her benefactor was. Uncertainty gnawed at her as a stark reminder that her fate still hung in the balance. For all she knew, he was here to do just what she feared... to finish the job.

"Hmm, good," he murmured as he paged through the reports in her patient folder. "It seems the wound has closed properly and is healing very well." He checked her pulse. "A bit fast, but it's to be expected since you don't know if you can trust me. Either way, you're well enough to be transported. The only reason you're still here and alive is because Arian has this place locked up like Fort Knox." A chilling laugh filled the room. "Not that it stopped me from getting inside." His voice turned dark. "Worse, it wouldn't keep your assassin out, especially since he's such a trusted friend of the family."

Zafira banked that last bit of information for further scrutiny later while she suppressed the desire to open her eyes and scream for help when she felt him remove the monitor connections from her arm. She knew him well enough to know he had planned this extraction to the last detail. He wanted her out of the hospital, and nothing she could attempt to do would keep her here. It was best to preserve her strength until a more appropriate opportunity presented itself to escape his clutches. More so, she needed to find out exactly what he was up to.

Zafira Guzun was adamant about keeping her children safe, even if it meant she had to give up her own life to do so.

"We'll have to move fast, so please keep your body stiff. I don't want you falling off the bed if I need to start running and dodging bullets."

Their exit from the hospital was surprisingly smooth. It irked Zafira. Whenever they were approached, he was addressed as a doctor, which meant he had taken pains to establish a presence in the hospital over the past weeks. That he had gone to such lengths to get her out of there caused fear to ripple

down her body.

For all she knew, she was about to live the final few hours of her life by staying quiet and playing comatose.

Blyad! I've played right into his hands.



A luxurious lakeside house at Valley's Lake, Codru, Moldova...

How he had become entangled in such a convoluted mess was beyond his comprehension. Life had briefly been idyllic and seemed to be heading toward a happily ever after with the woman he loved at his side.

Until fate intervened.

“Fate, my ass. The fucking devil is more like it.”

You know the saying blood is thicker than water? Yeah, it was a no-brainer. But nobody ever mentioned that you had to roll over and take a screw job from your own flesh and blood. Family’s supposed to have your back, right? Love you, look out for you—not manipulate and exploit you for their personal agenda.

Andrei Balan, aka Andrei Smirnoff, had learned that lesson the hard way. The past year had been a crash course in life’s hard truths. One of them was that you couldn’t escape your roots, no matter how fast or far you ran. So, the decision to abandon the man’s name he had believed to be his father was an easy one. Taking back his birth name suited him better. He was Russian, after all, and what better way to stand tall in his skin than to admit his lineage by using his family name, especially at this crucial time in his life?

It was a pity it came with the reputation of a murdering son of a whore as an uncle. Yet in the grand scheme of things, it was precisely the path he, as Andrei Balan, had walked his entire adult life. Still, over the past year, as he fulfilled the role his uncle had forced upon him, he had shed more blood than he had in his entire career as an assassin for the Guzun Bratva.

Regret and anger held a stranglehold over him ever since he had learned the truth from his uncle about who his biological father was. He had initially found solace in letting the beast inside him, the one true to his cruel familial ancestors, run rampant—that of a ruthless killer.

At least acting out that way had rid him of one of the emotions that had been strangling him at the time—regret. The past, with all its mistakes and missteps, had been irrevocably sealed, locked away in the annals of history. Besides, Vanya Guzun no longer deserved his regret. He had broken her heart, yes, but to have killed the only family he had left was the one thing for which he couldn't forgive her. It didn't matter that he no longer harbored any love for the man; blood was blood, and he was the one who had taught Andrei how to stand on his own two feet since he was a boy.

If only he could latch onto something to channel the anger that churned inside. He needed to, quickly, so he could start thinking clearly.

“Case in point of my fucked up mind,” he mumbled while gazing at the woman lying on the bed. Why he had even bothered bringing her here was a mystery beyond him. Yes, she was innocent and never knew that Viktor, in a drunken stupor, had fucked another woman at his bachelor's party. In all of this, she'd become as much a victim as he had. Nonetheless, she was a Guzun, and that put a target on her back.

“*Da*, she doesn't deserve to be punished for her fucked up family's decisions.”

Da, just like you have been for yours.

Andrei dismissed the persistent voice in his mind. Accepting his true nature and identity had been a personal reckoning he had confronted long ago. The years between getting close to the Guzuns had been a respite from the darkness that was Janos Smirnoff.

Of course, at first, he had been oblivious to who the Guzuns truly were, viewing them merely as players in his uncle's grand scheme to ascend to the pinnacle of criminal power. Janos' ambitions had extended beyond just the Bratva. He'd aimed to command not only various Mafia factions but to unite them all under his rule, a hybrid role he had scornfully named the *Phacapo di tutti phacapi*.

Initially, Andrei had scoffed at his outlandish ambitions, until he returned home and witnessed the staggering expanse of Janos' influence over the criminal underworld. His uncle had already assumed the mantle of leadership, and all that remained was the final piece of his master plan to secure his place as the supreme ruler of global crime. That was the sole reason why he had remained in Russia and assumed the role his uncle believed he had been preparing for his entire life.

Now, that weighty mantle to attain that goal rested squarely on Andrei's shoulders, whether he desired it or not. It was a daunting choice—he, the reluctant heir or Janos' faceless partner, a power-hungry man, known only as Gareth Sanders, who wanted to destroy everything good in the world.

Vanya Guzun included.

His gaze shifted back to Zafira.

“Time to wake up, *Comare*,” he muttered in a measured tone. “We both know you're not in a coma anymore and haven't been for weeks. Frankly, I don't have any patience for this charade.”

Her eyelids fluttered briefly before reluctantly opening. The vibrant azure of her eyes sparked with fury as their gazes locked in preparation for a

fierce confrontation.

“Just what the hell am I doing here, Andrei Balan?”

“Andrei Smirnoff, *Comare*. I suggest you remember that name. I’m not the man you remember.”

“You don’t need to remind me,” she mumbled as she struggled upright, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. “Come, help me stand. I’m feeling shaky since I haven’t been on my feet for over a month.”

He was at her side in a flash, having always had the greatest respect for the regal woman.

Despite her tough exterior, she had a soft heart for those she loved. Until he had broken her daughter’s heart, he was one of those she cared to protect and love.

“What am I doing here?” She glanced around to fix her eyes on the tranquil lake through the window. “And where the fuck are we?”

“Where we are is irrelevant. I brought you here to keep you alive.”

“Gmphf. For all I know, you’re the one who put me in the hospital in the first place.” She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t for a second think I’ve forgotten your promise, Andrei... to kill us all.”

“You’re wrong. I never promised that. It was just your daughter and only because she murdered my uncle.”

“That bastard deserved what he got.”

“Maybe he did, but none of you realized the time bomb you activated by killing him.”

“What are you talking about?” Her eyes bore into him. “Janos is the one who caused all the problems. Now, he’s dead.” She frowned. “Except if you took it upon yourself to take over where he left off and take the Red Bratva beyond its borders.”

“What do you know about that? No one knew just what he had been

planning. I didn't even know until he forced me to go back to Russia.”

“I thought by now you would've learned that I know all and see all, Andrei. I'm disappointed you forgot just who and what I am.” She shrugged. “Besides, he was freely boasting about his plans during my abduction not so long ago. Or did you happen to forget that little shitshow?”

“No, I didn't, but as I said, none of you realize what you did by killing Janos Smirnoff.”

“So, why don't you tell me, Andrei?”

“For one thing, your daughter, Vanya Guzun, has become the sole target of every assassin out there, and believe me, the bounty on her pretty little head is so fucking big, they are swarming like hornets into Moldova as we speak.”

Chapter Two



AVV Airpro, chartered cargo service, based at Chişinău International Airport, Moldova...

“Isus Hristos! Get your goddamn nose out of my ass, Arian. You and Vadim are worse than a giddy proctologist eager to test a new anoscope! Blyad’! I’ve had enough of your meddling.”

“As long as you keep coming to work fucked up on dope, my foot will be so far up your ass, you’ll be wearing diapers for the rest of your miserable life.” Arian clamped a hand around her upper arm as she stumbled over her feet in an attempt to escape her two brothers’ scrutiny.

“Destul, Vanya,” Arian recoiled as an involuntary belch smelling of vodka exploded from her mouth.

“Ah, fuck!” Vadim reeled back. “You reek of booze and stale cum. Did you spend the night getting completely fucked and drunk on a bottle of vodka?”

“One bottle? You obviously don’t know me very well, dear brother,” Vanya smirked as she finally made her way to the chair beside Vadim and fell into it. “At least a couple is more my style.”

The petulant tone and surly expression said it all and conveyed a

sense of disillusionment and a lack of faith she now had in humanity. If she wasn't family, it might have been amusing, considering the Guzun Bratva weren't known for their magnanimity when crossed. Especially Vanya, who had such a mean streak she had been crowned *La Mafiosa ne plus ultra* from a young age.

The atmosphere in the room was tense as the two brothers locked eyes in a moment of shared concern. Their sister was coming off the rails.

The Guzun family had been through the wringer the past couple of months. With their mother, Zafira Guzun, in a coma after a failed assassination attempt, they were all struggling to come to terms with the reality of her condition. Vanya, in particular, had relapsed into old habits—boozing, partying, and using drugs. Her own culpability had gouged out a hollow since she believed that if not for her allowing Andrei into her heart, she could have prevented the tragedy that had struck their family.

However admirable of Vanya to take full responsibility for the catastrophic events, her reasoning was based on a theory that veered away from reality. Her belief that she could've somehow prevented the attack was so abstract, it resulted in overlooking the more significant factors at play. Her convoluted theory caused her usually sharp mind to ignore the danger they were all facing.

That mortal threat was personified by Andrei Smirnoff, now the Pakhan of the Red Group, the most feared and ruthless Bratva in all of Russia.

"Podvin' eto, Arian. Why am I here? I have a lot of shit to do, not sit around and listen to the two of you lecture me all fucking day."

"Then stop acting out and wallowing in your own shit," Vadim barked angrily.

"Ydy do bisa, Vadim!"

“Hell is already way too crowded for my taste, particularly since you’re roaming its hallowed halls 24/7.”

“*Ot’ebis, Vadim!*”

“Enough! Both of you.” Arian’s bellow cut like a knife through the room, causing Vanya to jerk in fright. “Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he growled as she promptly started hiccupping—a habit from when she was little, which was always triggered when she was suddenly startled. “Here.” His voice softened slightly as he handed her a glass of water.

“Thank you,” Vanya mumbled as she took a few sips to calm the tickle in her throat.

“I’ve let you be, Vanya, but enough is enough. You’re not only making a fool of yourself, but you’re also tarnishing the family name.” Arian shot her a warning look as she opened her mouth to respond. “You know how much pride our mother has in the Guzun family’s status in Moldova. Do you honestly think you’re honoring her with your behavior?” He steepled his fingers in front of his chest. “For that matter, have you even bothered to visit her in the hospital since she was shot?”

“For what purpose?” Vanya spat. “She’s been in a coma in case you’ve forgotten. Knows fuck all about what’s going on around her, right? So why waste my time?”

“Indeed, since you’re so caught up in your endless pity party about being cuckolded, you couldn’t give a shit about the woman who would give her life for you.” His eyes turned glacial. “Who, in case you missed it, nearly did. It’s only a miracle that she survived the assassination. The surgeon said if the bullet had been half a centimeter to the left, she would’ve died instantly. Is that what you would’ve preferred, Vanya? That she was dead so you could continue with your self-destructive lifestyle, playing the drama queen, the victim in this fucked up mess?”

“*Blyad*’, Arian,” Vadim protested. “That’s a little harsh.”

“No, it isn't. It’s the truth, and it’s time our little sister owns it. Yeah, Andrei Smirnoff fucked her over, but he’s also the bastard who shot our mother. *That* is what we should be concentrating on, not her broken heart.” Arian glowered at her. “Get a fucking grip, Vanya, or I’ll have you institutionalized in a rehab to dry you out.”

“You wouldn’t fucking dare,” she sneered.

“Really? Keep this fucking up and find out.”

Emotions had now become so stretched as to be beyond the point of repair. Vanya sulked with her arms crossed and refused to meet her brother’s stern gaze.

“Look at me, Vanya,” Arian demanded. When she refused, he strode forward and grabbed her chin, forcing her bloodshot eyes to meet his icy glare.

“I’m only going to say this one more time to get it through your thick skull. Get yourself together, or I will fucking wring you dry myself.”

“You fucker!! Get off me!” Without dropping her blazing glare, she gripped the pinky finger of his hand clasped on her chin and bent it back, threatening to snap it at the base.

“Goddamn! YOU BITCH!”

“You can’t control me, big fucking Bratva Pakhan. I’m gonna do this my way,” she spat.

Arian’s eyes flashed dangerously. He leaned in close, his imposing frame towering over her.

“Our mother was nearly killed. Yet here you sit, drunk and high as a kite instead of hunting for the attacker. You have become *weak*.”

Vanya jumped up, her eyes flashing as she clenched her fists in anger.

“How dare you? I am not weak! I will fucking kick your balls up your

ass for saying that. Fuck you. Fuck you twice! You know how much I love our mother. I want that bastard to pay for what he did to her more than you do.”

Arian stepped even closer, leaving barely an inch between them. His stare bore into hers relentlessly.

“Then prove it. Honor her by avenging this insult to our family. Need I remind you that *your* Andrei Balan is no more, Vanya? He has fully morphed into Andrei Smirnoff. As bad, if not worse, than the man who raised him. He never loved you, and he proved it by trying to kill our mother.”

A fierce and unyielding flame glowed hot for a long moment in her gaze, which smoldered dangerously. Then suddenly spent from the fight as the truth sank in, she averted her eyes with her shoulders sagging in surrender. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but she couldn't deny that her brother was right. She needed to muster the strength within her and pull herself together.

“Fine. You win,” she acknowledged bitterly. “I'll dry out. I'm sorry I broke your finger.”

“Never mind. It's not broken... I don't think.” Arian stared at his sister, quickly searching her face, then nodded and stepped back to relinquish the space he had occupied during the intense confrontation.

Vanya had learned through hard-earned experience not to challenge his unwavering determination, especially when the family's well-being hung in the balance. It was a silent acknowledgment of the unspoken rule—when it came to protecting the family, Arian's resolve was ironclad, and Vanya would not dare challenge it.

“Better yet, check into rehab,” he said as he sat back down. “The quicker you're back to your normal self, the better.”

“I'm not going to a rehab center.” She shook her head as Arian's hard

gaze swung in her direction. “I’m not a novice at this, big brother. I’ve done it before; I can do it again. Besides,”—she smiled wryly—“Bogdan has been on my back about cleaning up my act as well. Like in the past, he’ll be all the help I’ll need in ditching the detour I took back to my bad habits.”

Bogdan Rusu was like family to the Guzuns. He had been their father’s best friend and fulfilled the role as advisor to the Guzun Bratva for as long as they all remembered. After Viktor passed away, Bogdan remained the advisor and became their mother’s protector. He, more than anyone, blamed himself for her almost getting killed.

“Then it’s a good thing Bogdan’s here today,” Arian drawled. “He can take you home and start detoxing you immediately.”

“The trust in this family is so heartwarming,” Vanya said with dripping sarcasm.

“Trust has to be earned. It’s the one lesson Dad taught all of us on the first day we were indoctrinated as Guzun Bratva members. I, for one, live by it. I would’ve expected you did, too.”

“*Destul*, Arian. Just stop the sermons. You’re giving me a headache that has nothing to do with the narcotics in my bloodstream.”

“Just get your ass home. The fumes you’re releasing every time you open your mouth are making me nauseous,” Vadim cut short another drawn out debate between his siblings. A razor-sharp glare at Vanya when her head swung his way was enough to warn her she was on thin ice, which said a lot since Vadim was the one who hardly ever lost his temper with her. “Just go. I already phoned Bogdan. He’s waiting in the parking garage for you.”

“What about my car?” Vanya lamely tried to put up a last fight.

“One of the men is going to drive it home, so you can relax. Your precious car is safe.”

As Vanya made her unsteady way toward the door, Arian’s cell phone

rang, shattering the tense atmosphere that had enveloped them. She steadied herself, doing her best not to stumble. Her mind was consumed by thoughts of what had brought her to this point.

“Fuck me,” she scoffed as she caught her reflection in the glass door of the conference room. A crimson bloom of embarrassment spread across her cheeks. The sight was disheartening. It was only then, as she stared at herself, the true extent of her disheveled appearance became painfully apparent. The fact that she hadn’t even realized just how awful she looked before coming to the office was a stark testament to how deeply she had fallen into a state of despair.

“*Yebena mat!* Why didn’t either of you tell me just how fucked up I look?” She pointed at the door. “*Iisus Khristos*, I look like shit!”

“Good. At least recognizing it is a step in the right direction. Hopefully, now you’ll do what is expected from you,” Vadim said. They were both startled when Arian bellowed loudly into his cell phone.

“*Blyad!* How the hell did that happen?... When?... And no one saw anything?... Fucking heads are going to roll... Just shut up! I don’t want to hear any excuses. You are all fucking fired!” He was already striding toward the door as he ended the call.

“Get your ass home, Vanya. I need you to dry out within a couple of days. Vadim, let’s go. Mother has been abducted from the hospital.”

“What?” The cry came in a chorus from Vadim and Vanya, then she exploded. “I’m not going home. I’m coming with you.”

Arian turned on her like a raging bull.

“Go. Fucking. Home. I need your mind clear and sharp. Do you hear me, Vanya? That is the *only* way you’re any good to me, to us, and to our mother. Now. Leave! Go fix yourself. I don’t want to see you until you’re *you* again.”

Vanya couldn't recall Arian ever being this angry with her. She wracked her brain but drew a blank. His anger was on a whole new level. He was seething, and if it weren't for his obvious concern about Zafira's disappearance, she had a hunch he might have slapped her to drive his point home.

As it was, she didn't need any physical reminders. Right there and then, she grasped the painful truth he was laying out. In the whirlwind of the past six weeks, and in the state of despair she was in, she potentially could endanger them all.

"I'm going. I'll clean up, big brother. I promise." She followed them to the elevator. "What about Bogdan? He should know about Mom."

Arian and Vadim looked at each other. A silent agreement passed through them.

"No. Keep it quiet for now. Once we know what happened at the hospital, we'll tell him. I don't want him tearing through the hospital like the Spanish Inquisition on a rampage to find who took her." Arian frowned. "Only her private guards, the allocated hospital staff, and we knew she was in a secure ward at that hospital. If anyone starts raging about her disappearing, it could potentially put her life in more danger."

"She's been abducted, Arian," Vanya snapped. "I'd say her life is already in danger."

"Cut it off, Vanya," Vadim cautioned in his usual calm tone. "We need to keep this quiet until we know more. You know how protective Bogdan is over Mother. He would literally tear down the walls of that hospital to find her. That would most definitely deter us from finding whoever is behind this."

"I'm so sick of the two of you constantly mansplaining the error of my ways to me, Vadim." She tossed her hair defiantly over her shoulder—her

action one of a completely sober woman. “Bogdan should know because he loves Mom, for no other reason. Yeah,” she scoffed at their surprised looks. “Even after I mentioned that fact numerous times over the past month, you still didn’t grasp just how deeply he cares for her and that it goes way beyond that of being her protector, did you?” She ran a trembling hand over her eyes before glowering at them. “We all know who is behind this! Who else but the bastard who shot her?” Her lips curled as she spat the name out in disgust.

“Andrei fucking Smirnoff!”

Chapter Three



Club Extaz, Chişinău, Moldova...

“*De dragul dracului, Vanya! Where are you?*” Bogdan’s voice thrilled through her ear the moment she answered his call. The three Guzun siblings owned two BDSM clubs. The first, Club Expressions in Dubasari and this one, Club Extaz. She preferred coming here when she needed a sadist she could manipulate into easing her tension.

“There’s no need to get your boxers in a twist, Bogdan. Wait for me at my house. I’ll be there in an hour or two.”

“What? And leave you to dry out by getting shit-faced? Not happening on my watch. You better tell me where you are, young lady. If I have to come look for you, it won’t end well.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Just calm down. I’m not going to touch liquor. I just need to take off the edge. Otherwise, I’m gonna fail before I even begin.”

“Master Spider is ready for you.” Vanya nodded at the club’s receptionist, who had gone to check if he was available to accommodate her request for an erotic whipping. Her attempt to mute the phone was too late, as Bogdan’s explosive response confirmed.

“You’re at Club Extaz? *Blyad*’, Vanya! Are you insane? Do you have any idea what Arian will do to you if he finds out you ignored his instructions and went there instead? Why don’t you just slap him in the face?”

“Are you done scolding me? I told you I didn't come here to get drunk. I just need a session with Master Spider, then I’ll—”

“You’re not getting it. Put your fucking ass in a cab, right this minute, and come home now before Arian shows up. You know as well as I do the moment you step inside that club, someone will alert him of your presence.”

“No, they won’t.”

In a feeble attempt to intimidate her, a torrent of invectives burst from his mouth only to subside into a humiliating trickle. He knew she was right. As a submissive, she was well-liked at the club. Most of the Doms and Masters would give their eye teeth to score a scene with her. Tattling to Arian was not in their best interests.

Vanya listened impassively on her end of the phone. There was nothing. Silence. It was her cue to impugn his patriarchal-infused outburst.

“Well... that was quite the tantrum. Are you feeling better, Boggie? Listen carefully. Take a deep breath, then without entertaining another thought, treat yourself to a yummy lunch. If I may suggest The Cov. Great bar where you should indulge in at least two generous, nicely chilled vodka gimlets. For me, part of the allure is when that cosmic moment arrives. Not in the form of the bright flash of a comet’s tail but instead, a display of fluid dynamics. Isn’t it surreal watching in the blink of an eye as the beads of condensation expand and balloon up to collide together, then suddenly in a freefall, silently streaking down the stem of the glass to their end? Death. It almost feels sacrificial.” She exhales as if in a trance.

“A final display of selflessness. Whaddaya think? Protest or is it performance art? God! The finality of it. A kind of ephemeral beauty, almost.

Whoosh! Remember the footage of that Vietnamese monk in Saigon during the war who doused himself in kerosene then set himself alight? Whoa. No way to unfuck yourself after seeing that.”

Ignoring Bogdan’s strangled mumbling, she released a tingling laugh.

“Okay, I’ll be home soon.” With his furious protest still ringing in her ears, she hung up.

With long strides, she made her way toward the dungeon where Master Spider, the Training Master, stood waiting for her. A delicious shiver shot down her spine as she watched the loop of his whip let out a loud crack as it accelerated past the speed of sound. The resulting ‘sonic snap’ slapped the hard granite walls of the dungeon with a sharp echo.

The dexterity of Master Spider’s artistry was legendary among the cognoscenti of the BDSM world. He was considered a magician with a whip. That he was also a sadist only compounded the manic enthusiasm from the inevitable throng of devotees who would show up and cause a crush to witness his genius. His reputation for being able to read the unique emotional psychology of a sub and indefinitely maintain her pain/pleasure threshold to bring her to the apex of a sustained mental and physical euphoria brought out the most starry-eyed practitioners from every corner of the globe.

Those who made the pilgrimage were at once awestruck and envious of the few who were rewarded with a scene with the Master. Vanya had joined those chosen few who became favorites. His exquisite methodology was exactly what she needed. He would be the Part A of a bipartite solution.

“Master Spider,” she said as a way of greeting. “Thanks so much for fitting me in while you’ve got a training group waiting.”

“I have a couple of assistants who can continue with the class,” he said, unsmiling as he watched her with narrowed eyes. “So, you wish to receive an erotic whipping?”

“A hard masochistic whipping, yes.”

“You do realize I am a sadist, Vanya. If I agree to this, what you’re asking for is exactly what you’ll get. There will be no mercy from me.”

“Good. It’s exactly what I need.”

A smile of anticipation lit up her face, which slipped momentarily as a vision of Andrei with the whip in his hand soured her mood. He was the true whipping Master and knew exactly how to make her scream without brute impact from the leather.

Get the bastard out of your head. He’s not worth your tears.

No kidding, bitch, especially since he’s your brother!

Fuck off! He’s not my brother.

Apparently, DNA testing said otherwise.

Vanya shut out the annoying voice of her subconscious mind, fully aware of the truth it carried. It was precisely why she had been relentlessly searching for something, anything, to pull her back from the precipice that had loomed before her for months. She had teetered perilously close to losing all control.

Excruciating pain would loosen the relentless grip of sorrow and loss that held dominion over her every waking moment. She needed to relax her mind and reach a level of euphoria that could release her from the relentless pull toward the abyss.... even if only momentarily.

“Very well.” He gestured toward the Saint Andrew’s Cross. “If that’s what you want, I need you naked.” He called over a club coordinator who was busy cleaning equipment. “Sub Willow, please rub oil over Vanya’s body, then strap her in.”

“I don’t need to be tied up. I’ll be fine.”

“If that’s what you prefer.” Master Spider continued his meticulous practice snaps as she quickly undressed. Standing quietly under Willow’s

hands as a layer of oil was spread all over her skin, she could feel the tension inside her begin to build.

“That’ll do,” Master Spider said. “Get on the cross, please.”

With feet spread wide on the step-ups, she pressed herself against the diamond-shaped leather padding in the center of the cross and grasped the large O-rings above her head.

“I’m ready, Master Spider.” Vanya held steady, quietly waiting for the first brutal strike against her back. She shivered as she felt a warm presence behind her.

“Really, sub?”

“Yes, Master Spider.” Now electrified with anticipation, a hot spasm tore into her loins to rip open a seam bulging with lust when she felt the hiss of his whispered words light her up.

“Good. I know you want it hard and hot, right?”

“Oh, yes, Master Spider. Pleasure with a dose of pain so profound, it will blow my mind.”

“I assume you listened to what I said earlier and know what to expect?”

Vanya didn’t blame him for checking with her again. Everyone at the club knew she was very selective with who she played. More so, unless she could control the scene and the Dom, she wasn’t interested. Although she had loved tipping the scales into a certain level of masochism with Andrei in the past, it wasn’t her preference, so she never indulged in such scenes. Sadist Doms were the kind she resolutely avoided.

“Yes, Sir. I’m ready. Whip me hard.”

“Hold tight. We’re about to start, but first, I’m going to give you a light flogging to bring the blood to the surface and heat your skin. We don’t want to leave any bruises, right?”

“To the contrary, Master Spider. I wouldn’t mind bruises. Lots of them.” Her voice lowered. “A cut or three would be even better.” When he didn’t respond, she looked at him over her shoulder. “So, why waste time heating my skin? Just let it rip.”

“Interesting,” he murmured as he watched her with darkening eyes. “I might be a sadist, Vanya, but I am first and foremost a Dom. You are not going to control this scene. It will be done my way or not at all. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Sir. I apologize for my forwardness.”

“Even though I’m a sadist, I refuse to push you past your own level of endurance, no matter how much you beg me to. I’ve been a Dom long enough to know that what you’re after isn’t pain to achieve utmost pleasure. You’re after brutal punishment. If it was justified as part of a club misdemeanor, I would gladly comply, but now, here, as an erotic whipping, although I can promise you mind-blowing pain, I will know when you’ve reached your limit before you do. I won’t push you too much past that point. Knowing that, do you still wish me to continue?”

Master Spider brushed his hands over her hips and traced her breasts as he spoke. Vanya relaxed as a wave of heat flushed through her veins. She leaned against his chest as he rolled her nipples between his fingers.

“Oohmm, yes, Master Spider. I do. Let’s continue.”

He stepped back and started hitting her with smooth strokes against her skin. She shivered as he added soft brushes with his palm in the wake of every strike, awakening her nerve endings more with his sensual touch. The intensity of the strokes increased, steadily becoming a burning sting.

“Ah, yesss,” Vanya hissed as she slowly relaxed into each kiss of the leather against her skin.

“That should do it.”

“Ohh,” Vanya moaned as he brushed his hands all over her back and buttocks, then slowly ran a finger between her labia.

“Hm, I see someone is getting a little excited already. You shouldn’t relax this quickly, my pet. Believe me, you would do well to wait to release the tension until the pain becomes too much to bear. That’s when you’ll experience the best rush of pleasure.”

That said, he tossed the flogger to the club coordinator and picked up his single tail whip. Vanya breathed in deeply as she studied the tool in his hand. The rolled leather strap started wide at the end of the short handle and ended in a flexible piece of nylon cracker cord. She knew it was a high-impact tool since it looked similar to the one Andrei always used. With it, a Dom could control how much or little pain he wanted to deliver.

“Now, the real fun starts.” Suddenly, Master Spider’s demeanor changed as he rolled his shoulders and snapped the tail in rapid succession several times while he closely watched her. The sadist was ready to step into play. For the first time since she had walked into the club, Vanya wasn’t sure if she was truly ready for this. Her emotions were in such turmoil that she didn’t know her own mind half of the time. Perhaps coming here had been a mistake.

Grow some balls, Vanya. You know why you came here.

Yes, I know, but I’ve never done a masochistic schene with anyone but Andrei.

Forget the bastard. It’s because of him that we’re here. So, either grow some steel nuts or run.

I’m not running.

Then stop fucking crying about what you’re doing and take the whip.

Regardless of the pep talk, as unrewarding as it was, Vanya flinched with each sharp crack behind her.

“Oh,” she gasped as the tip of the whip struck. Her body jerked, even though it was no more than a whisper against her skin.

“What is this?” Master Spider approached her and frowned darkly. “You’re as tense as a vanilla sub receiving her first whipping.”

Vanya forced her muscles to relax but couldn’t stop chewing on her lip. He fisted his fingers in her hair and forced her to look at him.

“I need your mind in this scene. Right here, in this moment, with me. If you’re chasing ghosts in Neverland, it ends now, or we stop.”

“No! I’m here, I promise, Sir. Please continue.”

Master Spider stepped against her back and caressed her stomach. “Very well, but I’m not stopping to warn you again. Allow your mind to wander, and the scene is over.”

Vanya moaned as he lazily brushed a finger over her clit and pinched a nipple. “It won’t.”

“Good. That’s what I want to hear.” Stepping back again, he didn’t warn her that he was starting. All she heard was the soft swish sound of the whip, followed by a sharp sting against her thigh.

“Aww!” Vanya was becoming impatient as Master Spider continued to whip her but kept the impact just below the brutal strength she was after. She knew why. Even a sadist needed to feel a connection with the sub. It was the reason why he kept interrupting the strikes with gentle, arousing stimulation of her clit and painful pinching of her nipples. It did what he intended. She was wet with lust crawling all over her lower body.

“More, Master Spider. Harder! Give me what I’m after, damn you!” Eyes blazing angrily, she tossed her hair over her shoulder as another mediocre—in her opinion—strike connected with her buttocks.

Unbeknownst to her, the intensity of the whipping had increased exponentially, and red welts crisscrossed her back, buttocks, and thighs. In

her current state of mind, she wasn't aware of it. All she knew was the pain in her heart superseded the pain she expected to feel from the whipping. She needed it the other way around.

I'm fucking tired of drowning in these feelings. I want them gone. He needs to whip them out of me!

“Very well, but be warned, once I go down this route, I'm not stopping, so if you want out, you better scream red.”

“Good! Then fucking do it.”

“No, that's not going to give her what she needs.” The gruff rebuke that rumbled from the big man's throat, who had been watching silently, sparked awareness through Vanya's body. Her eyes narrowed dangerously as she stood as though plastered to the cross. No matter how much she wanted to attack him, for some unknown reason, she couldn't move.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” she sneered through clenched teeth without turning to face the very man she was there to obliterate from her mind.

“Saving you from embarrassing yourself, it seems.” Andrei's voice sounded grim and filled with disappointment.

She refused to allow it to upset her.

Before Vanya realized his intention, he walked closer, yanked her off the cross, and disregarding her struggles, had her hands bound to the pulley chains of the whipping platform that hung from the rafters. Next, he spread her feet wide apart with a steel bar and locked them into the O-rings on the floor.

“*Blyad'*! Untie me, you fuckface! Now!” Her protest came too late as her muscles finally followed the directive from her brain.

“I'll take it from here, Master Spider,” Andrei said as he took the whip from him.

Even though everyone at the club was aware of the conflict between Andrei Smirnoff and the Guzuns, he had been a good friend to them all. Master Spider was also aware of the intimate relationship they used to share. If there was one person who knew how to obliterate the demons swirling inside Vanya, it was him.

“Maybe you should,” he acknowledged and then looked at Vanya. “I’m not the one to give you what you need, Vanya. You knew that when you came here.”

“Don’t you fucking dare leave me with him! Arian will have your head for this. The fucking bastard—nogmmpfh!”

Her relay ended in a muffled curse as Andrei pushed a ball gag into her mouth and strapped it behind her head.

“I believe it’s a hard, erotic whipping you’re after.” His warm breath teased her cheek as he pressed his hard body against her. She stiffened as his palms feathered over her nipples, and they immediately turned as hard as rocks.

Her mind exploded in protest.

He’s my goddamn brother!

I thought you said he wasn’t.

It doesn’t matter. He’s a bastard. He kidnapped my mother. I don’t fucking want him!

Your gushing pussy says otherwise.

Shut the fuck up.

Chapter Four



“So, this is what you do when your mother ends up in the ICU ward, half dead after nearly being assassinated. Why am I not surprised? You always were a selfish bitch.”

“Phffgu,” she tried to curse around the gag. The smirk on his face wasn’t exactly the payoff she had hoped for. Enraged and humiliated, she jerked against her restraints. It was evident he got a perverse pleasure to watch her struggle, naked and in vain. Proof of the black thought of laying the whip into her back as she writhed against the lash was visible in the pulses of hot blood careening into his burgeoning knob that swelled under her regard. To him, this must be all too delicious.

Blyad’! How can I even envision the treat of him pushing into my soft, wet bits.

“So, you wanna be punished? Well, I am at your service and would be more than happy... thrilled, in fact, to give you a thorough flogging.” She hissed as he brutally pinched her nipples. “A sample of what’s in store for killing Uncle Janos.”

Andrei was an expert with the whip, his skill so perfected that a sub would curl up in agony from the first lash. Not because he used brute force,

but because he controlled exactly where he wanted their emotions to go without allowing them to slip into subspace.

“It seems you need to be reminded, Vanya, about the difference between being whipped by a sadist and that of a true Master. Flagellation is my *métier*. It is my sole province.”

Biting her ear, he chuckled when a low cry escaped her throat.

“I love that taste and the sound it makes. Do you miss it as much as I do? Never mind. I’m getting ahead of myself. May I just say what a lovely surprise, even though we find ourselves both occupying this familiar and necessary arrangement.”

Honey is loathsome in its own deliciousness, as you very well know, you prick.

She glowered at him as he responded, as if he could read her mind.

“So true. If ever there was a human trait so indulgent in its expression. An extravagance to supplement my mood because I am feeling so gluttonous tonight. Do you want to surrender to yours? Are you hearing me, Vanya? I mean, how serendipitous this meeting.” Andrei studied the familiar landscape of her body. “Who in their right mind would waste this opportunity? Here we are... again. So, let us begin with the hope that we may slowly dance together, unreservedly, in a ballet, according to our own needs and rhythms. What could be more natural?”

Vanya’s tortured groans came in measured beats that fell in sync with each lash of Andrei’s whip. Apart from the two players, not a soul was there to experience the melodic scene. The labored grunts behind the delivery of each intricately placed strike were answered in kind with a gasp as each lash bit hard into supple flesh. It was this unchoreographed, jagged duet that came to repeat itself in an endless, syncopated loop as the instrument of the source kept time with its corresponding echo, back and forth, and over and over, and

over, again and again, with each and every cycle spliced seamlessly on top of the preceding one. With exquisite depth of knowledge and discipline was borne such a revelatory and masterful display in all of its searing beauty.

A shot of adrenaline dumped into her blood supply to power up her nervous system, was like high octane fuel spilled onto an afterburner. It felt like a runaway freight train racing through her chest.

She knew exactly what was coming and how it would impact her emotions—veering in a direction entirely opposite to where she was aiming for.

Andrei stood like a statue, watching her with hooded eyes, then ran his finger down the center of her chest.

“I’m disappointed, Vanya. I really am. You always were a strong woman. It seems you’ve grown weak.”

She blanched and yanked viciously on the chains as her eyes sparked with hatred. Hearing that word directed at her a second time in one day infuriated her.

“Ah, now that’s more like it.” He laughed as he patted her chin. “Still have a little spunk left in you, I see.”

The look of pure evil that glimmered in his eyes caused fear to unravel inside her and churn riotously in her stomach. The words he had snarled at her the day she had shot Janos Smirnoff flashed through her mind.

“Mark my words. I will take my revenge. You. Will. Die.”

Vanya stood resolute. If this was why he was here, then so be it. She would face her fate as she lived her life—a testament to confronting challenges head-on, embracing them with fierce resolve. Without so much as a blink or the faintest twitch of her muscles, she met his gaze squarely, her eyes speaking volumes even as her lips remained sealed instead of contradicting his statement.

The initial shock of his unexpected arrival had faded, but a myriad of unexplained emotions remained. Apart from the zing of arousal she always felt in his presence, an intense desire burned within her—to see him on his knees, begging for mercy before she extracted the retribution he was due for what he had done to her mother... and the wounds he had carved into her own heart.

Andrei moved methodically around her, keenly observing the taut contours of her form. A faint shiver, born deep within the recesses of her spine, began to ripple through her. His unhurried, deliberate steps disconcerted her and made the air around them feel as though it was infused with an eerie intent.

Just start already! The words seared through her mind. Within, a volatile cocktail of fear and anticipation mingled and created a turbulent storm of emotions that threatened to consume her from the inside out.

He stepped back, drew the whip quickly away, then brought it down in a sharp strike against her inner thigh. The sudden change in focus came as a complete surprise. Vanya gasped and tensed at the shards of pain that stabbed into her brain. A cry exploded from her chest. Although it wasn't as painful as some of the whippings he'd given her in the past, it somehow carried a message of intent.

Andrei kept his eyes on her, watching her like a hawk as he applied a similar stroke to the left thigh. Again, she cried out as the burning pain seared her mind.

Stepping closer, he ran the rough leather of the whip over the slope of her breasts.

“I suggest you pay attention, Ms. Guzun. This is only the beginning.” Lowering the whip, he tapped it against her thighs, left, right, left, right, *crack*. Once more, the whip cracked against her upper thigh, then

immediately, again, to the opposite one.

“Agghh!” The ball gag muted her shrill cry as it felt like a red-hot poker was searing her skin. With legs now turned rubbery, she clung to the chains above her head.

This was so much more than she had ever felt or experienced before. He had barely started, and she already felt like crying.

Moving behind, Andrei dragged the whip over her shoulder and allowed the tail to move across her back before applying a stinging blow to first the left buttock, then the right. She hissed as he brushed his palm over her nipples at the same time as the strikes left a streak of lava-like burns, although it was a barely-there brush that stung against her skin. He continued snapping his wrist, covering her buttocks with a series of blows that slowly increased in strength as her flesh took on a cherry-red hue.

Vanya shuddered after each blow, desperately curling into herself as the pain seared like wildfire through her nerves to scream inside her mind. As much as the pain crippled her, a surge of warmth followed that she clung to, then... *Crack!* Another scorching blow would yank her back to reality.

In an attempt to divorce herself from the emotions that ran rampant inside her, she tried to envision his demise at her hands. The picture just refused to materialize. Her frustration turned to desperation as the lashes became increasingly agonizing, forcing her to feel—not only the pain on her skin but the pain of failure that had been the cause of leading her astray. Screaming against the ball gag, she silently cursed Andrei for having the ability to tap into her tortured soul.

“Your mind seems to be wandering, Vanya. Didn’t I teach you to always pay attention to me? To always be *present* in a scene?”

Andrei’s warning washed over her. He shrugged his shoulders as she cast a blistering glare at him over her shoulder. Pulling his arm back, he

swung it forward and snapped his wrist at the last moment.

“Agghh!” The scream was torn from the depths of her soul as she thrashed against the chains.

Never before had she endured as much physical pain as she felt now, but it was all for nothing. Andrei controlled her in every sense of the word. He kept her on the edge, aware all the time, never allowing her one inch of respite so she could slip into subspace and find the emotional relief she desperately sought.

Her whole body shivered. In reality, the strikes of the whip were no more than a whispered kiss against her skin. Controlled and aimed to connect with specific nerves just below her skin that shattered her composure time and again.

The blows continued to rain over her back. She became apprehensive, as much as she was mesmerized by his graceful, fluid movements as the whip continued to snap in a blur. There was beauty in his cruelty. Watching the sensuous arc, it was like an extension of his artful mastery of the sinewed leather.

Vanya was crying and screaming in a vortex of agony that spun around her like a tornado. She looked up and searched for Andrei’s eyes, whimpering and silently begging.

“Agghh!” Another strike left her hanging weakly in the chains.

She slumped forward and leaned against Andrei as he stepped closer and gently removed the ball gag. Her dry lips brushed against his throat, and her voice sounded foreign and hoarse.

“Fuck me. Please... I need...”

“I guess you do,” he murmured as he brushed a finger over her labia to find them wet and sticky with her essence. “I would’ve thought with the number of Doms you’ve been fucking over the past few weeks, your cunt

would have had its fill of cock by now.”

“Go to... ohh,” her protest ended in a delicate moan as he slipped two fingers deep inside her pussy.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Bogdan’s guttural voice bellowing through the chamber struck Vanya like a bolt of lightning.

Iisus Khristos! What am I doing?

“You fucking bastard! Take your hands off her. She’s your goddamn sister,” Bogdan stormed closer and swung a wild punch at Andrei, which he evaded easily.

“Ah, yes,” Andrei said as he looked at Vanya with an arcane expression passing over his face. His lips curled up in a sneer. “But then again... is she, really?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” His words checked Bogdan’s next punch.

“Truth in this family has always been a gray area, hasn’t it, Bogdan?” Andrei crossed his arms as he regarded the two people glowering at him.

“Seeing as the fact Bogdan is referring to has been made by *your* family, I find that statement rather amusing, don’t you agree?” Vanya snapped. The chains clanked as she shook her hands. “Unfucking tie me!”

Andrei ignored her, but Bogdan glanced at her. His face flushed red with anger as he noticed the result of the two whippings crisscrossing over her back, thighs, and buttocks.

“*Blyad*’! Just look at her. Her back is covered in red streaks. I’m going to fucking kill you!”

Bogdan stormed Andrei. Again, he evaded him with ease.

“You might be a giant against me, Bogdan, but I’m faster and younger. Believe me, you will lose in hand-to-hand combat, and truth be known, you’re the one man associated with the Guzuns I don’t want to hurt.”

“Don’t fucking do me any favors because I sure as hell won’t spare you.”

“I understand that, but hear me well, Bogdan. *Comare* is going to need you. If I were you, I’d reserve my strength. Soon, you’ll need all of it to keep her alive.”

“So, Arian is right,” Bogdan rumbled in a deep voice. “You’re the one who abducted her.”

“Indeed.” Andrei brushed off the heated curse from Vanya and kept his gaze locked on the giant in front of him. “Something you should all be thankful for.”

“*Nenorocitul dracului!* You fucking bastard! Where is she?” Bogdan always reverted to Romanian when he was angry.

“She’s safe, and she’ll stay that way unless any of the Guzuns get in my way.” His gaze seared Vanya. “Especially her.”

Stepping around Bogdan, he walked toward the exit of the torture chamber.

“Make sure they all know Zafira Guzun’s life is in their own hands.” He turned away, the words chasing after him as he strode off. “One more thing. Tell Arian to be careful who he trusts. In this fucked up game, no one is who they claim to be.”

“Including you, you fucking bastard.” Vanya’s furious sneer checked his stride.

He stopped and turned. His gaze bore into her with an enigmatic intensity. The stare felt like it stretched into eternity, imprisoning her in a moment of profound tension. His eyes, at first shrouded in mysterious darkness, yielded to a fleeting smile that softened their stark allure. In a silent acknowledgment, he gracefully inclined his head before pivoting on his heels. The words trailed behind him, their faint echoes making them difficult

to discern even amid the silence of the room.

“Yes, Vanya, *especially* me.”

Chapter Five



Chateau VanZun Winery on the banks of the Dniester River, Dubasari, Moldova...

“Who the fuck does he think he is?!” Like a hammer to a nail, Vanya’s rage slammed into the singularity of each word as she stomped through the double doors of her villa. She wheeled around to jab an accusing finger into Bogdan’s chest.

“How could you let him just waltz away like that? The fucker skipped off as you covered. Do you suddenly tremble in the presence of the mighty Red Bratva Pakhan?”

Unfazed by the scathing insult, the imposing man gently pulled the door shut behind him.

“Your anger is misplaced, young lady.” His rebuke stole the lingering silence in the room. “Need I remind you that if you had returned home directly, we wouldn’t be having this conversation?”

“Gmphf!” Unrepentant, Vanya marched toward the bar. Seizing an open bottle of pure grain vodka, she quickly flooded a shot glass when it was slap-sticked down the polished mahogany by a big hand.

“Hey! *Blyad*’, Bogdan,” she protested. “Don’t you ever fucking do that again. That is pure grain vodka! No! Give it back to—”

Bogdan checked her right cross while dumping out the liter of Beluga vodka into the sink. His eyes flashed.

“I’m here to assist you in drying yourself out, and as I’ve been assured by your own words, you willingly committed to this process,” he said evenly. “I don’t see the point in dragging it out any longer, do you?”

“Just one final shot, Bogdan. After that bastard whipped me...” A forlorn sob escaped her lips. “I need it for strength. Then we start, I promise.”

“We’ve already begun,” Bogdan countered, his gaze sweeping over the well-stocked bar shelves. “Do I need to remove all of these, Vanya, or are you going to behave and keep the promise you made to Arian?”

With her shoulders slumping, she lowered herself onto a barstool, then winced as her sore buttocks met the unforgiving wood seat.

The abuse she sustained from the recent whippings would linger for days and serve as a painful reminder of Andrei Smirnoff’s complete indifference to the power of the Guzun Bratva. He had brazenly invaded their territory and dared to whip her. For that, he was going to pay.

And I’ll make damn sure he suffers greatly. Oh, yes. He’ll be sorry he ever stepped foot in Club Extaz!

“Vanya?” Bogdan prodded her for a response.

“Leave the booze where it is, and I’ll clean up the mess. Besides, it’ll test my willpower by making me hang around a fully stocked bar. If I can’t withstand the temptation, then I’ll know I’m not ready to make the effort.”

“This time, you went overboard, Princess. It’s not going to be as easy as before.”

Cringing, Vanya nodded. Bogdan was right. The past few weeks had been a nightly descent into alcohol and cocaine-fueled debauchery in an

attempt to numb the pain and guilt she felt over the assassination attempt that had nearly put her mother at death's door. That, compounded by Arian's anger over her reckless behavior, had pushed her right to the edge. Checking out was the easy part. It was living that scared the shit out of her.

"All the more reason to challenge myself." Raising her bloodshot eyes and in a broken voice, she whispered, "I failed my mother, Bogdan. I have to make it right. I have to do this. I *will* succeed... and quickly."

His rugged face bore the marks of a life filled with challenges, but his eyes were soft with concern as he looked down at Vanya.

"I'm happy that you came to your senses and are ready to face what you've been running from. You can't drown your guilt in alcohol and drugs forever. Your family needs you, and most importantly, your mother needs you."

Vanya turned her head away, unable to meet Bogdan's gaze. The memory of Andrei Smirnoff's betrayal and his attempt on her mother's life haunted her every day. No matter that she didn't believe him to be her supposed half-brother. She had given him her love. She had trusted him. In the end, he shattered her heart.

The gnawing guilt she felt for not seeing through his lies and the pain her mother suffered as a result had been so debilitating, she began to spin out of control.

The assassination attempt on Zafira's life was payback for Vanya killing Andrei's uncle. If not for that, her mother would be in good health and not lying in a coma somewhere.

"Arian gave me the responsibility to ensure you go through the rehab process and dry out at home," Bogdan continued with a voice that was gentle but firm. "We can't have the Guzun Princess wallowing in self-pity and addiction. It's time to face your demons, Vanya."

Fighting back tears, Vanya started trembling. She had always been the strong-willed, no-nonsense woman in the Guzun Bratva who never took any prisoners or showed weakness—ever. Now, she was crumbling under the burden of her own emotions and guilt.

“Arian needs your help, now more than ever, especially with the resurgence of a territorial war among the Bratva groups. We don’t have weeks to do this, Vanya, and although I know this is not what you want, it’s needed.” He hesitated briefly. “I arranged for a medical team to come in and assist with your recovery.”

“No! I told you I could do this by myself. With your help, I’ll—”

“It’s non-negotiable, Vanya. It’s already been done. They’ll be here in the morning. Until then,”—he smiled grimly—“I’m afraid I’ll have to lock you in your room.”

“I’m not an errant child, Bogdan, and I refuse to be treated like one.”

“That’s not the point. Your withdrawal symptoms are going to hit you hard and fast.”

“I’ll be fine for the first couple of days,” she said in a clipped voice.

“No, you won’t be, and you know it. The way you’ve gone around the bend the last four weeks, drinking and snorting coke every fucking day... you’ll be kicking like a mule for a fix.”

“Don’t come crying to me when your precious medical team ends up with broken noses, Bogdan.”

“Yeah. We factored in your violent behavior. You’ll be restrained if necessary.” One eyebrow curved upward in a perfect complement to a derisive sneer on his lips. “You’re still not getting it. Didn’t you listen to what I said, Vanya? We knew from the beginning this would get ugly very quickly, so this is what’s going to happen. You’ll be administered hourly adrenaline shots in addition to being put on a detox cocktail drip that will

clean out your system within a couple of days.”

“You’re not fucking serious.” Vanya cringed just thinking of how much worse this was going to be. The physical agony of detoxing from drugs and alcohol was excruciating during a normal rehabilitation process. Speeding it up would physically exhaust her when withdrawal symptoms took hold. It would feel like her body was betraying her with every tremor and every wave of nausea. Worse, it would exacerbate the emotional turmoil raging through her.

“You should know me well enough by now to realize it’s not something I would joke about.”

“You are not going to fucking tie me to the bed, Bogdan. I will not allow it!”

“I’m afraid you don’t have a say in the matter. I have the mandate from your brother to get this done.” He crossed his arms. “I will not fail the Guzun Pakhan.”

“Heaven forbid that any of us do,” she muttered.

Ever since Zafira had been shot on his wedding day, Arian had become a changed man. He had always been stoic, but now he had emotionally withdrawn himself from everyone around him. His demeanor became even more harsh with the complete absence of any compassion for anyone... not even his bride.

In fact... least of all for her.



Farma de Pasari, Arian’s livestock farm, on the banks of the Dniester River, Dubasari, Moldova...

Arian leaned against the door frame of the bedroom, captivated by the sight of his wife, Izolda Sidorov, meticulously brushing her hair. It was an intimate moment, one that allowed him to appreciate her timeless beauty. Despite the encroaching milestone of turning forty, Izolda retained a youthful allure and enduring elegance that seemed to defy the relentless march of time.

A rock-solid confidence exuded from her that belied the hardship of being incarcerated in a Russian prison.

Unfortunately for her, that torment is about to start again. She betrayed me... for the third time. This time, she will pay the price... to none other than me.

“Whoring yourself up, I see.”

He reveled at witnessing her wince as their eyes clashed in the mirror. Amusement curled his lips as he watched a bloom of red patches populate her cheeks at the insult.

The silence between them stretched as she refused to indulge his desire to spar with her. It didn't deter Arian as a dissonant quiet emerged that clearly plagued Izolda's patience.

“How much longer is this going to continue, Arian?” Izolda finally gave in to the unhappiness gnawing at her. Her hand trembled visibly as she placed the brush down on the dressing table.

Arian suspected it was a sign of suppressing her anger more than anything else.

“We've been married for months, yet I've been sequestered to a separate bedroom, only to see you when you come to claim your... how do you put it every time? Ah, yes, your conjugal rights.” Defiance glimmered in her eyes as she tilted her chin higher. “When you do bother to come here outside of those times, it's to insult me. What kind of pleasure do you gain

from calling me a whore?” Her eyes turned cloudy. “Especially when you know it’s not true.”

“Do I? Remind me, my dear wife, who was the one speaking to another man on our *wedding* day? The same man, to this day, whose true identity and location you refuse to divulge?”

“How many times do I need to tell you this? I don’t know! I’ve only ever communicated with him by phone.”

“Of course, how could I forget? Except, as I told you many times, I don’t believe you. That call came at the exact time my mother got shot. You knew I would follow you, thereby taking me away from my family. If not for that, I would’ve been there to ensure my mother was safe. No, my dear wife. You and your dear Garreth Sanders colluded to get me out of the way so she would become exposed.”

“That’s ridiculous! How on earth do you deduce that she would’ve left the reception directly after you did?”

“Because she was there to support me. Throughout the ceremony and the reception, Mother stayed by my side—rather than my bride, who chose to run off and chit-chat with another man. My mother ensured I was happy and everything was running smoothly. That was what had kept her from falling apart. The moment I left the reception, so did she. If I had remained with the guests, she would never have left my side. No, Izolda. You knew. You knew all too well how the scene would play out. You, more than anyone else, realized how vulnerable she was at that time since she struggled with the news about Andrei’s parentage.”

“Arian, please, let your anger go and think clearly. I told you about Sanders because it was the right thing to do, and I needed to be honest with you. Why would I have done that if I was in collusion with him? What in God’s name would I have gained by warning you about him if, by doing so, it

could have jeopardized whatever he was planning?”

“Since I am an expert at trading with ghosts and phantoms who aren’t what they seem, this entire situation screams a setup. So, no, I don’t trust you.” He smiled grimly. “I never did, and here’s the kicker, Izolda. Knowing you and Sanders were planning something, there was only one way for me to stay in control and be ahead of the game.”

“And what was that?” Her body had turned as stiff as a board except for her hands, which visibly trembled.

“Why, I thought you already put two and two together, my dear wife.” This time, the smirk on his face was all evil. “I married you, of course.”

“No!” She shook her head in disbelief. “We love each other. That’s why we got married. Please don’t destroy all we have worked so hard to recover after... after Boris tore us apart all those years ago.”

“First Boris, now it’s Sanders. When are you going to take accountability for your own actions, Izolda? You’re wrong. I didn’t marry you for love. Such a wasted emotion, don’t you agree?” Ignoring the gasp of disbelief that escaped her lips, his eyes took a slow gander over her body. “At least the marriage gained me one privilege. My *conjugal* rights. So, dear wife, I believe it’s time for you to do your duty.”

“No! I refuse to become your convenient whore!”

“Ah, so there it is. At least we agree on one thing.”

“No! Fuck you! I refuse to spread my legs for you, Arian.”

“Let’s not waste any time. I need a good fuck to relieve some of the tension in my body, and since you’re so conveniently ready, there’s no need for any foreplay.”

Ignoring her protests, he yanked her up from the stool and ripped off the dressing gown. With hard hands clamped on her hips, he turned her around to push her forward on the dressing table. Clutching a clump of her

hair in his hand, he forced her chin back until their eyes met in the reflection of the mirror. Like every time before, she didn't fight him off, and as always, a slash of pain ripped through him as he thought of how their lives were supposed to be. This time, it only served to increase his anger.

“Right here would do nicely, where I can watch the pleasure you gain and keep denying you get every time I fuck you.”

Fury ruled him at that moment, and he closed his mind to her whimpers as he thrust his turgid cock hilt deep inside her pussy. With a stoic expression, he watched the spark in her eyes become dim until it finally died as he continued to claim his due. His mocking laugh taunted her as her body shuddered when a climax rippled through her, which he continued to feed ruthlessly.

To his own detriment, he didn't stop to think that he was treating her just like Boris Sidorov had done, as he used her emotionlessly—a body to expunge his lust on.

It was an act that would cost him dearly in the months to come.

Chapter Six



The Koval Mafia's headquarters at Hrad Devín Castle, Bratislava, Slovakia...

“What are you doing here?” sneered Havel Novák, the Underboss of the Koval Bratva Group. His gaze searched in the dim light of the large meeting hall. No one else lurked in the shadows apart from a gray-haired man seated at the round meeting table. “We both know you have no love left for the Koval Bratva ever since Sabira Guzun became our Pakhan.”

“If you were honest with yourself, you’d admit that the current state of affairs is a farce.” Michal Bielak, ex-Communication Avtoritet of the Koval Bratva, folded his arms across his chest. He didn’t seem at all concerned that his presence had been discovered. “She doesn’t even live in this country anymore. How can any Pakhan rule their Bratva group from a distance? *Eto pizdets*, Havel, that’s what it is!”

“You hate Sabira because you blame her for your son’s death.”

“Of course, I blame her. She fucking killed him!”

“Your son betrayed all of us, Michal, and besides, she’s not the one who killed him.” Havel frowned as he wondered how Michal had breached

their underground bunker. Once he was cast out of the Bratva, his access was revoked. His appearance was troubling.

“He, alone, is responsible for getting himself killed. What happened to you? At first, you accepted his guilt and why he was executed. Then everything changed, and you vanished. No explanation, no goodbye.” He waved a hand in the air. “Now, all of a sudden, here you are. Back to blackening our Pakhan’s name and legacy.”

Michal studied his once-close friend. “It should be you.”

Havel frowned. “What is ‘it’ that I should be?”

“You should be Pakhan. You know it, I know it...” He hesitated briefly. “And everyone in the Koval Bratva Group knows it.”

“So, that’s why you’re here? To stir up some shit?” Havel shook his head. “I thought better of you, Michal.”

“And I thought you had more courage than a sewer rat,” Michal spat. “Look at you! You’ve become nothing more than the slut’s lapdog, and yet you’re here. You’re the one who is ruling the Koval Bratva on a day-to-day basis. You’re the one making the decisions, taking all the risks, while she plays whore to that bastard of a Guzun.”

“Enough! Since Sabira married Vadim, the Guzuns have added a lot of value to our organization. We’re thriving like never before. I’ve always been loyal to the Koval Family. So has everyone in this group.”

“Are they?” A sly look crossed Michal’s face. “How sure are you about that, my dear friend?”

Havel’s eyes narrowed. A sudden sense of doom filled the large chamber.

“Just how did you get in here, Michal? For that matter, what the hell are you looking to achieve?”

“Change, Havel. Change that would benefit both of us as well as

every member of the Koval Group,” Michal said cryptically.

“You’re not Koval Bratva anymore, remember? You have no power here,” Havel countered. An acute sense of being caught out raised the hair on the back of his neck. “I think it’s time for you to leave.”

“In the world of crime, murder, and mayhem, those leading the less abled should always be open to change... and be prepared for the unexpected.”

Havel’s body tensed as a low, gravelly voice sounded from the shadows behind him. A chill raced down his spine. A Cheshire cat grin stretched wide the corners of Michal’s mouth. The conversation had served as a distraction. Another body materialized out of the shadows. Havel refused to be manipulated and kept his focus on Michal.

“Well, I see you not only betray the trust we placed in you, but you also invite strangers into our midst,” he snorted disdainfully.

“Now, now, Underboss Novák, don’t vent your anger on Michal. He merely followed my instructions,” the voice droned nasally.

“So, you swapped playing the lackey from one to the other,” Havel sneered at Michal and reveled in the crimson flush on his cheeks. As a fiercely loyal member of the Koval Bratva, betrayal was the ultimate violation in his eyes, and bringing a stranger into their stronghold was the worst of all.

Havel snorted as the figure moved into vision.

“A mask? You expect me to trust a phantom cowering behind a wig, sunglasses, and a hat? How gullible do you believe me to be?” Havel’s skepticism flared as he glowered at Michal. “I suggest you take your friend and leave. Neither of you are welcome here.”

“You have one of two options, my dear Underboss Novák,” the tall man interjected. The long overcoat drew taut against the muscularity of his

arms. The confidence in his stance warned Havel that he was used to issuing orders.

“Who do you think you’re threatening here?” Havel refused to be cowed. His patience began to unravel. “Do not forget that you’re the guest, and I’m the one who holds the power within these walls.”

Unperturbed by Havel’s aggression, the stranger stated his name, “Gareth Sanders, at your service.”

Havel’s brows drew together as he wracked his memory, but the name failed to register. No doubt it was an alias. His impatience grew, and he leaned forward with narrowed eyes.

“Never heard of you,” he said bluntly, sending the message that Sanders had failed to make an impression. “Enough of this cat-and-mouse game. Cut to the chase. Who are you, and what in the hell do you want?”

“There’s a war brewing on the horizon. One that’s set to ignite between the Bratva and the Sicilian Mafia.” Sanders stated the inevitable chaos about to be unleashed. “In the end, only one can emerge as the supreme ruler. It’s high time, Havel, that you make your decision about where you want to stake your claim.”

“The Sicilian Mafia holds no allure for any of the Bratva factions, Sanders,” Havel said with contempt. He had no intention of involving the Koval Bratva in any kind of alliance. “We have no interest in your territory, nor do we covet any kind of business deal with the likes of you.” His gaze shifted to Michal, whose unease was becoming evident.

“Have you been living in a bubble the past year, Underboss Novák?” Sanders responded sarcastically. “Or is it that you’ve become so enchanted with the female Pakhan that you have failed to look beyond your own little world of power to see the war brewing?”

The blatantly unfiltered inference of being so self-absorbed as to be

incompetent succeeded only in further escalating an already dangerous confrontation. Complacency, ineffectualness, and the inability to lead in tumultuous times were viewed the same regardless of what one's business was. The usually prescribed antidote was to make a change at the top by whatever means necessary.



Gareth Sanders was a nom de guerre for a man who had come from a long lineage born four generations ago that had been forged in the crucible of the dark arts of organized crime.

From the very moment of his birth, his life was irrevocably intertwined with the global network of the Mafia. He took his first breath in an environment where secrets were the common currency and loyalty the highest virtue. For him, the celebratory clinking of glasses heralded the successful culmination of clandestine deals or the beginning of new ones.

As a child growing up in the cruel and unforgiving criminal world, Gareth's life was one of paradoxes. While the legal world condemned their way of life, within the insular ranks of his family, it was considered a badge of honor. He learned early on that the code of silence was the law of the land and that transgressions were met with swift and brutal consequences. Loyalty to the family was paramount, and betraying that trust was a sin beyond redemption.

“No one and nothing matter more than family, my boy. Don't you ever forget that.”

The voice of his grandfather echoed through his mind. How he missed him. Grimly, he forced the sadness from his mind.

Gareth's upbringing had been populated with the faces of "family" members—lots of cousins, aunts, and uncles whose appearances could be easily explained as get-togethers, whether at the beach, in the basement, or a day at the tracks. He was exposed to a world where respect was earned through power and fear, and alliances were forged and shattered in the blink of an eye. The delicate dance of power struggles became a backdrop to his childhood.

Yet, amid it all, Gareth also witnessed the bonds of family that ran deeper than blood. Loyalty and sacrifice were the norms of his world. For him, family was gold.

"One day, son, you'll come to understand that human compassion and survival are an essential part of our world. To rule, you must find a balance between the two."

His daily exposure to the peculiar work ethic, supplemented by the occasional tutorial and topped off with slices of wisdom from his grandfather, had formed the foundation for Gareth to become the best of the best.

It was because of a sacrifice his grandfather had made that led to the cruel nature Gareth inherited.

He had always adhered to his mother's unwavering demand for a life guided by principles of honor, dignity, and fairness. For as long as she had lived, Gareth remained a paragon of those virtues. But the day she died, an irreversible transformation took place. Over the past two decades, he had methodically plotted his revenge—retribution his grandfather had been denied at the hands of the very man Gareth vowed to destroy.

"First, I'll strip him of his pride," Gareth said sotto voce. "Then I'll force him to beg for mercy to keep his family alive. And finally, once he watches as they're tortured to death, I'll kill him last. Justice will be mine."

Apart from seeking revenge, realizing his grandfather's dream of

becoming the global crime lord was at the top of his list.

Janos Smirnoff had started to agitate in becoming the subjugator, believing it was his destiny. Gareth had no intention of playing that game with him. His death had been a blessing in disguise, but then his nephew, Andrei Smirnoff, inherited the coveted title.

Gareth had no intention of vying for the position of top dog in this new venture for it was he alone who had set the wheels of change in motion. He was the mastermind. There could be no doubt anywhere among anyone that it was his due to rule as the king of kings of organized crime. The sooner Smirnoff realized it the better.

“I’m not gonna make the same mistake of shooting only half his face. This time, I’ll blow the whole fucking thing off,” he muttered.

He returned his attention to the man across from him. Gareth, amused by Havel’s brewing disdain, took a seat and put his feet up on the meeting table.

“Get your filthy, fucking feet off the table,” Havel spit.

“Easy does it, Underboss,” Gareth said, as he nonchalantly examined his manicured nails. He looked up, and they locked eyes. “That, my dear Havel, is exactly the issue. Being the leader of the Bratva group is a hat that doesn’t fit you. It’s just too big.”

“I’m not the Pakhan, you—”

“No, you’re not,” Gareth cut him short and leaned back in his chair. “But, as Michal correctly pointed out earlier, you’ve been performing all the Pakhan’s functions. Any other man with half a spine would’ve taken charge long ago. It begs the question—why have you become a wimp to be bossed around by a woman?”

“*Upokoj!* Silence! You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t know me. Leave. Get out!” Havel quivered with anger.

“Not until I’ve said my piece.” With a penetrating gaze, he lowered his feet to the floor and leaned forward. “You have a choice. You can embrace what’s about to happen and join our cause, or if you’re not interested, we can fit you out with a nice pair of concrete shoes and take you deep-sea diving. There it is.”

“What in the fuck are you talking about?”

“I’m taking control of the Koval Bratva Group, Havel. That is what the fuck I’m talking about.” Gareth grinned. “And you, my dear man, are going to play a crucial role in making that happen.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“I mean to say that because of your close ties to the Pakhan and her beloved Moldovan family, you are going to make sure that none of them suspect anything has changed within the organization.”

“And if I refuse?”

Gareth shrugged nonchalantly. “You’ll be sleeping with the fish, but only after I’ve had your whole fucking family whacked. We wouldn’t want them to worry about you, now would we?”

Chapter Seven



Chateau VanZun Winery on the banks of the Dniester River, Dubasari, Moldova, Vanya's home...

As the days turned into weeks, so, too, in parallel did mindfulness bend to the weight of apathy. Vanya, once free to indulge her most reckless impulses—having done so wantonly, without regard to the subsequent physiological and psychological damage that ensued—now found herself incarcerated by the necessary requirement of rehabilitation in order to arrest her descent into the abyss of self-destructiveness.

She passed the daylight hours wandering aimlessly, unmotivated by desire, curiosity, or more importantly, the need to search her own mind for anything useful that might otherwise assist in her recovery.

Strapped to the bed, as the occasional need arose, her once rebellious spirit—which more often than not defied the strictures of normality—had become impotent as the powerful symptoms of withdrawal laid siege to her mind and body. If only her cries could dull the pain and emotional turmoil. Instead, each day was bookended morning and night by an endless routine to help her disengage and be free from the incessant call of her demons.

“It’s only been two weeks, but *blyad*’, it feels like a month. How cruel of Arian to make me suffer so much,” Vanya bemoaned her own fate as she stepped out of a steaming shower. She shivered as a draft from an open window chilled the droplets of water that cascaded down her warm body.

However much she had to endure to rid herself of the toxins, today was the first time she sensed an awakening that left her feeling refreshed.

“If Bogdan thinks he’s gonna keep me locked in here to endure any more humiliation, he’s in for a surprise. I can feel it in my bones... I’m clean now. Today is the day I rise from the ashes and start the road to reclaim my rightful position as the Mafiosa Princess of the Guzun Bratva. Let anyone dare to stand in my way.”

Her resolve hardened with each passing moment. A fire ignited within her to prove to her brothers that she was ready to turn over a new leaf. She meticulously dressed herself, slipping into a pair of snug-fitting jeans that accentuated her long legs, a crisp white silk shirt that clung to her curves, and platform sneakers for a couple of extra inches to boost her confidence. Pleased with the transformation, she took a moment to study herself in the mirror.

“How could I have allowed myself to sink so low?” she muttered in acknowledgment that this had been the worst relapse of her life. If not for Bogdan’s gentle coaxing, clawing her way back into the light would’ve been much harder.

“It’s not over. I need to stay clean,” she murmured. There was still a long road ahead, but at least now, she possessed the willpower to fend off any cravings that might threaten to derail her progress.

“Not happening again. Not ever,” she vowed with her gaze fixed on the reflection of her perfectly made-up face in the mirror. “I’m done making a fool of myself and filling my body with poison. Besides,” she added as a

shadow of guilt crept over her face. “I have the perfect incentive—finding my mother.”

Vanya wasn't naive and realized her journey to redemption had only just begun but was resolute to face whatever challenges lay ahead. As soon as she found her mother, she would once again fill her rightful place in the Guzun organization.

“Here goes nothing,” she murmured as she turned the doorknob slowly, her heart pounding in anticipation—not that she was scared of Bogdan, but it always paid to be mindful. As the door creaked open, she cautiously peered down the dimly lit hallway, half-expecting Bogdan, already hidden in the shadows, to jump out and intercept her should she try to make a run for it. The vision of this comedic skit caused such an abrupt outburst of laughter to possibly reveal her whereabouts, she quickly had to grip and clench shut her mouth to stifle any sudden urge from happening again.

She had worried unnecessarily as the early hour meant that the house was cloaked in silence, and everyone was still likely asleep.

“Hmm,” she moaned as a low growl rumbled through her hungry stomach. It had become so familiar a pang that she had learned long ago to chemically assuage it. That option was no longer available. Hunger surged through her with newfound urgency. For the first time in weeks, food took precedence over thoughts of the next fix.

“Well, here we go. Taking charge once again.” She squared her shoulders and with newfound strength, stepped onto the tiled staircase to descend with the soft click of each footfall echoing through the narrow passageway.

“Hmm, heaven is waiting,” she hummed as she approached the dining room. The tantalizing aroma of breakfast filled her nostrils, sending her taste buds into a frenzy of anticipation. At least the chef wasn't as lazy as the rest

of the people in the house.

“Ah, I love this room.” She sat at the dining table and luxuriated in the warmth of the incandescent morning light. The second cup of coffee rested in her hand, its steam lazily curling upward, while her plate was an indication of her prodigious appetite—bacon, eggs, and crispy hash browns stacked high. She savored each bite, an indulgence she had denied herself for too long.

She stiffened at the sound of approaching footsteps. Though soft, they carried an undeniable weight that set her senses on high alert. *Ugh... here we go!* She steeled herself for the impending confrontation.

“So, you finally dragged yourself from bed,” she said in a playful lilt around a mouthful of food, then nearly choked when Bogdan responded with no more than a grunt. She turned sharply to look at him. “What? No Gestapo-inspired interrogation as to Why are you not in your schlafzimmer, Fraulein? Did you misplace your whips, handcuffs, archive rod and chains, mein Herr?”

Bogdan ignored the bait and focused squarely on the buffet spread. He settled into a chair opposite her before his eyes met hers briefly as he took a sip of his coffee. The air between them was charged with unspoken anticipation.

“Why would I?” he finally replied, his tone blunt and matter-of-fact. “Arian wanted you clean in two weeks. I made sure you would be. So, if you hadn’t come down by yourself this morning, I would’ve kicked your ass down the stairs.”

She slumped in her chair with disappointment etching across her features.

“Woe to me for expecting at least a well done from you,” she mumbled.

“Not that it’s necessary, but since you seem to have developed a fragile disposition, I will.” His voice softened. “You did very well, Princess. I’m proud of you.” Within the blink of an eye, his voice turned steely. “But this time, I’m going to keep watch over you. You will not slip again, Vanya. Not on my watch.”

“Don’t worry, Bogdan. I’ve no intention of doing any such thing.” She smiled wryly with gratitude shimmering in her eyes. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Bogdan, usually a man of few words, allowed his emotions to shine through in this moment.

“For caring so much.” Sincerity colored her voice. “And for saving me from my brother’s wrath.”

“You’re like a daughter to me, Princess. I will always protect you, and if the need ever arises, give my life for you.” His deep-set eyes revealed the genuine affection he held for her.

“No! Don’t you dare say that.” Vanya’s expression shifted to one of horror. “Do you hear me, Bogdan? I will never expect you to take a bullet for me. In fact, if you ever dare to do that, I will haunt you until your dying day.”

“What a pleasant prospect.” Bogdan chuckled.

“I’m serious, Bogdan. Promise me. I’ll never be able to live with the guilt.”

“It’s not up for debate, Vanya.” His expression turned impassive, thereby signaling the end of the discussion.

“Well, then I’ll have to return the favor,” she said blithely.

“No, little lady, you won’t.” Frowning, Bogdan rose purposefully as the ringing of the doorbell prevented further discussion. “The guards at the gate know to warn me ahead of time when someone arrives.”

“If it’s one of my pigheaded brothers coming to check on me, I’m gonna lose my shit,” Vanya replied sarcastically.

“They don’t need to. I’ve been giving them daily progress reports. Arian is expecting you back at the office today.”

“Well, thanks for sharing that with me, mon capitaine!” she shouted after him.

His trusted Glock was firmly gripped in his hand as he opened the front door.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

Vanya’s heart leapt into her throat at the sound of Bogdan’s furious bellow. Without hesitation, she bolted toward the entrance hall.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” she demanded, skidding to a halt next to him.

“Well, it’s so nice to experience your mutual excitement upon seeing me,” the voice mocked the profane greeting as he studied their faces.

The overt muscular carriage of this man spoke quietly about his capacity with its subsequent effect causing a shiver to violently erupt down Vanya’s spine. That his presence provoked such a gesture of surprise from her, he decided to exploit the advantage by expressing a toothy grin, the significance of which remained unknown.

She had come to know Luciano Maranzano well enough to know that the explicit Chesire grin was a façade to mask something malignant and unforeseen.

“Regardless of the intrigue that beset my mind by the two of you running off in the middle of the night without even as much as a goodbye, I was hoping for at least a cordial hello and maybe an unsolicited explanation for your absence after all this time.”

Vanya’s irritation spiked as he spread his arms wide in a theatrical display of magnanimity.

“I’m waiting, my dear,” he continued in a condescending tone. “A

hug and a kiss will do. No? Hmm, can't say I'm surprised."

With complete disregard for the imposing figure by her side, Luciano shouldered his way past them, then strolled nonchalantly toward the dining room as if he owned the place.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Vanya said in an aside to Bogdan as they stared after him. Her fists were clenched so hard, her knuckles turned white.

"Fuck if I know."

"Do you think he found out I hacked his system?"

"Did you leave any traces of being there?"

"How do you know me, Bogdan?"

"Then that question is moot." Pointing his gun at the arch leading into the dining room, he grumbled irritably, "I guess we better join this fuckface."

"Put the gun away, Bogdan. I doubt Luciano wants to kill me in my own house, especially since the guards at the gate can identify him."

"I've learned over the past year not to trust anyone, Princess." His eyes darkened as he reluctantly holstered his sidearm. "Andrei Smirnoff is a living example of that."

"*Da*, that is true," Vanya readily agreed. She shook off the nagging thought that suddenly bloomed large—the identity of the most likely traitor. Now was not the time to allow her anger to rule her mind.

A sense of foreboding hung heavily in the air as they made their way to the dining room. Her gut instinct warned her that Luciano's unexpected visit could only mean trouble.



AVV Airpro...

“Simmer down, Vadim,” Arian urged, attempting to soothe the palpable tension evident in his frame.

“Don’t tell me to simmer down,” Vadim snapped in frustration. “Our mother has been missing for two weeks, and we’re still no closer to finding her. Jesus! Talk about déjà vu! I can’t believe that in this age of advanced technology, we can’t locate Andrei anywhere.”

His anger boiled over with a powerful kick to a nearby office chair. It skidded across the room and crashed violently against the wall.

“I sincerely doubt that the chair is to blame for—”

“Oh, fuck off, Arian.”

“I share your concern, but throwing tantrums and destroying furniture isn’t going to achieve anything,” Arian admonished in his usual calm demeanor.

“She was in a coma, for Christ’s sake! We don’t even know if she’s still alive.”

“Don’t go there.” Arian refused to entertain such a grim possibility. “Vanya will be back today. No one is better at searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack than she is. If that bastard’s in Moldova, she’ll find him.” He paused in thought. A shadow of doubt darkened his face. “If he’s the one who took her.”

“Of course, it’s him. Who else stands to gain from abducting her? No, Arian, this is just another ploy to divert our attention while he conspires with the other Bratva groups.”

“Maybe, but I still don’t—” His phone vibrated with an incoming call. He answered it brusquely, “Guzun.”

“Are you aware that Luciano Maranzano is in Moldova?”

Arian sat up as he recognized the deep, guttural voice.

“You fucking bastard! Where is my mother?”

“And are you aware that he is currently at your sister’s vineyard?”

Arian’s heart sank at the revelation.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I saw him arriving.”

“So, help me God, if you go anywhere near Vanya, I’ll—” Arian’s anger surged.

“I vowed to kill that bitch, but I’ll do it at a place and time of my own choosing. Until then, you fucking better believe that Luciano Maranzano is a bigger threat to her than I am.”

Arian clenched his jaw to subdue a torrent of curses that threatened to burst out, but the call abruptly ended. With a steely expression, he grabbed his car keys.

“Let’s go, Vadim. Luciano Maranzano is at Vanya’s.”

“*Isus Hristos!* We’ve been so focused on Andrei and the search for mother that we forgot about the traitor in our midst. Do you think he’s aware that Vanya hacked his system?”

“The only thing I’m certain of is that I won’t leave anything to chance. Even with Bogdan there to protect her, Maranzano is a ruthless bastard. I’d never underestimate his capacity for violence.”

“If he doesn’t know about the hack, he won’t suspect that we’re onto him.”

“Exactly,” Arian agreed. “So, when we get there, keep your composure.” He turned thoughtful. “The question is, how did Andrei know to warn us... unless he’s aware that we don’t trust Luciano anymore? He was supposedly dead and already in Russia by the time we found out Luciano was lying to us about his intentions all these years.”

“You’re right. We better be extremely careful. Looking at things from that perspective, I’d say it’s a toss-up whether Andrei or Luciano kidnapped mother.”

Chapter Eight



Chateau VanZun Winery...

Renewed concern for her mother's safety showed in the hunched shoulders and pallor on her face as Vanya watched Luciano stack a plate with food.

"I don't recall inviting you to join us for breakfast," she grumbled in annoyance.

"Come now, my dear. How about we let bygones be bygones?" The clichéd entreaty meant to disarm his hosts and set a tone of benevolence was fraudulent. He made no eye contact. The condescending use of *my dear*—all of it delivered in its rote simplicity—was devoid of any parts that could be considered authentic. Seen as a personal affront to the truth, it was immediately refuted.

"Raping someone then asking to let bygones be bygones is the worst kind of obscenity. It reeks of the institutionalized sexual violence that has been perpetrated against women for thousands of years by a misogynistic patriarchal society, you *pridurok*."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Bogdan turned to Vanya with his eyes blazing. She could see the rage brewing inside him.

“Shit,” she mumbled regretfully. No one knew what had happened during her previous trip to Catania. She never intended to tell anyone about it because she believed she carried much of the blame for it.

Now was definitely not the time to lose focus, especially since Maranzano’s sudden appearance seemed too much of a coincidence—at the same time as her mother’s abduction. What had happened to her in the past had to take a back seat for now.

“Nothing to concern you.” The pointed look silently urged Bogdan not to pursue the matter.

Vanya stared into space, lost in thought. What if they all had made the wrong assumption? They knew that Luciano was involved with Janos Smirnoff before his death. He had even managed to turn Gabriel Dalca, the Guzun Group advisor, against them. It had come to light that Janos had long ago set him up to infiltrate the Guzun family as a child—his own child, illegitimate but still his own flesh and blood. Gabriel had befriended the Guzuns at middle school—around the same time Andrei had arrived in Moldova at the age of twelve.

That Janos had harbored such an intense grudge against Viktor, their father, and used innocent children as pawns in his quest for revenge seemed unfathomable, yet it was precisely what he had done. This elaborate scheme had been unfolding over the course of decades, only coming to realization in the past couple of months.

Vanya’s concentration was severed by the abrasive sound of Luciano’s voice.

“That is a bald-faced lie, and you know it. We had this conversation before, and here you are again, daring to accuse me of rape,” Luciano snapped in between bites of his food. “As far as my recollection of that night goes, our little adventure was entirely consensual.” He cocked an eyebrow in

protest while stifling a sense of amusement tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Isn’t that right, my dear? I mean, wasn’t that the reason you remained at my villa afterward and agreed to become my fiancé?”

Lips curling with disdain, she sneered, “You have a warped memory, *nemernicule*,”

“*Nemernicule*? I’m afraid my Romanian is a little rusty, but by the sound of it, I doubt it’s a term of endearment. Tut-tut-tut. You’re slipping, Ms. Guzun. What happened to the unfazed woman who kicked me in the balls not so long ago?”

“Give me time, and I’ll be sure to repeat the pleasure.” Vanya had to dig deep to calm herself as his insult sunk in. It served as a stark reminder of the liability she had become to the Guzun Bratva and her family.

But that’s in the past now!

Letting herself be ambushed by morbid self-pity—abetted and reinforced by her own prodigious appetite for drugs and alcohol that fed an addictive personality—brought her to the threshold of absolute ruin from which there was no chance of redemption. It was too easy to mindlessly step off the edge and let go—to stop the madness and pain—which was why she had dug deep to summon up the reserves needed to do battle with her demons and return once more to become the ruthless Bratva Mafiosa she had always been.

“You’ve broken an age-old tradition and offended my family, Maranzano, by visiting our sister without our knowledge or our permission.”

Vanya whirled around in surprise at the unmistakably familiar voice that suddenly resonated through the room.

“Arian!” Disregarding her brother’s stern expression, Vanya sprang to her feet and hugged him in an uncharacteristically warm gesture. At that

moment, she had never been happier to see her two siblings. Ordinarily, she wouldn't be fazed by the notorious Sicilian mobster, but in her current weakened state, she harbored a lingering fear that he could easily overpower her—not necessarily physically, since instinct would kick in to fight, but emotionally she was a mess.

“I didn't expect to see the two of you here this early,” Luciano grumbled in an irritated tone. He shifted uncomfortably under Arian's stare.

“Why would you?” Vadim shrugged as he bit into a crispy piece of bacon. “Or have you been keeping tabs on us, dear friend?”

“Come now, Vadim. Don't be a sourpuss.” Straightening his shoulders, Luciano continued eating. “There's no need to be jealous that I visited Vanya first. In case you forgot, we're business partners. I am merely here to discuss the specialized wine she's developing for my hotel group.”

He appeared to be unperturbed at their intrusion, but Vanya wasn't fooled. The taut lines of his jaw gave away the tension he was trying to hide. The appearance of her brothers had clearly put a damper on his reason for visiting her.



“You've broken an age-old tradition and offended my family, Maranzano, by visiting our sister without our knowledge or our permission.” Arian's voice resonated through the room, setting the tone for his presence. His words were still echoing through the room when Vanya impulsively threw herself into his arms in an unfamiliar display of affection that caught him off guard.

In the world of the Guzun Bratva, outward displays of tenderness and care had always been frowned upon by their father. Such emotions openly

expressed were perceived as weakness for those who bore the Guzun name. They were known for their unwavering familial bond, whose power and ruthless business acumen were unmatched.

Even though Andrei had warned him about his presence, Arian's sixth sense had gone on high alert the moment his eyes locked onto Luciano. Their silent arrival had granted him a brief window to scrutinize the man.

Maranzano exuded an unshakable self-assuredness as he brazenly taunted Vanya. His attitude was a stark departure from his previous interactions with her, especially since he had made his intentions clear, not so long ago, to marry her. Now, more than ever, Arian sensed his erstwhile friend had been deceiving him for far longer than he had suspected.

His thoughts turned to Andrei. Where did he fit into this puzzle? What was the nature of the connection between him and Luciano? Arian vividly remembered Andrei's strong aversion to Luciano. In the past, he had never made a secret of his deep-seated hatred for the man.

Although he suspected Janos Smirnoff had a shady undertaking with Maranzano, Arian didn't believe Andrei would have continued with the association once he became Pakhan of the Red Bratva.

What he wouldn't give to know what information Andrei had on the Mafia Don. More so, what made Andrei so assured to think Luciano posed a greater threat to Vanya than himself—the very man who had once vowed to end her life?

Still, when he felt the slight tremor of her body against his, Arian wrapped his arms around Vanya for a rare display of affection as he listened to Vadim spar with Luciano. His voice darkened dangerously as he continued with the stark warning at the uninvited guest.

“Not too long ago, arriving here unannounced would've been seen as an egregious act resulting in the wagging of tongues and the slandering of a

woman's reputation. We could talk ad infinitum about the Madonna whore complex prevalent among misogynistic men toward women and how they categorize women as being pure, like their mothers, with all the rest being sluts... whores. Unfortunately, this attitude toward women subsequently destroys relationships. You know where this is going, don't you?" He grimaced, but his expression remained cold, and he remained unconcerned about Luciano watching him in surprise at his unexpected aggression.

"Satisfaction in the form of a correction would be needed to rectify this aberrant mindset, such as a public apology, for instance. And if that wasn't forthcoming, then harsher methods—for example, putting out an eye, cutting off an ear, a nose, hacking off both thumbs—would've been the method used to forever identify the misanthrope, so that wherever he went, the entire village would know who he was and what he did." Arian was enjoying Luciano's discomfort more than he should.

"We aren't so medievally-minded these days but we, my people, still hunt down and surgically castrate malevolent, swaggering bulls who get out of their shit-stained penis and trample upon the code of honor. Blood must be shed because that's what it's all about in the end, isn't it? One's flesh and blood?" Arian scoffed. "This is an ironclad tenet from ancient cultures, and you, being a Sicilian, *mio cumpa*, should know this by heart. I am very tempted to seek satisfaction for myself and my family with a proportionate response of my own. You have dishonored us. How am I supposed to respond now that you are in my house?"

"I thought this was Vanya's house?" Luciano said in his usual self-righteousness.

"You're walking on thin ice, my friend," Vadim warned. "You are well aware that this is our turf, hence, our house."

"Not to mention that I didn't even invite him in," Vanya mumbled

irritably.

Arian's eyes narrowed as he took a closer look at his sister. Her reaction wasn't just an after-effect of the stringent rehab she had undergone. There was something else haunting her, something deeper. The fact that she seemed relieved by their arrival, even with the hulking presence of Bogdan, set off alarm bells in Arian's mind. Whatever was bothering Vanya had to be connected to Luciano Maranzano. His brooding gaze shifted to the man who had morphed from friend to adversary not so long ago.

"So, you're here on a business trip?" With his gaze fixed on Luciano, Arian addressed the follow-up to Vanya. "You should've warned us he was coming, sis. We could've cleared our calendars to spend some time with him."

"She didn't know," Luciano interjected with a weary expression on his face. "It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. You know that in our business, it's necessary to get away now and then."

"Speak for yourself," Bogdan sneered. "In our business, we don't cut and run when things get tough. We suck it up."

Arian caught Vadim's surprised look at Bogdan, but he ignored it. He wasn't going to question or berate Bogdan for speaking his mind. He was as much a leader of the Guzun Bratva as they were. In fact, he possessed more knowledge of the criminal underworld than all the others in the room combined.

Bogdan usually had a firm grip on his temper. Whatever had triggered his outburst must have hit a nerve. Arian had a hunch it had something to do with Vanya's evident distress upon their arrival.

"Now isn't the best time for visiting, Luciano," Vadim chimed in as he seamlessly adapted the role of mediator. "As you must know, our mother is in a coma, and we're—"

“Which is why I’m here,” Luciano cut in. His gentle smile fell flat as he met Vanya’s icy glare. “I’ve come to offer my support in any way possible. In light of that, I wanted to personally inform you that I’m prepared to postpone the launch date of our endeavor until your mother is out of the hospital.”

“That won’t be necessary. I have a very capable—”

“I insist.” With that, the thin, masquerading tone of diplomacy employed to soothe suspicious minds had finally worn through and was replaced with an ultimatum shorn of any pretense. “Besides, it’s not a noble gesture, rather a selfish one. You see, my standards are exceptionally high, and I refuse to accept a substandard product that you might pass off to one of your employees. Our agreement was that you would personally oversee the flavor development. I’m after nothing but the best, my dear. Nothing else will satisfy me.”

“As you very well know, all the pairings have been done and approved by you.” Vanya’s sharp voice responded. “I issued the production notice for the first batch weeks ago. I’m afraid it’s too late to cancel since some of the flavors are already in the aging process.”

“Well, that’s good news. Either way, I don’t want you to feel pressured to get anything done until your focus is one hundred percent on the project.”

“I’ve got my fingers in numerous pies, Maranzano,” Vanya declared. Her voice dripped with the unshakeable confidence that was her trademark. She leaned back in her chair, exuding the kind of self-assuredness that came from knowing she had a formidable team backing her up. “Believe me, your wine pairing project is just a fragment of the many business ventures I manage simultaneously.”

Vanya’s words painted a vivid picture of her capability and

determination. With the support of her brothers by her side, she was a force to be reckoned with and was fearless in taking on any challenge that came her way.

Arian silently applauded her as the room seemed to pulse with the energy of her unshakeable resolve.

“Well, then, it seems I have nothing to be concerned about,” Luciano responded in quiet resignation.

Arian’s innate ability to read people had yet to fail him. His gut told him that Luciano had no idea Zafira Guzun had been abducted from the hospital, which led him to a troubling realization. Andrei Smirnoff remained the only suspect in Zafira’s disappearance. Still, none of this made any sense. If Andrei was the one who shot Zafira, why would he abduct her from the hospital to keep her safe? The question gnawed at his mind.

And what was Luciano Maranzano doing in Moldova?

Chapter Nine



Two days later, Valley's Lake, Codru, Moldova...

Its narrow draft didn't require much effort to pull the sleek economy of the seventeen-foot skiff across the lake that was inflamed with the colors of morning twilight. The only disturbance guilty of disrupting the quietude of the serene tableau was the clatter of uneven oarsmanship by the sole occupant of the boat who struggled to drive it in a straight line.

"I don't know why I couldn't have a motorized boat," Vanya grumbled. Her frustration was evident in the tight grip she had on the oars. She cast an annoyed glance at the boat's oarlocks. The pins had, over time, lost their tight purchase into the cedar gunwales. All that was needed to evict a pin from its worn mount were the jerky movements of an inexperienced rower.

Although not a stranger to being on the water, she was more comfortable deep-sea diving or piloting a speedboat. The steady rhythm needed to successfully power oneself with two oars was lost on her.

"This is close enough. I wouldn't want the asshole to become suspicious." With a final heave, she shipped the oars.

Cursing, she wrestled with the cumbersome task of getting the fishing line in the water. It was anything but easy.

“Who the hell still fishes like this?” she muttered while trying not to show her exasperation lest it give her away as a novice. According to the old man who had rented her the boat, the lake was a favorite of the estate community. Mostly by people who chose to live here specifically to be close to the land and who loved to fish the old way. Retirees spent their mornings hoping to reel in a handsome catch.

Five minutes of expletives punctuated the air as Vanya tried and failed to bait a hook. A final “Fuck it,” ended the exercise, and she cast an empty hook.

With the slouch of a seasoned angler, she pulled the Gilligan hat low to tuck away her blond mane and shield her eyes from the bright glare of the morning sun. Then, hugging the butt cap of the rod under her left arm, she opened the bail and watched as the weighted line played out.

A morning gust whipped up by warming air danced across the water, turning the glassine surface to matte as it nudged the bow to starboard, lining up the lake house at twelve o’clock. The mansion’s architecture was imposing, its elegant façade exuding an air of opulence. It stood a distance from its closest neighbor, as if safeguarding the privacy of its inhabitants.

“Did you ever once imagine that I would remember the location of your secret hideaway, Andrei?” The words rolled off her tongue, leaving behind the now bitter taste of an evening they had shared over a bottle of wine.

Memories like old photographs flickered through her mind, reminding her of their tender lovemaking on the night Andrei had told her about the lake house. It had been a time when their connection had been intense—a time when their love, like a hidden garden, had revealed itself in full bloom.

He had shared his secret home with an enthusiasm that was infectious—a dream he had nurtured, designed, and built with his own hands over the course of five years. The passion he had invested in its creation was unmistakable in every carefully crafted detail.

As she stared at his dream come to life like the gentle ripples on the water's surface, a myriad of emotions washed over her. The house with its rustic charm made her yearn for what once was. Ignorance of what was to come at the time had fed the dreams she had created in her mind of sharing this place with him. It was now a distant memory, yet vivid in her recollection.

“Yes!” Her eyes lit up as a man exited the house. “It *is* the right house... and I've got you, you bastard! Shit.” She clamped her hand over her mouth as her triumphant shout escaped her lips. In her excitement, she had forgotten how far sound carried over water.

Her eyes darted nervously to the surroundings. She couldn't afford to be discovered now, not after the meticulous planning to get there. Not to mention that she had purposely omitted to tell her brothers about the place and that she was coming here alone to investigate.

“*Da*, Arian is gonna be seriously pissed when he finds out,” she muttered as she peeked at the house from under the cap while pretending to check the fishing line.

Luckily, the man who had just descended the porch stairs seemed unaware of her presence as he performed a couple of stretches. His movements were unhurried, as if he was completely at ease, before setting off on a run.

Vanya watched him intently while she held her breath in suspense. With a sigh of relief, she finally exhaled. Her gaze remained fixed on his long, purposeful strides as he began to jog along the path that led away from

the lakefront.

There was no doubt in her mind—it was Andrei Smirnoff. She would recognize his easy, confident gait and that striking physique from afar. The leather mask that concealed the left side of his face appeared stark black over the distance. It had become an unmistakable signature... like his dark heart.

While keeping watch on the diminishing figure, Vanya slid the oars into the water and began to pull.

The placid rural atmosphere belied the tumultuous feelings that came into sharp relief.

Breathe.

As each stroke of the oars pulled her closer, she couldn't shake the feeling of a predator closing in on its prey.

“Just row. Just fucking row!”

Vanya's gaze darted constantly between the house and the path on which Andrei had disappeared.

The two-week stint in rehab had physically weakened her but not her newly reacquired resolve. With steely willpower, she tapped into a reserve of strength and pushed through the painful burn of lactic acid that inflamed her core.

“I must hurry. I have no idea how long he's gonna be,” she mumbled as she reached the shore. “*Blyad*’, the past two weeks have turned me into a weakling,” she wheezed.

With her heart pounding, she scrambled over the gunwales and dragged the skiff into a seclusion of Horsetail reeds at the edge of the lake.

Satisfied that the boat was hidden, she quickly scanned the path, then darted toward the house. The surroundings seemed to close in on her as the tall trees and thick underbrush amplified the anxiety of being caught. Resolutely, she ignored the tension in the air and followed her gut instinct.

“Mom is in that house, I’m sure of it.”

She made her way through the trees while continuously glancing over her shoulder and checking the path Andrei had taken.

“So far so good.” Moving quickly, and with growing confidence, she approached the house.

“*Destul!*” She stopped to listen as the rustle of leaves startled her. “I’m not fucking scared of the prick,” she mumbled to give herself a boost of courage. “This is bullshit. You’ve got balls of steel, Vanya Guzun. Get your mind in the game!” She was determined to see this through, and although her emotions were still fragile after the grueling rehab stint, she refused to allow it to weaken her resolve.

Stepping onto the wraparound porch, she cautiously peeked through the windows. There wasn’t a soul in sight.

“Well, here goes nothing.” With her trusted K-bar in hand, she opened the front door and slipped inside. Unless she was faced with a life-and-death situation, she didn’t want to kill anyone here today—at least not until confirming her mother was there and what her condition was.

With skills honed by years in the field, she quickly cleared each room on the ground floor.

“Is there anyone here apart from you, Smirnoff?” she questioned in a hushed voice. Andrei wasn’t the type of man who would play nurse to a woman in a coma. Logic dictated that he had procured someone to take care of her mother. She refused to consider that her instinct was wrong and that Zafira might not be there. The words he had said that day at Club Extaz stopped her in her tracks at the landing of the stairs.

“*She’s safe, and she’ll stay that way unless any of the Guzuns get in my way.*” She could still feel how his gaze had seared her when he continued. “*Especially her.*”

“*Blyad*’, he had said Mom’s life is in my hands, and what do I do? I’m here, doing exactly what he warned me not to do.” Indecision gnawed her hollow as she looked first down the right hallway, then the left. “I’m not running away. If Mother is here, I’m taking her home with me, even if I have to shoot him to get her out.”

Vanya hadn’t forgotten Andrei’s promise the day she killed Janos. She also recalled the challenge she had sneered at him in response.

“*Bring it, Andrei. I’ll be waiting.*”

However much she had been crawling among the ashes with the news that he was her half-brother and out to destroy her entire family, Vanya couldn’t accept it as true. Even now, standing in his house, nothing of what Janos had claimed rang true. Not in her mind... and definitely not in her heart. She didn’t believe in faerie tales, and although Andrei had destroyed the trust and love she had for him long before that incident, she had no desire to kill him.

Except if it was to keep her family safe. Family always came first, and for her own mother, she would gladly give her life. Not confronting a mortal threat wasn’t in her DNA.

“I’m done waiting, Pakhan Smirnoff. I’ve come to you. So, if this is gonna be a showdown, so be it.” Squaring her shoulders, she made her way to the left, and quickly checked every room.

“Oh, thank God!” she exclaimed as she opened the last door and walked into a room to find her mother sitting up in a large four-poster bed.

“Vanya?” she said sleepily. “What are you doing here?” She glanced out the window, then peered past her into the hallway. “How did you get in here? Where’s Andrei?”

“*Isus Hristos*, Mom. I haven’t seen or talked to you in months. I came here expecting you to still be in a coma, and the first thing you do is bombard

me with questions. How about morning, Vanya? How are you?” Vanya sat down on the bed and clasped her mother’s hands. For the first time ever, she yearned to feel her mother’s arms around her.

“I thought you were dead. When you disappeared from the hospital, I... I’m sorry I didn’t come looking for you immediately, but I had to... I had to... I’m so sorry, Mom.”

All the emotional baggage burst open at that moment as Zafira spread her arms and hugged her tightly. She clung to her mother as if she was the only lifeline left.

“I was in such a bad place. Instead of being there for you, I fell off the edge. God, I still can’t believe how close I came to self-destructing. I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you.” Vanya’s chest heaved with broken sobs.

“Enough, my darling. Shh, no more crying. I firmly believe everything we’re going through now will soon pass.” Zafira gently rocked her, just like she had done when she was a little girl. “Shh, my little princess. I’m here.”



Slick with sweat, Andrei bounced up and down to the steady beat of the music in his ears. He panted as he took a slug of water. Glancing around, he inhaled the fresh morning air. The breezy run through the abandon of primordial beauty always astounded and rejuvenated him. Sunlight tinted the forest and lake with a golden glow, creating a natural and breathtaking panoramic of the morning. He would never tire of the expansive scene.

He stopped with a grim look crossing his face as he took note of the position of the sun. His voice echoed on the breeze as he turned and started

jogging back to the house.

“I guess she’s had enough time to breach the house and find *Comare* by now.”

He had been expecting Vanya to show up since the day at Club Extaz when he’d admitted to having taken Zafira. More accurately, he had been waiting for her since she went back to work after Arian had forced her into rehab under Bogdan’s care.

When he had noticed the lone sailor rowing a small fishing boat to the center of the lake, he knew their face-off had finally arrived.

The circumference of the lake comprised the boundaries of the private estate. Those who did fish here were seasoned anglers who knew not to pull a seventeen-foot skiff through the water with eight-foot oars. Not only were the oars too short, but there were also no oar rights to keep them balanced in their towers. In the end, what transpired was the unmasking of an amateur.

From the vantage point of a sniper, Andrei had watched with amusement through a pair of high-powered binoculars as the novice sailor, unaware of the scene she had managed to create, ended up entertaining an untold number of spectators as they, too, watched as she mangled her passage forward.

“It’s time to clip her wings—for good. This nonsense of drowning herself in booze and getting high whenever life throws her lemons has to stop. She’s better than that. It’s fucking time she realizes it.”

Time was a relative concept that allowed retrospection and corrective measures if a person was open to it. Andrei wore the mantle of being a fair and just man like a badge of honor. Words blurted out in a moment of heated passion could be as dangerous as rash actions taken without thought. He was a staunch believer in granting second chances. If he didn’t, he would’ve been dead long ago.

Although Vanya had killed his uncle, it was exactly what he would've done had their roles been reversed.

It can be said that in the criminal underworld, acts of violence committed by one family upon another in the struggle for supremacy were usually returned disproportionately in an attempt to decapitate the offending power structure. Often, this retributive violence only succeeded in begetting more violence. Where one head was severed, two grew back. And so, all-out war ensued, with each side inflicting so much damage as to disrupt the genetic hierarchy. Outside help was then enlisted to fill the vacancies until such time that a blood member could reassume the reins of power.

In rare circumstances, to stop the cycle of violence, exceptions were made. Andrei understood this, especially now, where his past intimately merged with that of Vanya's. Even she, the hardened Mafiosa, deserved a second chance.

Except, his benevolence was just as likely to be preempted by Vanya's obstinate nature. How she had survived this long while engaging in behavior that continued to put herself in harm's way was unknowable. Inasmuch as it could be attributed to a combination of luck and skill, it was always in the back of the minds of those who knew her best at what point would the application of one or both of those ingredients from that mixture fail, with the likely result ending with her untimely death.

As one of the leaders of the most revered Bratva group in the EU, she knew how the unwritten rules worked. One became the top dog by eliminating the weak. This was accomplished with help from family and loved ones against those one wished to unseat—just like the attempted assassination on *Comare* had proved.

He would've thought he had made it very clear to her, Bogdan, and Arian that he was keeping Zafira safe.

“But does she listen?” he scoffed as he ran. “No. The little chit has an impenetrable mind of her own. I can only hope she hasn’t led the assassin directly here.”

Chapter Ten



“What’re you doing?” Vanya’s voice quivered impatiently as she watched Zafira calmly tie her walking shoes.

Zafira glanced sideways at her. “I’m getting ready for my morning walk with Andrei. He said the clean morning air will do me good and aid in my quick recovery. I have to admit, he was right. I’m feeling much stronger since our arrival here. Playing comatose in that hospital bed for over a month didn’t do me any good.” She shrugged. “It kept me alive longer but it weakened my muscles.” She flexed her arms and stretched out her legs. “At least my strength is returning. Slowly, but surely.”

“What are you—I don’t believe what I’m hearing! Getting ready for your morning walk? What am I, chopped liver? Do you even see me? Know that I’m here?”

“Don’t be silly, darling. Of course, I know you’re here. There’s nothing wrong with my mind. It’s just my body that took a bit of a beating.” Zafira sat down at the dressing table and leisurely brushed her hair.

“Then let’s go. I came here to take you away from that... that bastard! Now. Let’s go.”

An amused grin spread over Andrei’s face where he leaned against

the doorway quietly observing the scene. Vanya's fiery passion was what had first drawn him to her, like a moth to a flame. Even now, he could see it in every fiber of her being as she argued with her mother.

Her dark eyes flashed as she spoke with razor-sharp fervor. Through personal experience, he had intimate knowledge that she loved with an all-consuming intensity that frightened away most men. Everything Vanya did, she did with a passion. It burned within her, an untamable force that both enthralled and terrified those around her.

Andrei had always been thrilled at the way she embraced life so completely, so recklessly. While others tiptoed cautiously through existence, Vanya grabbed it by the horns and rode it. She felt everything deeply, painfully, wonderfully. He envied the raw force that motivated her. It stirred the embers within his own soul.

No matter the circumstances they were in, he was still drawn to her fiery spirit. He believed he always would be.

Vanya threw her hands in the air as Zafira fastened her hair into a french roll, unmoved by her daughter's insistence to leave.

"I don't understand you, Mom. How could you not want to leave? Andrei Balan—"

"Smirnoff, darling. He's insistent about that. His name isn't Balan anymore," Zafira calmly interrupted.

"Oh, for God's sake," Vanya muttered.

Andrei got the impression that she rolled her eyes but with her back turned to him, he had no way of knowing for sure.

"Whatever the asshole prefers to be called. He, that fuckface, is the one who attempted to kill you, and yet you're in no hurry to leave."

"Did he, though?" Zafira turned to look at Vanya. She seemed serene, at peace as she folded her hands on her lap and stared at her daughter.

“Did he what?”

“Try to assassinate me. Personally, I’m not so sure he was the one.”

“You’re not...” Vanya stumbled back and sat down on the bed as she stared at her in disbelief. “I’m lost. Did that asshole brainwash you, Mom? Of course, he’s the one who shot you. He promised he would get rid of all the Guzuns, or did you happen to forget that little tidbit of information?”

“Actually,”—Zafira cleared her throat,—“he promised to kill you, not all the Guzuns. We were just warned not to get in the way.”

“Well, thank you for that clarification.” Vanya jumped up. “I’m done asking nicely. C’mon. We’re going home. Now!”

“I’m not going anywhere, Vanya.” Zafira got up to place her hands on Vanya’s cheeks.

Andrei knew from personal experience that the soft, yet steely touch of the *Comare*’s hands on your face had the quiet force to calm anyone.

“Listen to me, darling. If Andrei was so set on killing me, why would he bring me here, nurse me back to health, and keep me alive? No, I’ve had time to think this over. I don’t believe he’s the one who shot me. In fact, I actually think he’s the one who saved me that day.”

“What do you mean, saved you?”

Zafira briefly relayed her recollection of that day, which induced another verbal explosion from Vanya.

“And, of course, he’s the one who put that little story in your mind. *Blyad*’, Mom! You know what happened in Russia. You know how much he had come to hate all the Guzuns. How could you fall for his ploy? All he did was soften you up and turn you.”

“To what end, darling? He has nothing to gain from me siding with him.”

“He has everything to gain.” She spread her arms wide. “It got me

here, didn't it? And instead of you chasing me off immediately, I'm still here, taking the chance that he might find me here. Isn't that what he wants? To get to me so he can kill me... like he promised?"

Zafira turned pale. "You're right. I was so happy to see you, I didn't think." She pulled Vanya to her feet. "Go. He'll be back from his run soon, but there's still time. Go, now!"

"I'm not going anywhere without you."

"Vanya, please listen to me. This man, this Andrei Smirnoff... he's not the same one we came to know and love. He has changed. He's more dangerous now than he has ever been. Yes, I believe he saved me, but if he's still resolute to kill you—"

"He's welcome to try." Vanya pushed her mother aside. "I'm not going anywhere. If you're staying, then so am I."

"*Isus Hristos!* Why do I have to be the one blessed with such stubborn children?" Zafira muttered. "Please, just listen to me for once in your grown-up life! I will be fine. Believe me, if I didn't think I was safe here with Andrei, I would've escaped long ago, but you have to leave. Now!"

"You heard me. I'm not leaving."

"Perhaps you should listen to *Comare, malen'kaya printsessa.*"

"I'm not your fucking little princess." Vanya spun around at the sound of Andrei's voice.

He wasn't surprised to see the K-bar at the ready in her left hand. The fiery response was exactly what he had expected. In fact, he preferred to deal dealt with the hellion in her.

"This is a new low for you, Balan."

"Again, the subconscious need to provoke me, Ms. Guzun, is a symptom of a disordered mind wanting any kind of contact. Your mother warned you about that name."

Her eyes narrowed. “How long have you been lurking in the door listening?”

“Long enough for an enemy to have smoked you several times. It’s the same old shit with you, Vanya. So argumentative and so dangerously consumed by what’s in front of you that you leave your six open. Fatal mistake.”

“Andrei, Vanya was just leaving. She’s—”

“No, I’m not,” Vanya cut Zafira short as she shot a sideways glance at her. “I told you. I’m not leaving without you.”

“Darling, please. Andrei...” Zafira looked at him beseechingly, as if she was begging for his understanding. “He’s not the—”

“*Da*, I got that. He’s not the same man, yada-yada-yada. I don’t give a fuck, Mother. I am not leaving you here with him. Besides...” She plunged the K-bar into a leather breast sheath, then planted her hands on her hips to glare at her tormentor. “If the fearsome Pakhan of the Red Bratva truly wanted me dead, I would’ve been lying in a puddle of my own blood long ago.” She cocked her head sideways. “Isn’t that right, Mr. *Smirnoff*?” she sneered. “You’ve had several opportunities. There was Club Extaz, then when I arrived by boat early this morning and just now, with my six open.”

“What are you talking about, Vanya?” Zafira looked between the two antagonists, ready to close quarters.

“Oh, he knew I was here, Mom, which is why he returned early from his run. He just wanted to give me enough time to get inside, so he could have the advantage.”

Her sudden movement caught him unaware. As if out of thin air, she brought the 9mm Makarov to bear, aiming it at his head for a one-shot kill.

“How’s that for a bit of magic, asshole?” Vanya backed up just out of his reach and slowly exhaled. “I cannot describe to you, in words, what I’m

feeling right at this very moment. I am right on the fuckin' edge, and all out of fucks, you cocksucker. What's left of my patience is less than the width of one blond cunt hair." Wearing a malevolent grin, Vanya gripped the instinctive activation guard of the laser sight on the semi-automatic and menaced the bony depression between his eyes with a crimson dot. "That, combined with a two-pound trigger pull on this bitch and I will blow your shit into the next room. So... Go ahead. Just flinch. I promise you won't feel a thing."

"Oh, I wouldn't dare," he mocked as he lifted his hands in pretend submission.

"Andrei? How did you know she was here?" Zafira interjected.

"It seems your daughter isn't thinking rationally, *Comare*. My guess is that her mind is still clouded by the withdrawal symptoms she suffered while in rehab. One is dangerously vulnerable at this point. Any pre-existing, unresolved emotional issues tossed back into the volatile mix can be easily triggered. Whatever the real reason might be, I see before me someone who's unraveling by the minute."

"You got that right, motherfucker!" Vanya exploded. "I warned you to shut the fuck up! You didn't listen!" Andrei watched as she slid an index finger inside the trigger guard.

"Easy does it, *printsessa*," he said with a grimace. It had always invigorated him to verbally spar with her but this time, she reacted more violently than usual. His voice lowered into a calm, dulcet tone. "Had you done a proper investigation, you would've known that in a luxurious estate such as this, fishing in a seventeen-foot skiff on the lake isn't allowed. In fact, any type of fishing in the lakes here is strictly limited to weekends."

"That fucking prick lied to me!" Vanya seethed with anger. She had been conned.

“And who’s fault is that? It’s not mine. Hmm, never thought I’d see the day,” Andrei murmured.

“You’re not getting it yet, asshole. I’ve had enough of your condescending, patriarchal bullshit to last me a lifetime! Now, I’m going to be free of it. I want to remember this moment as being our last intimate act.” With that, she lunged at Andrei, pinning him against the wall. The barrel of the cocked Makarov rested under his chin.

“I hate you,” she sneered in his face.

“C’mon, Vanya. You got conned by a swindler looking to make a quick buck. So classic and something you would never have fallen for had you been yourself.” Not wishing to aggravate her further, he slouched heavier against the door, not offering any resistance. “Anger and seeking revenge has a way of being counter-productive, doesn’t it? Something I thought you would’ve learned after all the years by your brother’s side.”

“Which brother would that be, *Balan*? Vadim. Arian”—the hesitation was deliberate—“or you?”

“Ah, yes, another tale the Guzun clan eagerly swallowed, like tasting Strottarga Bianco caviar for the first time.” His eyes darkened. “Why is it that those who have everything are so quick to believe the worst?”

“What are you saying, Andrei?” Andrei cursed under his breath as Zafira’s voice cracked under the strain. She appeared paler than before.

“I think we’ll skip the walk for today. You look weaker than yesterday.” He gestured toward the bed. “I suggest you take a bedrest day.”

“Don’t you dare patronize me, young man,” she snapped angrily. “What exactly did you mean?”

“Viktor Guzun wasn’t my father.”

“Why should we believe you?” Vanya spat. “Now all of a sudden you have a different story, yet when Janos so succinctly broke the news, you

stood there, claiming it all to be true.” She jammed the gun into his chin. “C’mon, you bastard! Tell the truth!”

“Put that gun away, Vanya, before it goes off and a wayward bullet does what the assassin didn’t...” He smiled wryly as his fingers traced the outer edge of the leather mask on his face. “In both instances, I might add.”

“I’ll hold on to it, fuckface. I don’t trust you,” Vanya spat but took a step back.

“Start talking, Andrei. My patience is running thin,” Zafira interjected as she sat down at the dressing table.

“Two things I learned over the years under your and Viktor’s tutelage, was to never accept anything at face value, and don’t ever let your opponent know what cards you’re holding.”

“Stop the philosophical bullshit! Just spit it out, Balan.” Vanya’s eyes flashed as she, too, became increasingly agitated.

“If you call me Balan one more time, I will teach you a lesson you won’t easily forget,” he warned darkly. “Don’t push me, Vanya. Not today.”

“Really, fuckface? I’m the one with a gun. How ‘bout I blow one of your kneecaps off?”

Zafira ignored the brinkmanship between them and prodded Andrei insistently, “Are you saying you knew Janos was lying about Viktor being your father when he told us?”

“Yes.” He sighed when her eyes turned glacial. “One thing you need to understand, *Comare*, is that I owed Janos my life. There was a time that I would’ve done anything for him until I found out he had been using me.”

“I’m listening.”

“Janos used Gabriel and me as a gateway into the heart of the Guzun Bratva. I never met Gabriel as a child and didn’t know he was my cousin. Janos had known, even back then, that your organization was the strongest of

them all.” He grimaced. “Contrary to Gabriel being coached from the day he had walked into your sons’ lives about what his purpose was, I wasn’t.”

“That’s not what Janos said,” Vanya interjected.

“Janos knew what would upset Arian the most. Truth be told, when I was younger, I had no idea Janos wanted to use my strong bond with Arian and Vadim to serve his own dark purpose. All I was told was to learn as much as I could since Viktor Guzun was the best teacher I could ever have. Janos claimed that with his knowledge, I would one day become the kind of successor the Red Bratva would be proud to have.”

“When did you realize he was using you?” Zafira watched him intently.

He knew her well enough to realize she was looking for signs of deceit.

“Janos wanted me to spy on Viktor and steal documents from the vault. Expecting me to do that to the man I was supposed to learn from, was a red flag and I knew he had been lying to me all the years. When I refused, he changed. He started treating me like scum and claimed I wasn’t a true Smirnoff, that I deserved the name Balan even though I wasn’t born from the loins of the man who carried the name. He produced a birth certificate that stated he wasn’t my father. In a way, I was relieved. At least I knew then why the man I grew up thinking was my father hated me so much.”

“How long ago was that? If I recall correctly, Janos only told you Viktor was your father after you got shot and went back home to recover,” Zafira prodded.

“It was at a time when the Red Bratva started its drive for EU dominance, many years before that. I cut him off at that point, and refused to be associated with him. My loyalty was with the Guzun Bratva.”

“But that changed,” Vanya said bitterly.

“Yes, because I believed Arian had deceived me. That he was indirectly responsible for getting me shot, that he wanted me out of the way because Janos had been trying to force me to change my allegiance, and he didn’t trust me any longer.”

“But he didn’t,” Zafira said with conviction.

“Yeah, well, the jury is still out on that one,” Andrei said cryptically. “Anyway, when I arrived home, Janos was overjoyed and believed he had the upper hand. Thought I would be easy to control. At first, I didn’t care and let him have his way. My recovery took longer because of that. When I didn’t show interest in his scheme or taking over from him, he produced another birth certificate and DNA results claiming Viktor was my father. He did his best to convince me that Viktor had known all along who I was and that I was the rightful leader of the Guzun Bratva. I wasn’t that easy to convince, so I went to Moscow to confront my mother. Before I got there, she died in a car wreck. I knew it wasn’t an accident. It was just too convenient.

“That was the day I realized just how power-hungry Janos was. No one mattered in his life. Not his own sister, and sure as hell not her bastard son.” He shrugged. “We were all game pieces he used in his master plan to become the Bratva leader of all. He envisioned himself in a position similar to that of the Sicilian Mafia’s *capo di tutti capi*.”

“I always knew he was a crazy bastard,” Vanya said. “If he showed you DNA results, how did you know it wasn’t the truth?”

“Because I’m not an idiot. I went to the homeland statistics department and the lab that did the DNA test years ago.” His eyes darkened. “Turns out they did four different tests. Whether or not he had sex with my mother that night, I can’t say, but one thing I can confirm without any doubt is that Viktor Guzun wasn’t my father. I chose not to disclose my knowledge to Janos. I learned the most valuable lesson from him—how to play on both

sides of the fence. I knew the day would come when he overplayed his hand. All I needed to do was be patient.”

“So, it’s true then,” Zafira said softly. “You’re not the one who tried to assassinate me.”

“No, *Comare*, it wasn’t me.”

“Then who? Who else hates the Guzuns so much?”

“The same man who shot me.”

Vanya turned pale. “I thought you couldn’t remember. Isn’t that why you blamed and came to hate Arian? Because you believed he betrayed your confidence?”

“At first, yes. My memory returned in flashes since then, but it took a while before the entire picture made sense.”

“So, you’re not angry with Arian anymore?” Vanya prodded.

“As I said earlier, I’m still on the fence about him. Taking into consideration who I saw that night, he is still the only one who—”

“So, you *do* know who shot you?”

“Yes, Vanya, I do.” His eyes swirled with hatred. “Which is why I warned all of you to stay out of my way. None of what I just told you matters. Nothing has changed. If any of the Guzuns get in the way of me taking out the bastard, I’ll not hesitate to take them out as collateral damage.”

“Who is it?” Vanya snapped. “I want to know who destroyed our happiness, Andrei. It’s my right!”

“Ah, Vanya, when will you ever learn that not everything in life revolves around you? He didn’t destroy our happiness. I ended it before I got shot, remember? We were never meant to be.” His eyes hardened with resolve. “If you were hanging on to the belief that I still loved you, I suggest you disabuse yourself of that notion right now, because I don’t. I never did.” Andrei watched the hurt turn her eyes cloudy.

Through tight lips, he said to Zafira, “Breakfast is ready. I suggest you go eat so you can take your medication.”

“Andrei, don’t you believe it’s better to tell us?” Zafira implored him. “Don’t forget the other lesson we taught you—that there is strength in numbers.”

“You’d be better off concentrating on the Bratva-Mafia war looming, *Comare*. If there is one thing I came to desire more than anything in my life, it’s to be in charge of my own destiny. To stand as the leader of the Red Bratva goes hand in hand with that. Now that I’ve achieved that, no one is going to take it away from me... no matter the consequences or who has to suffer along the way. I suppose among Viktor, Janos, and Arian, I learned the value of being the top dog.”

He walked out the door with the damning words following in his wake.

“Believe me, when the war erupts, and with the Red Bratva leading the way, if you’re not ready, you might just lose everything... your precious children included. ”

Chapter Eleven



“This is a precautionary visit, sir. We received a call just after midnight of a stranger lurking around the southeast corner near the base of Kypchakskaya Hill just outside the security fence. We combed the perimeter of the estate and didn’t find anything untoward. As always, the community’s safety is our first priority, so please ensure your doors are locked at night.”

“Of course. Thanks for letting me know.”

Andrei watched the two security guards drive off. His sharp gaze roamed across the lake and the adjacent rolling hills. He didn’t believe in coincidences. In all the years he’d owned the property, there had never been a break-in or any reports of unauthorized persons loitering in or around the fenced area. That a suspicious man was seen not too far from his house a day after Vanya arrived, immediately raised a red flag.

“Something’s not right,” he muttered to himself. “Vanya is too careful to be followed, which begs the question... how the hell did anyone know to come here?”

After scanning the immediate perimeter one last time, he shut the door. It would be wise to have a covert security team in place to monitor the house and property. Even if someone had discovered Zafira was staying here,

it was still the most secure location for her to be at. He already had security cameras and infrared motion detectors installed in overlapping fields of coverage, positioned around the house. To multiple force protection and intelligence, Andrei had deployed fixed early warning threat identification and target-tracking devices hidden well beyond the treeline that served as the last line of defense against an invading force of enemy operatives. If necessary, a hard exit in a high-powered speed boat across the lake could be made within minutes.

With so much at stake, he was willing to take every reasonable precaution to ensure Zafira's safety during her stay. The more eyes watching over her, the better.

The fact that there had already been an assassination attempt on her life told Andrei that Gareth Sanders was becoming desperate. Nothing he had done to weaken the collaborative strength of the Bratva groups loyal to the Guzun organization had succeeded. He believed that decapitating the matriarchal head of the three sibling leaders would be a catastrophic blow to their operational integrity.

"Fuck him. He's in for a surprise." Snorting with disgust at his thoughts, Andrei quickly made a call to the Red Bratva Underboss and arranged to have an immediate covert team embedded.

His thoughts wandered as he walked toward the kitchen. Sanders might have the weaker Bratva groups allied with him already, but no one would dare oppose the Red Bratva or the Guzuns. People in positions of power in the criminal world had assets on their payrolls to provide real-time intelligence that would enable them to weigh the strength of their enemies. What Sanders and Uncle Jonas had planned wasn't sustainable.

"He's an idiot if he believes it is."

"What was that?" Zafira looked over her shoulder where she stood at

the stove, already busy preparing breakfast.

“You’re up early,” he mumbled as he poured himself a steaming cup of coffee before sitting at the table.

“I’ve had enough bedrest. Anymore lying around and I’ll start getting bedsores. It’s been two months since I was shot. My wound is almost completely healed, and the walks have helped to start rebuilding my strength. Now, it’s time to take my healing up a notch.” She spared a glance his way. “If what you said is true, I need to be ready to fight.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You need to be protected. If you think for one moment I’ll let you go charging out into—”

“With all due respect, Andrei, you have no say over what I do. Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate all you have done. God knows, if it wasn’t for you, I’d be dead. But neither am I a porcelain doll. I grew up in the Bratva world—lived it and have known nothing else my entire life. I have faced and survived more territorial wars in one lifetime than you could ever imagine. Believe me. I do know what’s coming and as always, I will not give satisfaction to my enemies by going out on my knees. I will fight to the bitter end and take as many with me as I can.”

“With all due respect, *Comare*, you have no idea what’s coming.”

Dishing up, she took the seat across from him.

“Be honest, Andrei. Are you keeping me here to draw my sons’ attention from realizing what’s about to happen, or is this an attempt to force them into surrendering the Guzun Bratva throne to you? Do you really hate us so much that you have the desire to destroy everything that defines us?”

“You’re wrong, *Comare*. I never had such visions of grandeur. Being the Pakhan of the Red Bratva fulfills my desire for power.”

“Then why the cryptic remark that you will be leading the upcoming war?”

“The word is self-explanatory. This particular war isn’t going to end in a standstill. Believe me, it will require a victor. I will be fighting to win, even if it means I have to take on a role I believe should never be in one singular man’s grasp. If Gareth Sanders achieves his quest, we’re all fucked. I, for one, will never bow to a bastard like that. For one person to have so much power over global crime... it’s suicide at best for anyone who opposes him should he succeed.”

“I thought Arian said that Izolda didn’t know what Sanders looked like or who he truly is.” Zafira stared intently at him. “Why do I get the impression that you do?”

“Because you’d be right.”

“Andrei—”

“Enough fishing. Let’s eat.” Ignoring the annoyed look on her face, he started eating. “Isn’t the little princess joining us?”

“You do like to annoy her, don’t you?” She tilted her head. “Why is that, I wonder?”

“Stop looking for a faerie tale that isn’t there, *Comare*. Too many stories start with the words, ‘once upon a time’ and end with ‘and they lived happily ever after.’ It was never meant to be for us, and it never will.”

“Hmm, now why don’t I believe you, my dear?” She ignored him cursing as she smiled gently. “I wasn’t born yesterday, and I’ve known you from when you were a little strapping boy. You’ve been in love with Vanya since forever.”

“Love makes you weak.” He stared at her with his expression as impassive as his eyes were void. “You, more than anyone, should realize that.”

“Of course, that’s it. As the mighty and feared leader of the Red Bratva, you don’t deserve to be happy and loved. Is that it?”

“Enough of this emotional drivel.” He outlined the leather mask covering the top left side of his face. “This is all the reminder I need of why love adds nothing to my life. No, *Comare*. I have no love interest in your daughter. Accept that.”

“If you say so, my dear.”

“So,” Andrei said with irritation rife in his voice at the knowing smile curving her lips. “Is she going to sleep the morning away?”

“Vanya? Oh, no, she went for an early morning run.” She glanced at her watch. “Strange though, she’s been gone for two hours. She should’ve been back long ago.”

“*Blyad*! Doesn’t that woman ever listen? I explicitly told her not to leave the house without telling me.”

“Since when are you so naive to believe that would stop her?”

“You almost getting killed should be more than enough reason for her to be cautious.” An ominous frown drew his brows together. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was looking to get hurt.”

“Why on earth would you say that?”

“To ease her guilt that she wasn’t there for you.” Finishing his meal, he got up. “I’d love to know what happened to steal her confidence. Nothing ever got her down before. Her actions of late, it’s not the Vanya I used to know.”

“I don’t believe you.” Zafira’s voice was sad. “You were the only man she ever gave her heart to. Don’t you realize how deeply she loved you, Andrei? When you left her, you broke her heart. The day she witnessed your supposed death, it broke her soul. What do you think finding you alive then claiming to be her half-brother and hating her family did to her?”

Chapter Twelve



Although Andrei couldn't deny a nagging sense of remorse that lingered within him, he steadfastly refused to accept guilt for his past choices. He had done what was necessary to protect the Guzuns and to keep Vanya safe, or so he told himself. But deep down, he knew there had been other routes that wouldn't have involved hurting her to prevent the impending war and shield the Guzun family from further violence.

"Yeah, my plan fucking royally backfired," he muttered as he walked into the underground bunker of the house. With Janos Smirnoff gone, there was no one left to restrain Sanders' vicious ambitions. By killing Janos, Vanya had unknowingly accelerated the execution of Sanders' deviousness and had shattered Andrei's intricate plans to get rid of him without a full-out war erupting.

"Stop wishing upon a star, Smirnoff. The damage is done. There's no going back."

With economic movements, he systematically checked the various parameters flashing on the screens against the wall of the security room. All the CCTV camera footage in and around the house as well as the yard fed into this room, including the visuals from the drones that permanently

covered the area over the entire estate. Since he had brought Zafira here, he had taken all precautions to keep her alive.

“Just as I thought,” he said through clenched teeth as he detected Vanya deviating from the public road onto a footpath leading into the thick forest. “Completely disregarding every damn instruction I gave her.” Linking the drone live visuals to his smart watch and muttering incoherently, he headed outdoors, setting off at a fast pace to intercept her.

“It’s time the little chit is taught a lesson. It seems the whipping the other night wasn’t enough. I should just pick a switch from one of the trees and swat her ass until the blood flows.”

Andrei sprinted through the dense forest, his boots pounding against the muddy earth. The branches whipped past in a blur as he pushed his body to its limits. His enhanced senses were on high alert, detecting a threatening presence that should not be lurking in these woods. The estate guards were wrong. He had to be concerned. Adrenaline flooded his veins as he realized the potential danger Vanya faced.

Foolish woman! His jaw clenched tight with annoyance that she had ignored his explicit instruction not to leave the house unaccompanied. Now, she was vulnerable, exposed to whoever was stalking these woods. “Hopefully, she had enough sense to take her weapons.”

Andrei inhaled deeply, picking up the faint scent of Vanya’s perfume mingled with the earthy smells of the forest. Checking the small screen of his watch, he zeroed in on her location.

“Fuck,” His heart skipped a beat as he picked up the snap of twigs and rustle of leaves off to his left. “I hope that’s an animal and not a perpetrator.”

Desperation clawed at his heart, driving his legs faster. He had to reach her first. The thought of anything happening to Vanya made his blood run cold. This was all his fault. If he had just forced her to leave yesterday

instead of allowing her to stay, she would be safely back home now.

Instead, he had let his guard down. Andrei cursed himself for his foolishness. It had nothing to do with feeling safe in the estate and all the preventive measures he had in place. No, he had been selfish. He wanted her near, needed to feel her warm hatred washing over him. Perhaps in a way to castigate himself for causing her all the pain that had pushed her over the edge. Whatever his reasons, he had been wrong. If something had to happen with her under his care, he would never forgive himself. Whether or not they were wrong for each other, she was his sole redemption in this dark and violent world. He could not—would not—lose her. With newfound focus, Andrei summoned every ounce of preternatural speed and pushed his legs harder.

“There you are, you little chit,” he growled as he detected her jogging at a leisurely pace on the footpath. Keeping to his sprint through the rough terrain, he intercepted her at the next turn.

“*Blyad*! Fucking hell, Andrei! You nearly gave me a heart attack,” she snapped when he suddenly stood in front of her.

His eyes darkened as he took in her defensive stance, with the twelve-inch K-bar clutched in her hand.

“At least you remembered to bring a weapon with you,” he barked angrily.

She snorted as she sheathed the knife. “I never go anywhere without it. I thought you knew that about me.”

“What I do know about you is that you have the sense of a house mouse. You don’t listen, do you?”

“I’m not a child, Balan, and you’re not my father nor my keeper. I come and go as I please.”

“Not as long as you live in my house.” He crossed his arms. “Or are

you deliberately leaving the way open to have *Comare* killed?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Since I had to come and look for you, she’s alone at the house. Not good, Vanya, especially since the guards detected an uninvited guest on the hill outside the fence last night.”

“Shit. Then what are we standing around here for? Let’s go!”

Andrei stiffened as another rustle in the bush alerted him. They stood under a blanket of shadows cast by the canopy of trees surrounding them.

“Don’t move,” Andrei warned as he stepped out and glanced up at a fainéant band of clouds that hung severed about the glowing solar face, revealing its exquisite beauty amid a blue sky. With his head tilted, he listened. While he was running, he could sense a presence that shouldn’t be there. Reaching out, he drew Vanya against his chest and wrapped his arms tightly around her back as she attempted to slip away.

“Stop fighting me, damn it. Just keep still and put your arms around me,” he instructed in a tolerant voice as she squirmed in his embrace.

“Don’t fucking tell me what to do, Balan!”

“We’re not alone, Vanya. Do you honestly want to alert the community about dark violence in their midst? Have more innocent people die?”

With a soft exhale, she conceded as she looked around.

“How do you know there’s someone? I didn’t notice anyone, and believe me, I took time to look around as I ran.”

“I can feel it.”

“Of course,” she sneered. “The celestial power of the mighty Andrei Balan.”

“Smirnoff, Ms. Guzun. Don’t let me have to remind you again.” He suppressed a grin. He needed her quiet strength and was happy she wasn’t

intimidated by potential danger. Not that she would be. Vanya Guzun didn't have a scared hair on her body. She was the kind of woman who laughed in the face of danger.

That didn't discount the threat Gareth Sanders posed since Andrei knew he would use everything in his power to achieve his dream of becoming a global crime leader.

Vanya was one of the pillars of strength of the Guzun Bratva, and Sanders knew it. If she was out of the way, he must be counting on her two brothers to go berserk and throw caution to the wind in their quest for vengeance. That way, leaving the path open to Sanders for a clean sweep of all the allies still loyal to the Guzuns.

While Janos had been alive, Sanders had been cocksure of his success, which made Andrei wary and worried he was overlooking some important aspects of the upcoming battle.

Taking a slow breath, he focused his mind as he was taught during Krav Maga training. *Breathe. Stay calm. Don't lose control.* Vanya always made him vulnerable in a fight since his main concern was to keep her alive and not his own life. With his eyes closed, he procured all his senses. *Nothing.* It was quiet, apart from the soft chirping of birds overhead.

Whoever he had sensed earlier wasn't in close proximity. He relaxed. The rest of the dark clouds vanished like wisps of vapor. The lake, bathed in brilliant sunlight, offered a gentle rippling whisper in the background. Her low voice brought him back to the present.

“‘What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.’ Isn't that what William Shakespeare said?” Vanya whispered against his chest.

“Ah, I see. You want a kiss. Why didn't you just ask, love?” he murmured as he placed a soft kiss against her temple.

“In your dreams, asshole. Besides, if I truly wanted a kiss, I would’ve taken one, not wait for your sorry ass.” Although her voice had become chilled, she stood quietly in his embrace, not showing any desire to step away from him.

“Hmm,” Andrei sighed, contemplating his actions. They were both playing with fire. Now wasn’t the time to give in to carnal lusts. In fact, with her, it never would be. They were not meant to be. In the end, all they would do was destroy each other. She wasn’t the kind of person who forgave easily. What he had done to her in the past, no matter how much she would attempt to forget, would always be there to hound her. Vanya Guzun was the type of woman who would be waiting for the other shoe to drop. Indulging in a quick sexy romp with her in the forest would do more damage than good—no matter how hard and eager his cock was straining against his pants.

Except his body had a mind of his own as he blocked out all thoughts, allowing only the treasured warmth of her body to penetrate his mind. Her fresh, sweet aroma besieged his senses, sparking the familiar cravings he felt when she was close by his side.

The distant croak of a frog mingling with the muted thump of water upon the bank of the lake was like an opium tincture that left him pleasantly dazed. Andrei exhaled deeply, recalling the decadent sexual excursions with Vanya at Club Extaz.

He twined his hand in her silky tresses and pulled her head back, gazing at her in mute fascination.

“You’re so beautiful.” With a hoarse murmur, he nibbled at the base of her neck, where a pulse beat rapidly. He reveled in her throaty moan as he traced his tongue over the upper curve of her breasts.



“What makes you think I want you to touch me, you bastard,” Vanya said breathlessly as she tried to reason against her own desire and need to yield to his passionate advances. Her legs trembled at the memory of his hard body possessing hers, molding them together. She couldn’t question the urge to feel his hardness thrust into her. Right here, in the middle of the forest. She gave in to the desire to grind her hips against his loins.

Forget about everything else. It doesn’t matter what awaits us tomorrow. At this moment, I don’t give a fuck what’s gonna happen. I need this. I need him—now.

“Then stop me, *malen’kaya printsessa*,” he dared her with his soft lips trailing over her shoulder, releasing hot puffs of breath to heat her skin.

With lips trembling, she took agonized breaths. Her skin sizzled where his mouth caressed the silky texture between her breasts. The heat moved closer to the aching tips of her breasts. A cry of ecstasy burst from her when he sucked her nipple in the wet recess of his mouth.

Oh God, I missed him.

Curving her back, she pushed the taut nub deeper into his mouth, moaning as he nibbled on it. Raw need pierced her loins, her lower body now throbbing with arousal.

Vanya arched into him, wrapping a leg around his waist to draw him closer, moaning as he pressed her back against a wide tree trunk.

“Vanya, I want you, now,” he purred into her ear.

She gasped as she suddenly felt the cool breeze brush her naked thighs. He lifted her leg and shifted to press the head of his big cock against

her.

“Aaah, Andrei,” she cried as the passion that had been simmering between them boiled over.

“Yes, just like this, baby. Wild and uncontrolled. Give me the real you, Vanya. You, not the ice princess,” he said as he rotated his hips, rubbing his shaft erotically against her.

Vanya didn't think to deny him. She felt disoriented and lightheaded by the sensations he loosened inside her.

“Yes, fuck me,” she cried, tossing her head back as the bulbous head of his cock separated her moist folds. She gasped as he pushed in all the way to hilt himself deep inside her.

“Ahh, Vanya. Just as I remember. You are still hot and so damn tight around me,” Andrei whispered against her lips, their breaths mingling as he pulled out to rock back into her. His hand was still tangled in her hair as he kept her head back to gaze into her eyes while he thrust into her.

His primal growl weakened her resolve to maintain control as he slid into her with exquisite strokes, ending in a hard rolling motion of his crotch against her clitoris.

A myriad of sensations assailed Vanya. She panted as her muscles gathered, fed by the insurmountable pressure that built inside her. She tried to take a deep breath, but as unstoppable as the waves upon the sand, the orgasm rolled over her. Spasm after spasm shook her body. Her cry carried to the ocean as she slumped weakly against him.

Andrei strengthened his hold on her as he pounded into her, pinning her against the tree, groaning with every clenching motion around his cock. Sweat gathered on his brow as he reached for the swollen nub between her legs and pinched it.

Clutching her hands around his neck, Vanya moaned and bit into his

shoulder, exulting in the sensual groan forced from his lips as her body shuddered with yet another orgasm.

It was all Andrei needed.

“Yes, baby. That’s what I wanted. You, only you,” he growled against her temple.

“Yesss,” she hissed as he ejaculated deep inside her before collapsing against her, unable to move. Her body relaxed as it had the first time when he had made love to her at the club. Home... he felt like home.

He’s the one, Vanya. Always has been. Always will be. Believe it. All you have to do is remember that.

The reality of the impending war pestered the back of her hazy mind. If only she knew more of what was going on, of what was swirling behind his darkening gaze.

Andrei palmed her cheeks and kissed her deeply, reliving the recent passing of intimate moments they had just shared.

“Vanya—”

She felt his back stiffen at the same time as a gust of air buffeted them. They looked around and blinked at the dark silhouette sweeping toward them.

“Don’t move,” Andre warned.

Vanya realized he was bracing himself to feel the plunge of the knife the man had in his hand. Did the foolish man honestly believe she would whimper behind him and allow him to be killed to save her?

Asshole! It seems he forgot just who I am and what I’m capable of.

Acting on instinct, Vanya palmed the K-bar from the back of her pants and flung it at the approaching figure in one smooth motion. The charging man stopped mid-step as the knife penetrated his skull in the center between his eyes. By the time he landed on his back, he was dead.

“What?” she asked with complete innocence painted across her features as Andrei stepped back and glared at her with exasperation.

“Dead men don’t talk, Vanya.”

“Oops. Sorry. Next time I’ll aim for his dick.”

Somehow, Andrei got the impression it was his appendage that was in danger rather than that of an unknown assailant.

Chapter Thirteen



A luxurious mansion, Braşov County, Poiana Braşov, Romania...

“Goddamn useless fuckface!” Gareth Sanders sneered as he watched the footage from the drone hovering over Valley’s Lake, Codru în Moldova. Although tech-savvy, it hadn’t been child’s play to hack it. In the end, he had to procure the services of one of the top hackers in the industry to crack the firewall Andrei Smirnoff had installed on the system.

Since the trio were in the forest, Gareth didn’t have a clear view, but he could see enough to realize the assassin had failed.

“That fucking man must have more lives than a cat.”

Fuming at another failed attempt to get rid of the biggest obstacle in achieving his goal, he stomped out onto the wraparound balcony. Breathing in deeply, he forced a calmness to enter his mind, something he found easy whenever he visited his property on the ski slopes of Postavarul.

The lodge was a redefinition of luxury in mountain terms, in which natural materials such as wood, stone, wool, and fur invited nature inside and created a calm hunting cottage-like atmosphere. The house was well integrated into the landscape, both chromatically and volumetrically, which

was why he had chosen it. Being here gave him a sense of freedom. Its garden's perimeter was smartly demarcated by high vegetation and offered a soothing view for the eyes but also intimacy for the soul. The main attraction had been that the house was located in a low-density area, which provided a low level of visual and auditory stress.

Here, he could hide from the world in plain sight.

Lighting one of his favorite Gurkha Royal Courtesan cigars, he breathed in the comforting aroma of tobacco smoke. He felt the presence of the intruder before the faint sound of a footstep disrupted the silence.

"You're late." The irritation was rife in his voice.

"There was congestion at the airport. I got here as fast as I could."

"I abhor someone spitting out excuses, Gabriel. Results are what impresses me. I thought you knew as much by now."

"It won't happen again." Gabriel Dalca leaned against the balcony, keeping his eyes on the snow-white landscape surrounding them.

Gareth didn't have to look at him to know he was tense—not unusual for someone who had fucked up and knew he would have to pay for that mistake. A man like Sanders didn't appreciate his time being wasted, especially when it impacted the success of his plan.

"There's a rumor going around, Gabriel, that I find rather concerning."

"You're a clever man, Gareth, and should know better than to pay attention to unconfirmed rumors... Ugh! Fuck!" he grunted as Gareth slammed a fist into his gut.

"Don't test my limits this early in the discussion, Gabriel." His low growl drifted on the breeze with dark intent. "What I find interesting is that you didn't ask what rumor I was referring to, which in itself is rather telling, don't you agree?"

Gabriel stuttered but no coherent words escaped his lips.

“The thing is,” Gareth’s voice lowered as he stared at the glowing red tip of his cigar. “Not many people know what my real identity is. Many have speculated, but since I personally select individuals to be privy to the truth about who I am, I can count those on one hand.”

“Are you suggesting I ratted you out?” Gabriel gasped, still attempting to catch his breath. He had always depended on the protection of his father, Jonas Smirnoff, especially against this man. After his death, he had no one since Andrei had summarily cut him off. He believed since Gabriel betrayed the Guzuns, he wasn’t to be trusted. It didn’t even matter to him that they were family.

“I can assure you, Gareth, I’m not stupid. Besides, how would I benefit from leaking information about you?”

“Everyone has a price, and since your uncle’s death, you suddenly found yourself like the proverbial castaway stuck on a remote island. I know your cousin doesn’t trust you, which means you stand alone, with no protection or support from him.”

“That doesn’t mean I’ll give him information about you. For fuck’s sake, he doesn’t even know about our association.”

Gareth turned to him, his eyes glacial. “Doesn’t he? Why am I not convinced?”

Gabriel’s sudden pallor was prominent as he leaned closer.

“He doesn’t know!”

“If that is true, then how the fuck does he know who I am?”

“What do you... how the hell does he know?” Gabriel took a cautious step back. “*Isus Hristos*, Gareth, I haven’t seen or spoken to Andrei in weeks. He kicked me out of the house two weeks after Uncle Janos died. I have no authority in the Red Bratva. He stripped me naked. I hate the bastard. Why

would I help him gain more power?”

“Because it would be your ticket back into his good graces, my dear man.”

“Fuck his good graces. He’s fighting against what we’re trying to achieve. If he wins, he’s going to take the power meant for you, so siding with him isn’t in my best interest. I stand a better chance at success standing by your side.”

“What about the day of the wedding?” Gareth didn’t miss the slight discomfort as Gabriel moved his shoulders. At first Gareth had blocked what he had seen through the scope as he had pulled the trigger that day, but the memory had been hounding him ever since. “Someone was in that room and managed to shove the *Comare* out of the way just in time for my shot not to be lethal. No one but you knew. How do you explain that?”

“I didn’t tell anyone, I swear. Who was it? You must’ve seen—”

“You clearly have no idea how an assassin’s brain works when he’s in the killing zone. I focused on just her, Gabriel. All I saw was a slight movement, a hand against her back since it was in my line of vision. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to warn me that I had been betrayed.”

“It wasn’t me.”

Gareth stared at him and although he returned his look unblinkingly, he was aware of the conflict in his eyes. No matter what he had said, history proved that Gabriel’s devotion to blood loyalty remained steadfast. The bonds of a Bratva soldier to his family were absolute.

He might have banked on Jonas Smirnoff’s protection, but he had hated the man. More often than not, Gareth had to listen to his complaints about being used but never receiving any credit, yet his entire life, he did whatever his father had asked of him. In the kind of world they lived, blood ruled all. In Gabriel’s veins flowed an unbreakable oath to family, no matter

the cost. He suspected if Andrei changed his mind and Gabriel was forced to choose, kin would always come first.

Gareth was faced with a conundrum. He had always trusted his instincts when deciding who to allow into his inner circle. Those privy to his double identity were vetted extensively. Gabriel had passed that test years ago. Now, Gareth wasn't so sure whether he was still to be trusted, but he couldn't cut ties yet—not when Gabriel was his only connection to the inner workings of Andrei Smirnoff.

The fact that Andrei was back in Moldova troubled Gareth. As the most powerful Bratva Pakhan in Russia, why would he leave his territory to come here? Gareth's eyes narrowed as he gazed out at the mountains. Someone had been in Zafira's room that day she was shot. Someone who knew she'd be vulnerable and alone at that precise moment. Cold sweat beaded his brow. Who could possibly have such intimate knowledge of his movements at the time?

It kept coming back to instinct. It had to have been Andrei. If he was the one who had saved Zafira, why hadn't he intervened at the sniper's nest instead of letting her get shot? Was that why he was in Moldova now? The question pointed to one conclusion—Andrei must have taken Zafira from the hospital to prevent a second assassination attempt.

“Fucking hell,” Gareth muttered. If true, then Andrei shacking up at the property very few people knew of made sense. That Vanya Guzun, who now hated Andrei fiercely, showed up unexpectedly, fit too. “Of course! Why didn't I realize it sooner?” he berated himself. “Zafira Guzun is there.”

“Where? What are you mumbling about?” Gabriel looked sharply at him, relief washing over his face that the focus had shifted.

“Smirnoff's hiding her at his house in Valley Lake, Codru.”

“You must be mistaken. He owns a winery in Dubasari. Why would

he need a second house in Valley Lake?”

“I don’t care why people spend their money or how they do it, but that’s where he is now.”

“Now I know you’re stretching,” Gabriel scoffed. “Andrei is at a summit he arranged to address all the Bratva leaders, including those we swayed from the Red Bratva. You know what that means, Gareth. We don’t have time to waste. If he threatens them, they’ll pledge loyalty to him again.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me about this summit sooner? Now it’s too late to intervene.” Gareth flung his smoldering cigar off the balcony, watching as it sailed through the frosty air before the glowing embers vanished into a snowbank. Rage ignited within him. Snorting angrily, he stormed back inside, Gabriel at his heels.

“It changes nothing. Andrei isn’t leading that summit,” he barked over his shoulder. “He’s here in Moldova.”

“You’re wrong. I swear to you, Gareth, he’s— Ugh! *Blyad’!*” Gareth’s fist smashed into Gabriel’s jaw, sending him crashing to the floor. His head cracked against the wood with a sickening thud.

“Shut your fucking mouth, you prick. You don’t know shit,” Gareth snarled, ignoring Gabriel’s pained whimpers as he struggled to his feet. He didn’t care about the blood dripping from the gash on the back of his head where it had connected with the fireplace’s edge.

“There’s a first aid kit in the downstairs bathroom,” he said brusquely as he poured himself a stiff drink. “Go clean yourself up and don’t get blood all over the goddamn floor!”

Gareth didn’t watch Gabriel leave since he was struggling to suppress the rage boiling inside him. If there was one thing he hated, it was his meticulous plans going off the rails. He had been plotting his convoluted role to become a global crime overlord for longer than he cared to admit. No one

would stand in his way of achieving that goal.

At first, he had believed the Guzun Bratva to be his biggest nemesis until Andrei Smirnoff allied with his Uncle Janos.

“I should thank Vanya for killing the bastard if it didn’t completely fuck up my plans,” he muttered. He had controlled Janos Smirnoff easily enough. His nephew was an entirely different matter. Andrei didn’t bow to anyone’s command, not anymore. He had become a formidable power in his own right.

Now that the Pakhan of the Red Bratva was unleashing years of pent-up rage at the forced subjugation to those suppressing his leadership and taking control of his own destiny, the biggest obstacle in Gareth Sanders’ quest to become the ruler of all was Andrei Smirnoff.

“Fuck that. I will succeed. No one will stand in my way—not any of the five Sicilian Mafia families or Bratva groups, the Guzuns, and sure as hell not Andrei Smirnoff. The day will come when they all bow before me as their new supreme ruler, the one who will unite global crime as one.”

His eyes turned dark as he scanned the images from the drone.

“No one fucks with me. Playtime is over. Finally, we’ll see who is a real leader. The one who will put power and survival first, at all costs, even before family.” He cackled a demonic laugh. “Yeah, I’ll watch how the mighty fall, and believe me, they will all fall!”

Chapter Fourteen



A secure location on the banks of the Klyazma River near Chiverevo, Moscow Oblast, Russia...

One thing Andrei had learned from Arian was to always be cautious when arranging Bratva group meetings. Doubly so with a summit where leaders and members from various groups were gathered since it made them vulnerable to an outside attack.

The dimly lit warehouse was eerily quiet as Bratva leaders from across Russia and Europe filtered in. Andrei watched them enter one by one, his sharp gaze taking in each member. The encrypted location had only been sent to their phones five minutes prior—just enough time to arrive but not to plan anything nefarious. Those who didn't arrive timeously weren't allowed to enter and were detained until after the meeting was concluded. As per protocol, every attendee was thoroughly searched for weapons before being allowed entry.

A large oak table with ten red leather chairs stood prominent in the front of the room, facing rows of movie-like seats. The interior of the hall was purposefully dimly lit. The security guards were issued specialized night

goggles to ensure anyone acting out of character was spotted immediately.

Seated at the center of the large oak table, flanked by his council, Andrei kept his expression neutral. He was cognizant of the rigid atmosphere hanging over the room like a storm cloud. In the world they lived in, nothing remained a secret for long. Word had already spread that some of the groups here today had pledged allegiance to the Sicilian Mafia in an attempt to overthrow the Bratvas and with the aim of becoming the world leaders in crime. To those who upheld the ancient Bratva codes, this betrayal cut deeper than any knife.

Andrei had no doubt that Arian Guzun would be livid to discover that many non-Russian European groups were here today. Moreover, that the Guzun Bratva wasn't invited. His gaze sharpened as he spotted the leaders of one such uninvited group—a group that had a very intimate association with the Guzuns. In fact, their Pakhan was none other than the wife of Vadim Guzun.

Yet Sabira Guzun wasn't among the five leaders of the Koval Bratva taking a seat in the back row. Snapping his fingers, his trusted bodyguard and personal advisor, Oleg Gusev, stood next to him within seconds.

“Put a group of guards behind the Kovals in the back row. Ensure the perimeter outside is secured. If there is anyone skulking around, lock them up for interrogation.” He snapped his fingers once again as Oleg turned away immediately.

“*Da, Vor?*”

“Detain the Kovals once we're done. I wish to speak to their Underboss, Havel Novák.”

“*Da.*”

With a nod to send him off, Andrei turned to face the room and steepled his fingers, holding himself like a statue as the last few stragglers

hurried to their seats. There was no more doubt in his mind—there were traitors among them who had already allied with the enemy. The air was charged with suspicion and mistrust. He cleared his throat.

“Let’s begin.” His voice droned over the ripple of voices in the vast space.

Skipping the usual courteous welcoming and perfunctory introductions, Andrei cut straight to the heart of the matter.

“You all know why we’re here. I’m utterly disappointed that any true Bratva would ally themselves with Sicilian Mafia groups outside of our territorial borders,” he said with open disgust dripping from each word. His piercing gaze swept over the room.

“Do you even grasp the implication of this unholy alliance? Or are you so blinded by promises of money and power that you fail to see the sinister motivations behind this master plan?”

A low murmur rippled through the crowd. The division among them was palpable as heated debates flared up all over. Andrei had known some groups had defected, but he was shocked by just how many seemed to have crossed that line.

“How would you know what we’ve agreed, Pakhan Andrei?” a voice called out from the dissenters.

“Come now,” Andrei said magnanimously. “Don’t be bashful. Show your face. Despite our differences, you are safe to speak your mind. Stand and share your perspective, since you clearly believe me ignorant of the Mafia Dons’ true motivations.”

The murmuring grew louder, underscored by fists pumping the air as others urged the turncoats to show themselves, but no one dared. Under Janos Smirnov, they had feared the Red Bratva, but in his brief reign, Andrei had awakened a deeper terror—the devil inside him. His quiet rage seethed like

lava, ready to ignite at the slightest provocation. Even the bravest traitors knew not to push him too far.

The room grew silent under Andrei's blistering gaze. He had no more patience and refused to tolerate dissent. The time had come to remind them that the Bratva showed no mercy.

"Let me make this clear." His gruff voice simmered with quiet menace. "If the Bratva fractures over this, we will all fall. United, we are mighty, but divided, we will be crushed beneath the Mafia's heel."

Murmurs swept the room anew, but Andrei raised a hand to silence them.

"Make no mistake... if you ally with them, you will not retain power even over your own groups and territories. You will take orders from the *capo di tutti capi* or die for your disobedience. The Mafia allows no freedom, no dissent under their regime."

He paused, letting his words sink in.

"We have prospered because the Bratva respects strength through unity. The Mafia seeks only domination. You will not manage your own territories—you will grovel for their table scraps like dogs!" His fist hit the table with a bang.

"This is madness!" someone cried out. "Better to rule ourselves than become slaves."

Others echoed his sentiment. "*Da!* The Bratva bows to no one!"

"You speak truth, *tovarishchi*," Andrei said. "As comrades, we must stand together against this threat. Abandon these treacherous alliances for the promise of the illusion of power. Side with me and we will show the Mafia what true strength means!"

Cries of loyalty went up around the room. Andrei wasn't fooled. There were still those who remained quiet. He might have turned the tide, but

the war was far from over. Until Gareth Sanders breathed his last breath, the threat of a Mafia domination remained.

His gaze swept over the room. The warning was razor sharp in his voice.

“Beware those of you who side with a Mafia ally, I will personally defend the power of the Bratva... to the death, if need be, and whether it’s my life or yours, it matters not. No Sicilian bastard is going to rule over my territory.”

“*Da!* Andrei Smirnoff rules! There is no better example for all of us than a leader such as he. From the day he stepped into Pakhan Janos’ shoes, he hasn’t lied to us. He knows what is best for us and wants all of us to succeed. Bah! How can we trust an alien from another country over him? *Nyet!* We cannot. I realize that now.” The Pakhan of the Black Bratva rose and pumped a fist in the air.

Andrei breathed out in relief. Pavel Onokov was one of the big defectors. That he had switched loyalty back to side with the Red Bratva would help sway others as well.

“*Ypa* for Pakhan Andrei!” he shouted.

“*Ypa!* Pakhan Andrei! *Ypa!*” The hall exploded with shouts as the majority of the attendees hailed him with fists in the air.

With his expression stoic, Andrei nodded, feeling satisfied that the atmosphere in the room had shifted from negative to positive. The only remaining action was to switch the mindset of the groups he had noticed didn’t participate during the meeting—the few who were still committed to championing their enemy. Either that or eliminate them from the race... permanently.



“What a surprise to see you here, Havel,” Andrei said as he walked into the room where the five Koval Bratva leaders were detained. “Especially since I don’t recall inviting you to attend.”

“*Da*, as surprised as I was not to receive one, I’m sure,” Havel retorted in his usual assertive manner. He didn’t seem fazed that they had been caught.

Andrei sat down on the opposite side of the table, watching the five men curiously. Only Oleg Gusev and two men guarding the door were otherwise present in the room.

“Of course,” Andrei droned colloquially, “that poses the question of how you obtained the coordinates to this location. More so, how did you even know to be here, in Russia, at this exact point in time?”

“Like you, we are resourceful in many ways.” Havel crossed his arms. “Why are we being detained? We didn’t disrupt the meeting.”

“*Da*, you’re right. In fact, quite the opposite. You didn’t participate at all. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were here to gather information.” One eyebrow crawled higher as though he was amused. “Does your Pakhan know you turned informant for the Sicilian Mafia, Havel? Because as sure as I’m sitting here, there is no way in hell any of the Guzuns, including Sabira, would support what they are attempting.”

Havel’s lips compressed into a thin line.

“Let me rephrase that. I want answers, Havel. Either you give them freely, or I will make you talk. Your choice.” Andrei ignored the man on the left struggling to breathe as Oleg caught him around the neck in a

stranglehold. “So, let’s try this again. How did you know about this meeting, and who gave you the coordinates?”

Havel straightened and looked between Andrei and his comrade. “There’s no need for that. Let him go.”

“I suggest you start talking, my once dear friend since your comrade is turning blue already.”

“Gabriel Dalca.”

Oleg released his captive at the wave of Andrei’s hand.

“Of course, my dear cousin,” he said thoughtfully. “You do know that he’s not part of the Red Bratva anymore?”

“I heard,” Havel said gruffly. “Look, Andrei, I know this seems... unconventional, but all isn’t as it seems.” He shook his head. “Not only for us but for other groups as well.”

“You’re being blackmailed.” Andrei wasn’t surprised as Havel nodded with misery stamped over his face.

“I assume your Pakhan isn’t part of this act?”

“No. Gareth Sanders approached me personally, with the assistance of Michal Bielak, the Koval Bratva’s ex-Communication Avtoritet.”

Andrei listened uninterrupted as Havel relayed the meeting and the demands made by Sanders.

“To protect Sabira, we decided to keep the incident from her. When Gabriel contacted me, it was with an instruction to attend and, yes, gather as much information as possible.” Havel looked Andrei square in the eye. “We came here to reach out to you for help.”

“Did Sanders indicate at that meeting that Gabriel would be the mediator? The one issuing orders to you on his behalf—Gabriel, not Michal or himself?”

“No.” Havel frowned. “I got the impression he preferred to be

personally in charge of every Bratva group leader. He didn't seem to be the kind of person who trusted others to be as committed as he was to the cause he was forcing on us."

"But Gabriel expects you to report the information you gathered here today back to him, I assume."

"Yes, he made sure to repeat that instruction twice," Havel confirmed with a sour look on his face. "The little prick presented himself as Sanders' most trusted ally."

"Hmm, so, my dear cousin Gabriel is once again playing on both sides of the fence... interesting." Andrei leaned back in the chair. "The question is, who is on the other side of the fence? Well, let's not disappoint him. I'll give you information to relay to him. Something that will trigger a reaction beneficial to all of us. Once a traitor, always a traitor. It's a lesson Sanders has yet to learn." He got up and shook Havel's hand. "In the meantime, keep mum about all of this. Sabira Guzun won't be safe if she finds out what is happening in her territory. It's best that she remains ignorant."

"I agree." Havel hesitated on his way to the door. "Thank you, Andrei. I don't know what happened between you and the Guzuns, but one thing I do know, regardless of how feared you are as the Pakhan of the Red Bratva, deep down, you are a good, compassionate man."

"Don't be fooled by the façade, my friend."

"*Da*," Havel grimaced. "The question is, which part of you is the real Andrei... do you still know?"

Andrei watched them leave with a stony expression. It was a question that had been haunting him of late. Truth be known, he couldn't answer it. For the thin line between what was and what is had slowly been dissipating.

There was only the now. The present... this moment in time.

Chapter Fifteen



Three days later, Valley's Lake, Codru, Moldova...

Vanya surreptitiously watched Andrei from across the room, her heart aching and her mind confused. She struggled to hide the feelings still burning as fiercely as ever inside her, especially since he regarded her with cold indifference.

She studied his tall, broad-shouldered frame as he stood gazing pensively out the window overlooking the lake. He had disappeared for two days and returned yesterday without any explanation as to where he had gone. It stung more deeply than she cared to admit that he acted as if their passionate encounter in the forest had never happened. She could still feel the ghost of his hands on her body, his lips trailing fire across her skin. While she remembered every detail in vivid technicolor, he seemed to have deleted it from his mind entirely.

As much as it pained her, none of the tumultuous feelings showed on her face. As a Mafiosa, she never showed weakness. No one would know that late at night when she was alone, she allowed the tears to fall silently into her pillow over the man she had lost. Vanya yearned to reach through his aloof

façade and reconnect with the man she fell in love with, but the icy detachment in his eyes warned her away.

Sighing heavily, she watched his face turn. Their eyes caught in a moment of mutual remembrance. The flash in his eyes was so brief, she didn't know whether it had been real or her imagination.

"I'm going to fix lunch," he mumbled with his jaw clenched. He broke eye contact and walked to the kitchen.

"That man is infuriating," she snapped as he disappeared from view.

"Isn't he just," Zafira agreed with a benevolent smile. "But at least he's a good host. You have to at least give him that."

"Gmphf." Vanya jumped up and took the spot Andrei had vacated. Unseeing, she stared out the window.

Getting used to the stark blackness of the mask covering his left eye had been difficult at first. Not because it was disfiguring—quite the contrary since it made him even more attractive, in a dark, dangerous sort of way—but mainly because his entire personality had changed along with his appearance. Her mother was right—he was different. This man in front of her was evil and dangerous and didn't portray an inch of compassion for anyone.

Except that wasn't entirely true. If he didn't care, why had he bothered to abduct Zafira to keep her safe? For that matter, why did he allow her to remain at the house? Surely, he should be concerned that she would inform her brothers where they were?

Vanya started at the thought. *Blyad'!* *How could I have been so negligent?* Andrei hadn't confiscated her cell phone, and she had had ample opportunity to make a call to Arian, yet she hadn't given it a thought, not even while he was gone. That they were still here, and she didn't immediately excuse herself to do just that now that it came to mind was telling.

"Shouldn't you at least offer to help Andrei with lunch, dear?"

“You’re the chef in the family, Mom. I can’t even boil an egg without burning it.”

“Then I’d say it’s about time you learn.” She smiled sweetly. “Besides, you’re not an invited guest. You can’t expect to sit around all day and be served hand and foot.”

“I never expect anyone to serve me, and you damn well know it.”

“Watch your tongue, young lady.” Zafira’s steely response proved she would always carry the mantle of *Comare*, a woman who commanded respect purely because of her strength of character.

Feeling like a little girl being rapped over the fingers, Vanya mumbled an apology.

“Off you go. We can’t let him do all the work.”

“Believe me, he knows what a disaster I am in the kitchen. He’ll more than likely chase me out,” Vanya hedged. No matter how much of her mother’s steely backbone she had inherited, for some reason, the thought of being alone with Andrei made her tremble all over. Perhaps the dark, evil look in his eyes since his return had something to do with that... or maybe it was the desire that crawled under her skin whenever he was near to be devoured by that very beast inside him. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, Mom,” she snapped as Zafira gave her the evil eye for procrastinating. “Okay! I’m going.”

Just as she was about to walk into the kitchen, the doorbell rang. Relief washed over her. Calling out, she pivoted on her heel, “I’ll get it!”

“No, you won’t,” Andrei growled as he grabbed her elbow to hold her back. “I’m not expecting anyone.” He glowered at her as he released her and headed to the door. “I thought you’d be more aware of the danger.”

Vanya noticed his hand curling in preparedness around the butt of his gun.

“No one knows we’re here,” she called after him.

“If you believe that, the drugs have fried your brain even more than you realize.”

“Fuck you, Andrei!”

“Behave, you two,” Zafira’s calm voice cut their sparring short just as Andrei’s curse echoed through the house when he noticed who stood on the porch.

“What the fuck is he doing here?”

“Who?” Vanya and Zafira choired, straining to see without moving closer.

When the doorbell rang again, Andrei looked at Zafira over his shoulder.

“Stay out of sight. I don’t want him to know you’re here,” he said before opening the door.

“Maranzano, I can’t say I’m happy to see you.” His greeting was cordial as though he had expected the man’s visit.

“Ah, well,” Luciano smiled broadly. “Since I’m not here for you, your happiness is irrelevant to me.”

“*Isus Hristos!*” Vanya exploded as she walked closer. “You’re like a bad smell that won’t dissipate. First, you arrived uninvited at my house, and now you follow me here. One would think you would take heed of the warning Arian issued at the time.” She frowned darkly. “And just how the fuck did you know where I was?”

“Language, my dear,” Maranzano smirked. “First of all, your brother doesn’t rule the country. I can come and go as I please. Secondly, I always know where you are. How else? A husband should be aware of his wife’s whereabouts, don’t you agree?”

“Husband? Good God, you are completely insane. It seems you’ve

lost the last of your marbles, Maranzano.” She pointed to the car in the driveway. “I suggest you hit the road. Since Andrei is too polite to say it, I will. You’re not welcome here.”

“Let me spell it out for you, my dear. I came here to fetch my wife home, and I’m not leaving without you.”

“Since we’re reciting the ABCs, let me reciprocate.” Vanya leaned forward and all but spat into his face. “I’m not your fucking wife! I wouldn’t marry you, even if I were passed out.”

A pained look crossed his face. “Funny you should say that since you were so drunk that night, I believe you actually were out cold... on your feet.” With a flourish, he held out a document and a photograph. “But seeing as you require proof...”

Vanya’s fingers trembled from the anger surging through her as she stared at the marriage certificate. Her signature was scrawled boldly and in black at the bottom next to Maranzano’s. The picture was taken in front of Chiesa della Badia di Sant’Agata, a Catholic church in Catania, Italy. The priest standing next to them smiled broadly. No doubt, with his pocket full of cash in payment for performing the unethical ceremony. From all counts, it appeared to have been late at night since there were no people walking around in the background of the photo.

“Before you say it, I assure you the photo is authentic. If you still don’t believe me, I’ll personally take you to the church to inspect the notation of the marriage in their registry.” His eyes turned glacial. “You are my wife, Vanya. Legal and binding.”

“This is bullshit! There’s no way I would’ve...” Her voice drifted off as flashes of burning candles and a drone of a church choir singing ran through her mind like the reel of a vintage movie. “Fuck me,” she mumbled under her breath. They had gone to dinner, and the more she thought about it,

the more she realized she hadn't drunk that much that night, apart from two glasses of wine during the meal. It was after that her memory became fuzzy, but she did recall going to the church.

"Ah, so there it is. You do remember," Luciano boasted as he read the realization on her face.

"I didn't..." She looked at Andrei. His expression had turned thunderous, and she was hard-pressed not to take back a step. "It's not what you think." He shook off the hand she placed on his arm.

"What I think is that you should do as your husband says and leave with him. Neither one of you is welcome in my house."

"Isus Hristos, Andrei! Just listen to me."

"Oh, in case you're wondering, Andrei, there's no chance of annulling the wedding. We consummated it that evening... many times, I might add."

"You fucking liar! It's not... Andrei, for fuck's sake, don't look at me like that. It's not... just listen to me! He—"

"I'm done listening. Just get the fuck out of my house."

Vanya took a breath but swallowed the protest as she noticed the flash of victory in Luciano's eyes. However, that wasn't why she stopped trying to make Andrei understand what had happened. Three things happened to sway the choices she had. First, she now knew without any doubt that he had drugged her that night. Second was the reflection of her mother in the glass panel of the door heading their way, and the most important was the emotion that Luciano couldn't hide in time... one of pure hatred as he held out his hand.

"Come, my dear. It's time we left."

Whatever Maranzano was after, this was part of a well-laid-out plan. The victory of cutting Andrei down by taking what once was his wasn't his main purpose for coming here. Nor was the desire to have her as his wife. He

had something much worse in mind—not only for her but for her entire family.

He might have been Arian and Vadim’s best friend, but Andrei had been right all along to not trust him.

Luciano Maranzano wasn’t who he claimed to be. The only way she could find out what was behind his scheme was to play along. At least she had the advantage of knowing he was up to something evil. It would stand in her stead, since the bastard had no idea she was onto him. Another movement in the glass reflection spurred her to action. If there was one thing that would jeopardize the outcome of this night, it would be Luciano knowing Zafira was also there.

“Very well.” With a well-aimed elbow slamming into his gut, Vanya pushed Luciano out of the way and walked toward the car. She took utmost pleasure at the sound of him wheezing for breath. “Well? Are you coming, my dear husband?” she called over her shoulder.

“Aren’t you going to fetch your luggage first?” Luciano watched her with a puzzled expression. He had clearly not expected her to give in so easily.

The smile Vanya flashed at him was as bright as the midday sun. “Why bother? I’ve got a filthy rich husband now. You’ll just have to buy everything I need.” Jutting out one hip, she looked at him with her hands planted on her waist. “Well? Let’s get the hell out of here.” She cast a debilitating look at the man watching her with a closed expression. “There’s nothing here that holds my interest anymore.”

Vanya refused to give in to the heartache that Andrei had so readily believed she would willingly have married a man while she was mourning his death. Not even drunk or high on drugs would she have been that stupid or heartless.

Andrei should know her well enough to realize that.

Perhaps she had been the one fooling herself all this time. What she had believed was love was nothing other than a phantom faerie tale. Maybe she was the one who didn't know him. The man she had believed him to be would've given her a second chance. He would have seen through the broken pieces of half-truths and realized that hurt and insecurities were what drove the wrong choices she had made along the way.

Except he didn't... he chose to cut her off.

Da, Vanya, don't forget. He did so long before that fateful day that he was shot. He's the one who doesn't deserve your pain.

Cursing herself for not calling Arian and telling him where she and Zafira were, she got in the car. Since Andrei didn't believe her and clearly didn't trust her anymore, she was on her own.

Like always, she didn't waver in the face of the danger the man getting into the car presented. Luciano Maranzano might be a cruel Sicilian mobster, but he had just made a serious error in judgment.

Vanya Guzun was vicious when it came to protecting her family.

Chapter Sixteen



“How could you allow her to leave with that man, Andrei?” Zafira fought against his hold in an attempt to rush outside and stop Luciano from leaving with Vanya.

“She left on her own accord, *Comare*. She’s a grown woman and old enough to fuck up her own life.”

“There’s no way in hell she would’ve married Luciano Maranzano.” She shrugged off his hands and stormed back to the den.

“How do you know? From what I heard, she spent months living with him in his villa in Catania. Their exploits at the time were splashed all over the tabloids. No, I’m afraid I’m not as convinced as you are.” His eyes splotched with venom. “It completely throws your theory of her undying love for me out the window, doesn’t it?”

“Andrei, she was on her way back to Moldova the day you abducted me and took me to Janos. I made her turn around the plane because I knew the Sicilian Mafia had something to do with you being shot. At the time, I believed she was safer there than in Moldova, where everyone was trying to oust the Guzuns from the top dog position. She only stayed to hack into their mainframe and find out what Maranzano was up to.” She sat down. Her tone

sounded weary. “You made a serious mistake today, my dear. Vanya is the one who found out that Maranzano had an association with your uncle and that he had a mole in our organization.”

“Gabriel.”

“Yes, your cousin. How else do you think they found out where I was held?”

“That doesn’t negate the fact that she married the fuckface, *Comare*.”
Andrei remained steadfast.

“You should know better than anyone how easy it is to fake documents, Andrei.”

“Maybe so, but I saw in her eyes the moment she remembered. No matter what you may believe to the contrary, I know her. Your daughter’s memory might be hazy, but she married Maranzano. Congratulations, Zafira. It seems you’ve gained a son-in-law.” He chuckled. “I don’t know why you’re so upset. From what I recall, you and your sons were always singing his praises. He was treated as one of the family from when he was a boy when Viktor and his father were friends. When did that change?”

“The day Vanya found out he had used one of our most trusted comrades to spy on us.”

“Hmm, well, unfortunately, a little too late, don’t you agree?”

“If you’re not going to do anything, phone Arian. Now, Andrei.”

“The question you should ask yourself is this... how did Maranzano know where to find Vanya? There are only two people who know about this house. She and Arian. It was clear she didn’t tell him.” He cocked his head sideways. “Do you still wonder why I don’t trust your son, *Comare*?”

“How would Arian have known she was here? You’re as clever as he is. Neither of you would ever do the obvious thing. Hiding out at your house would be the first place he would look.”

“I doubt that. I told him I bought land and intended to build a house here. That was over six years ago. We never spoke about it again. He doesn’t even know the house is finished or that I used it as an escape now and then. Besides, if he did, he would’ve come looking for you long ago.” He shook his head. “Besides, Vanya still has her phone and her watch. Both have tracking devices installed that only he has the logins for, so I ask again, *Comare*, why should I trust your son?”

“Are you saying... I thought you had signal jammers installed everywhere, and that was why you weren’t concerned about anyone finding me or her.”

“I do, but if Arian had checked the history of her movements, he would’ve noted the last tower it pinged off of, and that would’ve been enough to trigger a memory of this property.”

“Arian wouldn’t have... he doesn’t trust Maranzano anymore, Andrei. Something is wrong. Very wrong.” Zafira started to pace. “If this place is so secure and access is only granted via the gate past the guards, how did he get to the house without them contacting you before letting him in?”

“Good question.” It was a concern from the moment Maranzano had knocked on the door, but since Zafira immediately went on the attack upon them leaving, it had slipped his mind. He quickly phoned the guardhouse. After reviewing the CCTV footage at the gate, the supervisor confirmed that a black GMC truck had entered and exited not so long ago.

“The driver opened the gates using a remote control. I’m sorry, sir. According to the system, the unit sequence used belongs to you, and with the tinted windows of the truck, we had no way of knowing it wasn’t you, so we had no reason to stop him.”

Andrei was already walking into the house’s control room by the time he ended the call. Zafira followed on his heels.

“What did he say?” she prodded when he didn’t say a word but started searching the security database.

“Fucking bastard hacked the drone system. He must’ve been watching the house for a while. The question still remains... how the hell did he know to home in on this exact location? The last tower her devices would’ve pinged off is over thirty miles away. Unless...”

“Unless what?” Zafira was becoming agitated.

“Unless she’s wearing a tracking chip.”

“What kind of tracking chip?”

Andrei glanced sideways at her. “One implanted under her skin. They are much harder to block than electronic devices.”

“But... *Vot i vse, on pizdets!* I’ll personally kill the motherfucker!”

“We have a bigger problem, *Comare.*”

“What is more important than my daughter’s safety, Andrei?”

“Your life. If he has been using the drone to spy on the house, he might have seen you and Vanya going for walks. He didn’t come to fetch her at this very moment because of his undying love for her. Maranzano is building a backup system if his master plan fails.”

“What master plan?”

Andrei continued as if she hadn’t spoken.

“First, he takes Vanya out of the equation to keep Arian and Vadim occupied with concern over her, then he’s going to come for you. He’s found the one weakness of the Guzuns, *Comare.*” His eyes darkened. “Your love and commitment to each other. He knows they would do anything to keep the two of you alive.”

“He fucking better pray I don’t find him first,” she swore as she followed him back upstairs. “We need to do something, Andrei.”

“I already am. I put a covert security team on watch around the house

a week ago. They are tracking the truck.”

“And what if—”

Andrei’s cell phone ringing cut her short.

“Yes?” His expression turned thunderous as he listened to the security guard at the gate.

“They won’t leave, so you might as well let them through.” Ending the call, he headed to the front door, opened it, then spun around, and sat down in a large wingback chair facing the entrance. “Suddenly, my house has turned into Grand Central Station!”

He stubbornly refused to respond to Zafira’s inquiry about who was coming. It was evident in the tautness of his body that he was expecting the visit to be anything but friendly.

“*Spasibo Bozhe*, Mom, you’re okay!” Vadim’s gruff voice sounded through the room as he, Arian, and Sabira walked through the door moments later.

Andrei was surprised when Zafira rushed to her sons and hugged them fiercely. In all the years he had known the Guzuns, he had never witnessed such intimacy between mother and sons. Any type of affection was strictly limited to behind closed doors, definitely not in full view of an adversary.

Arian’s gaze locked on Andrei. “Where’s Vanya?”

“You just missed the happy reunion,” Andrei said humorlessly. “She left with her husband.”

“Her what?” Vadim’s face darkened while Arian cursed viciously.

“Ah, I see you already made the connection.” Andrei lazily lit a cigar and watched his once best friend through the swirling smoke. “Guess you also weren’t invited to the wedding.”

“Someone fucking better fill me in. What the hell is he talking about,

Mom?” Vadim looked between the two men facing off.

“Luciano Maranzano.” Zafira spat out the name as if it was poison.

“I knew the fuckface was up to no good when he arrived out of the blue at her house. Why the hell didn’t you call me, Andrei? We could’ve stopped him,” Arian exploded.

“Why would I have? She left with him of her own accord. He didn’t force her and—”

“Enough!” Zafira’s voice carried a powerful command as she stared him down. “That is not how it happened, and you know it. She was afraid he would see me. That’s why she left with him.” Holding up a hand in warning, she silenced the words jumping to his lips. “I don’t want to hear it. My daughter’s life is in danger. You said as much yourself. So, what are you going to do about Andrei?”

“I’m not doing shit. She’s not my responsibility, nor did I invite her here. Either way, she’s a big girl. She made her bed, now she has to lie in it.”

“*Blyad*’! Now you listen—”

“I suggest you all stop this bickering and start acting. Vanya is in bigger danger than any of you realize.” Bogdan’s gruff voice rumbled through the room. He had entered silently but kept quiet to soak in Zafira’s presence. When she turned to face him, he avoided her eyes and looked at Arian and Andrei. “In my opinion, the authenticity of the marriage is debatable, but one thing I do know... Vanya didn’t consent to its consummation.”

“You knew about the marriage?” Zafira’s voice cracked with the strain of keeping her anger controlled.

“No, this is the first word I heard of it.”

“Then what do you mean?” Zafira crumbled to the sofa, already guessing what was coming.

“He must’ve drugged her since she only had wine with dinner but couldn’t remember what had happened most of that night. The next morning, she realized that...” Bogdan’s jaw clenched. “He raped her while she was passed out.”

“He’s a dead man walking.” Andrei’s lips didn’t move, but the words were as clear as day.

“I warned the bastard the day he arrived at Vanya’s house. I’m gonna personally castrate the swaggering bull’s shit-stained penis with a blunt knife. No one does that to my sister and lives.”

“You’ll have to get in line,” Andrei sneered.

“She’s not your concern, Smirnoff,” Arian pointed at Vadim. “We’ll handle the matter ourselves.”

“Don’t be obtuse, Arian,” Zafira snapped. “With the resources of the Guzun and the Red Bratva combined, you are more powerful, and believe me, Maranzano will not be sitting on his throne waiting for you. He’s going to have an entire army to protect him.”

“This asshole shot you, Mother,” Vadim protested. “You know he wants to take over the Guzun organization. Do you expect us to hand it to him on a silver platter?”

“If you carry on like this, he’s not the one who’s going to walk away with the prize, my son.” Zafira sighed heavily. “This has gone far enough. I can’t prove it, but I believe Andrei when he said he didn’t try to assassinate me. If he did, why on earth would he bother to protect me all this time?”

“That doesn’t dispute the fact that he has our father’s blood—”

“No, Arian, he doesn’t. Viktor wasn’t his father. He did his own investigation after Janos spun the same story to him but chose not to let Janos in on his knowledge.”

“And why is that, I wonder?” Arian said sarcastically.

“My loyalty has always been with the Guzuns, Arian.” Andrei's dulcet tones were calming. “That never changed until the day I was shot.”

“Which you blame me for, but I still don't know why.”

“If that's the truth, then I made an error in judgment, and I apologize. I have no aspirations to take over the Guzun Bratva, Arian. I have more than enough power already. I don't yearn for more. Comare is right. We'd be stupid not to combine our power and fight a common enemy. Gareth Sanders poses a bigger threat than any of us want in our future.”

“And Maranzano. I never realized it until recently, but he's just as power-hungry as that shady bastard.”

Andrei nodded. “For now, let's not waste any more time. We need to get to Vanya.”

“Well, inherently, Maranzano is a coward, so my guess is that he's already on a plane heading back to Sicily,” Vadim said.

“I agree. Let's go. Bogdan can pilot the plane. Sabira, I need you to stay here with my mother.” Arian looked at Andrei. “Will they be safe?”

“Yes.” Andrei briefly explained the security measures he had taken. “I also just instructed my security team to send six guards to the house.” He took out his cell phone. “Before we rush to the airport, let me check in with the covert team. They've been following Maranzano since they left.”

Anger painted a picture of rage on Andrei's face minutes later as he ended the call with the team leader.

“They lost him at a private airfield twenty miles outside of Codru. They took off on a private jet. According to the flight plan lodged, he's not heading to Italy, but to Braşov in Romania.”

“He must've confiscated Vanya's phone and watch since we lost the signal a couple of miles outside of Valley's Lake. Luckily, Arian remembered you told him about this house.” He looked at Andrei. “Romania?”

How the fuck are we going to find him there?” Vadim’s frustration was rife in his voice. “Even if we know which airport he’s heading to, by the time we get there, they will be long gone. He could go in any direction from there.”

“I know of one person who would know all the locations of his hideouts.” Andrei strapped on a set of knives and checked his gun. “I believe it’s time I spend some quality time with my cousin Gabriel. I don’t believe it’s a coincidence that he’s in Moldova at this time.”

“How do you know?” Bogdan was itching to leave.

“I’ve been keeping tabs on him since I struck him from the position of power in the Red Bratva. He’s been sulking ever since and went MIA. He’s been traveling all over the world, wasting the inheritance Janos left him. According to recent reports, he’s at the Radisson Blu Leograd Hotel in Chisinau. I’ll have my Underboss pick him up and take him to the Guzun interrogation bunker at the cemetery.”

“Good. My hands have been itching to get a hold of him.” Bogdan’s words chased after him as he headed to the door.

“I’d prefer that you stay and protect the women, Bogdan.”

Arian’s instruction stopped Bogdan in his tracks. He turned around slowly. His eyes flicked briefly to Zafira. Their eyes locked, but he looked away with a grim expression.

“With all due respect, Pakhan, I would rather use my skills where they are needed.”

“I’d prefer Bogdan to come with us since he knows the truth about what Maranzano did. We’re going to need him,” Andrei interjected to prevent a drawn out debate. “I assure you, the guards will protect them with their lives should the need arise.”

“Then let’s go,” Bogdan grumbled and walked off.

“Andrei?” Zafira stared at him as she caught a momentary unguarded

look on his face as he watched Bogdan leave. “What did Bogdan do?”

With a curse, he shook off the melancholy weighing him down.

“Nothing you should be blaming him for, *Comare*. Beware, don’t lose the one good thing in your life because of pride.”

Andrei walked out before he said too much, all too aware that he himself didn’t practice what he had just preached.

Chapter Seventeen



The Guzun interrogation bunker at Cimitirul Ciocana, Chişinău, Moldova...

Since it was well past the midnight hour, the cemetery was cloaked in gloomy darkness. Row upon row of weathered headstones glinted in the moonlight where they stood sentinel over their occupants slumbering below. A chill wind rustled through the skeletal trees as the four imposing men arrived silently with their prone prisoner slumped over the shoulder of the bulkiest of them.

Their footsteps crunched on the gravel path as they wound through the graves toward a large mausoleum at the edge of the cemetery. Constructed of cold gray stone, it loomed like a solemn fortress with the last name ZUKOV etched over the entrance. The sound of the iron doors creaked ominously through the silent necropolis as they pulled them open.

“Make sure the gate is locked behind us, Vadim. I don’t want any uninvited guests interrupting us,” Arian said as he started to descend the narrow staircase spiraling into the darkness below.

The meager light barely illuminated the slick stone steps. Reaching the bottom, he flipped an electrical switch, bringing dim lighting to the

hidden bunker. The others followed silently. Bogdan, with marked unconcern, dumped Gabriel's body on the floor.

"Ugh!" The grunt followed as his head cracked against the wall and painfully woke him from a chemically induced slumber.

The interrogation room was all cold concrete and damp earth. Rusty pipes lined the low ceiling, and chains hung from hooks on the walls. A single bare bulb cast ominous shadows across the single steel chair set beneath it. This was a place of fear—of secrets, pain, and death. No cries would ever reach above ground to disturb the eternal rest of those interred.

Gabriel's heart hammered in fear. The burlap sack over his head blinded him to his surroundings. With his hands bound behind his back and the cold concrete icy against his skin, it was a struggle, but he managed to sit up.

"What the fuck is going on?" he yelled. His voice resonated around unseen walls. "Where am I? Who are you? What do you want from me?"

Only ominous silence answered his pleas. Whoever had brought him here did not utter a single word. He didn't even know how it had happened. All he remembered was having a drink at the bar of the hotel... then nothing.

Gabriel strained his ears for any clue but could make out nothing except the frantic pounding of his own pulse.

The terror of the unknown gripped him in its icy fingers. As beads of cold sweat trickled down his neck, he came to the conclusion that his deeds had finally caught up with him. The Guzuns knew he had been working with the Sicilian Mafia, but they had already taken their pound of flesh from him for that. A myriad of questions ran through his mind. Why would they once again capture him? Moldova wasn't theirs. He could come and go as he pleased. Or was that it? They didn't want him anywhere in the country? Or was it someone else? But who?

Blind and powerless, he shivered uncontrollably. Many of the choices he had made in his life were never his own. Janos Smirnoff had paved the road he had traveled from when he was a child. Deceiving the Guzuns, however, by supplying Maranzano with intel of their organization, had been his decision. If they were the ones watching him silently with a confidence that he could feel sizzle in the air, this time he knew, there would be no escape.

Bile rose in Gabriel's throat as his imagination supplied visions of what torment might be inflicted on him in this dark place beneath the earth. He strained against his bonds but only succeeded in abrasions around his wrists. He had no option but to wait as his breath choked with dread for whatever his captors had planned. He gasped in fright as hard hands yanked him to his feet and tied his legs and arms to a chair.

"Blin! Let me go! You have no right to—"

His relay was cut short as the burlap sack was abruptly ripped from his head. As Gabriel's eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, his heart dropped into his stomach. He immediately recognized where he was—the Guzun's mausoleum interrogation bunker. It was confirmed as he found himself facing four very familiar men watching him with their eyes full of vicious disdain.

However, it was the man in the middle, the one who terrified him the most, that he stared at with trepidation—his cousin Andrei Smirnoff. Even before he became the Pakhan of the Red Bratva, Andrei's reputation as the most feared assassin in the criminal world was well known. Gabriel had witnessed firsthand the creative cruelties Andrei inflicted on those who opposed him.

"My dear cousin, it's so good to see you again," Andrei said in a tone that dripped with false warmth.

"Wh-What is this, Andrei?" Gabriel stammered. "I've stayed out of

the way, I haven't been—”

His words were cut off as Andrei struck him hard across the face. Gabriel's head snapped to the side. He gasped for breath as the coppery taste of blood filled his mouth.

Raw fear took hold of him as realization struck. He wasn't leaving this place alive. Andrei's manic glare told him his cousin was walking a tightrope. There would be no mercy, no quick end.

“Pl-Please, Andrei,” he whimpered. At that moment, he was robbed of all bravery and stood helpless against the tears filling his eyes. “We're family. You... Let me explain...”

Andrei stepped closer as he tugged on a pair of black leather gloves. Gabriel recognized them—they were his favorites for interrogations. He'd be begging for death soon enough.

“We're not here for small talk, nor am I interested in your whimpering pleas. The quicker you tell me what I want to know, the better... for you, at least.”

“I... what do you want to know?”

“Where is Luciano Maranzano?”

A warm wetness spread over Gabriel's lap as he pissed himself in sheer terror when the question registered in his mind. As much as he feared Andrei, so did he dread the wrath of the Sicilian Don. Either way, he was a dead man. He knew that Andrei would take his time and draw out the pain as long as possible.

As the first blow landed, Gabriel let loose a blood-curdling scream. He knew it was in vain. He had been in this very mausoleum many times during interrogations as a trusted advisor to the Guzun Bratva. No one would hear him down here.

“Last chance, Gabriel,” Andrei said darkly. “Tell me what I want to

know.”

Gabriel spat a mouthful of blood onto the concrete floor. “Go to hell,” he rasped as he dug deep for courage and stared at Andrei with defiance still burning in his eyes.

Andrei smiled. “Wrong answer.”

Gabriel started, and his eyes went wide with fear as he watched Andrei scrape two long, sharp steel rods together. An awful screeching noise echoed around the bunker.

“Wh-What are you— *Isus Hristos!*” Gabriel’s words morphed into an ungodly scream as Andrei ruthlessly stabbed the rods deep into his thighs, not stopping until the bones prevented further penetration. Blood streamed down Gabriel’s legs as he whimpered in agony.

“Well, that escalated quickly,” Vadim remarked dryly.

“NO! NO-NO! Please, st-stop!” Gabriel begged hoarsely. His pleas turned to piercing shrieks as Andrei held up a set of jumper cables. Sparks flared as he touched the clips together. Gabriel’s eyes darted to the side. The cables were connected to a high-voltage generator. “No! You can’t do this,” he screeched as Andrei amped the dials higher.

Gabriel thrashed against his restraints until Andrei grabbed his jaw in an iron grip.

“Hmm. *Nyet*, still the wrong answer,” he hissed as he stared into his eyes and brought the live clips down onto the protruding steel rods.

Gabriel’s body contorted in excruciating spasms, his screams bouncing endlessly off the concrete walls. The sickly sweet smell of burning flesh permeated the air as Andrei held the cables in place, his face devoid of emotion. After endless seconds, he released the clips, leaving Gabriel convulsing violently.

“Shall we try this again?” he asked calmly, as if inquiring about the

weather.

Gabriel could only whimper, tears streaming down his face, as he prayed for the release of unconsciousness... or death. If this was only the beginning, he would prefer to die a quick death.

“I d-don’t kn-know where he is.”

“So disappointing, Gabriel.” Andrei shrugged. “Very well.”

Gabriel started screaming before the clips touched the steel pens as he watched Bogdan turn the dials even higher.

“R-Romania. He’s in Romania in Braşov,” he shouted to keep Andrei from torturing him further.

“We already know he’s heading there. I want an exact location, Gabriel.” Andrei’s jaw locked as Gabriel shook his head. “My patience is running out. I suggest you start talking quickly. Believe me, this has only been a prelude to what’s coming.”

Lowering his head in defeat and his chest heaving from exertion and pain, Gabriel rumbled off an address.

“What security does he have?”

“Nothing. He doesn’t expect anyone to ever find out about the place.”



Andrei made a call to his Underboss with the instructions to confirm the location and to send him a live link directly from the GeoEye system. It took twenty strenuous minutes where Gabriel’s heavy breathing was the only sound in the room until Andrei received the intel. Studying the footage, his

smile turned cold as he zoomed in on the figure of a man walking out onto the porch of the large ski lodge.

“I’ve got you now, you bastard.” Walking toward the stairs, he said over his shoulder, “He’s yours, Bogdan. It’s time he learns there are always repercussions if you fuck with the wrong people.”

“NO! Andrei, wait! I gave you what you wanted. We’re family!” Gabriel screamed in terror.

“So, you did.” Andrei stopped to look at him. “Family or not, you are also the reason Maranzano managed to turn many Bratva groups against the Red Bratva and the Guzuns. For that, you will pay.”

Shutting his mind against Gabriel’s screams as Bogdan started slashing at him with a rapier-like knife, he walked out of the mausoleum with Arian and Vadim on his heels.

“Why didn’t you ask him about Gareth Sanders?” Arian wanted to know as they made their way back toward the entrance.

“I just did.” Andrei’s expression turned enigmatic as he looked at the two men. “I thought you would’ve made the connection long ago, Arian. Sanders and Maranzano are one and the same man... and the bastard who shot me that night.”

Chapter Eighteen



Two days later, Gareth Sanders, aka Luciano Maranzano's ski lodge, Braşov County, Poiana Braşov, Romania...

“So, is this supposed to be our honeymoon?” Vanya had silently been fuming, but she did a good job of hiding her true feelings from Luciano. It had been difficult to suppress the need to wipe the smirk that had been slanting across his face for far too long.

Even though she had expected it, she had fought against losing her phone and watch, but it was a battle she lost very quickly when Luciano threatened to turn around and pay a visit to her mother.

“Did you honestly think I don't know she's at that bastard's house, my dear?” It was at that point the smirk had started to irritate the hell out of her. *“I'm not an idiot, Vanya. I know your brothers can trace you, so either hand over your phone and watch or you can say goodbye to dear old Mommy.”*

“It is the perfect location for a honeymoon, isn't it?” Luciano looked around the vast space of the ski lodge out over the snow-covered mountains

with pride ubiquitous in his gaze.

Fucking useless peacock! Priming his feathers as if he created nature's beauty surrounding us.

“Unfortunately, we have some work to do before we can indulge in the pleasurable benefits of matrimony.” His gaze held hers captive through the thick haze of cigar smoke, forming a halo around his head.

“Gah! If you think I’ll help you with any of your devious plans, you’re even more demented than I realized.”

“Come now,” he laughed. “Is that a way to speak of your dearly beloved?”

Vanya clamped her lips together, refusing to add to his enjoyment by further sparring verbally with him.

“We could always bring your mother here as an incentive to make you come around.” He dragged on the cigar, his cheeks hollowing with pleasure. “Just say the word.”

“Oh please, how gullible do you think I am?” She smiled gleefully. “Or should I rather say, how stupid are you?”

“Careful, Vanya. My patience is rapidly running out.”

“You overplayed your hand, Maranzano. By now, there are so many security measures in place, not even an ant will get through to nibble on a grain of sugar at my mother’s feet.”

“Grow up, my dear. Your lover won’t involve your brothers. He’s as much after the top-dog position as I am. He won’t be that stupid to lose the only leverage he has over the Guzuns.”

“So, that’s why I’m here? You believe claiming me as your wife will give you the edge to sway other Bratva groups to support you rather than one of their own?” The tinkling of her laugh was like a slap in Maranzano’s face. “Oh, this is precious! I would’ve thought, as a Sicilian Mafia mobster, you

have more common sense than that. Either that, or you are completely oblivious as to how Bratva loyalty is bred.”

“Loyalty has nothing to do with it. No one will say no to the power and money they’ll gain under my rule.”

“Hmm. Ah, well, I guess you hit the nail on the head. Gold star for you, my dear husband. You have found the winning combination to become the... what was it you’re after again?”

“Global crime supremacy.” The response sounded clipped and strained. It was evident he was struggling to contain his temper.

“Of course, how could I forget? You want to become the all-powerful Pakhan-Capo, or is it Capo-Pakhan?” This time, Vanya curled over with laughter. “I have to give it to you. You dream big.” Her mirth ended as quickly as it began. “Just a pity it will remain a dream. You might have visions of grandeur because you’re at the head of the five Sicilian Mafia families... the mighty *La Cosa Nostra*, isn’t it?” She produced a perfect smirk of her own. “It won’t happen here. The Bratva will never bow to one ruler... especially a foreigner outside of our territory.”

“I’ve had enough of your ridicule.” He stabbed out the cigar stub in the ashtray. “Let me make it abundantly clear. You will do as I say because if you don’t, I will detonate the bomb at Smirnoff’s lake house.” A flash of satisfaction brightened his eyes as Vanya turned to stone. “You didn’t think I wouldn’t have a backup plan, now did you? I’ve been around too long and have planned the outcome of this project in too much detail to allow a bitch like you to thwart my plans.”

“I don’t believe you. Andrei has too much security around his property. There’s no way you would’ve been able to—”

“Who is the naive one now? Ever heard of a missile, my dear?”

“You fucking, bastard!” The thin line of control within Vanya

snapped. The thought that her mother and Andrei's lives were at stake catapulted her across the room before sanity had the chance to kick in. "I'll fucking kill you!"

Vanya had never seen him fight, and with blind fury guiding her, she was caught off guard by his quick reaction as he sidestepped her attack to wrap his arm around her throat in a stranglehold.

"Holy fuck," she gasped as a sharp pain seared from her side to her brain when he stabbed a short rapier-like knife into her.

"Not to worry, my dear, I won't remove it... just yet. We don't want you to bleed to death while I fuck you, now do we?" he taunted with a hushed voice against her ear as he forced her face down over the dining room table with her hands caught behind her back. The tight hold on her twisted arms, combined with the debilitating pain from the knife in her side, was too strong for her to fight.

"You'll be sorry you ever touched me, Luciano Maranzano. This time, I'm not passed out. If you think I'll crumble in a weak puddle once you're done, you don't know me very well— Agghh!" The threat ended in a blood-curdling scream as he ruthlessly tapped the knife and pushed it deeper. "I'm gonna fucking kill you," she sneered. In her mind, she saw him lying in a pool of blood with his own knife buried into his eye.

Patience, Vanya. You can take this. Let him have his way. When he ejaculates, you strike.

"I'm shivering in my boots, dear wife." Pushing her dress up over her hips, he unzipped his pants.

"Well, just look at that. A match made in heaven."

"Who the fuck—" Luciano's surprise gasp at the gravelly voice behind them was still echoing through the room when Andrei's fist blasted against his cheek, throwing him off Vanya as he fell to the floor.

Scrambling to his feet, he eyed the four men positioned around the room. The only one who presented an immediate threat was Andrei Smirnoff.

“How did you know where to find me?” He took a step back as Arian quickly moved toward Vanya when she moaned and slipped from the table to the floor.

“He fucking stabbed her.” Vadim also rushed closer as Arian’s furious voice was the only answer Maranzano received. “No, leave it in until we can get her safely to a hospital.” Arian stopped Vadim from pulling out the knife. “At least this way, she won’t bleed out.”

“So, that’s how you get your pleasures.” Andrei waited until Arian nodded that Vanya was okay in answer to the questioning look he cast their way. “And to answer your question... finding you was easy since I, too, have many resources.” He smiled. “No matter how much money you dangle in front of men desperate for recognition, there are always ways to make them talk. I would’ve thought, as the mighty *capo di tutti i capi*, you had learned that lesson long ago.” A negligent shrug ridiculed Maranzano further. “Ah, well, I guess you’re not as imposing as you made us believe, after all.”

“Fuck you, Andrei. You have no idea what you just stepped into. What I am capable of and how much power and support I already have at my fingertips.” Luciano barked out a laugh. “Many of whom have sworn allegiance to you motherfuckers before.”

“And did so again. Or haven’t you heard the latest? No? Well, let me briefly update you. I swayed the majority of those you corrupted to remember why they have always been loyal to the Bratva customs and the freedom they have to rule and decide their own destiny. We are Bratva, Luciano. We don’t bow down to one man. We never have. We never will.” His smile broadened. “And as to what we just stepped in? I guess you’re referring to you being the god everyone so reverently referred to as the one who has the power to rule

all... Gareth Sanders. Funny, though. Personally, I think you would've gained far more support if they knew the mighty Sicilian Godfather was the one behind it all."

"You won't stop me, Smirnoff. Everything is in place. I will be your ruler." He swiped a hand across the room. "I will rule all of you!"

"*Destul*, the man has lost his marbles," Bogdan smirked. "Does he honestly think he's gonna walk out of here alive?"

"I'm not stupid, Rusu," Luciano sneered. "I have a secure backup to keep me alive, or did you believe otherwise? There was always the danger that you'd find out about Gareth Sanders and what I'm planning." He straightened with renewed confidence oozing from him. "If I don't check in with my operation's team every hour, you can say goodbye to your beloved *Comare*." He looked at Vadim. "And your lovely fiancé since she stayed behind to look after her, didn't she?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Vadim grated with anger boiling inside him at the thought of Sabira getting hurt.

"H-He's got a missile aimed at Andrei's house," Vanya said in a pain-filled voice. She breathed shallowly in an attempt to keep herself calm and her blood flow normal.

"So, go ahead." Luciano spread his arms as he mocked Andrei. "Take your best shot and kill the love of your life's dear mommy."

Andrei laughed. "Sorry to burst your bubble, Maranzano, but they're not at the house anymore. I had them moved while we were on the way here. So, be my guest, blow up the place. It's just a house and can be rebuilt. You, on the other hand, don't need to live to see it happening." Tapping a finger against the mask covering his eye, he sneered. "It's time you paid for this, fuckface. Yes." His smile morphed into a mask of evil intent. "I remembered—you're the one who shot me."

With the words floating through the air, he went on the attack. Luciano didn't have time to prepare himself since Andrei moved so fast, he saw no more than a blur. Pain exploded in his chin as a fist landed with so much force against his jaw that the bone splintered.

"Fanculo! Fuck! Gesù Cristo!" Luciano's pained curses were muted as he staggered back against the windowpane of the sliding door. It rattled dangerously.

"Let's dance, motherfucker," Andrei snarled as he stalked toward Luciano like a predator moving in for the kill. Luciano scrambled to regain his footing, spitting blood as he desperately tried to defend himself, while Andrei proceeded with an onslaught of blows.

The thick smacks of flesh on flesh echoed through the room. Luciano managed to land a few solid hits to Andrei's ribs, but he didn't even flinch. He retaliated with a fierce uppercut that snapped Luciano's head back violently, cracking his jaw further.

"I expected more of a fight, Maranzano," he taunted. "Or do your lackeys usually do all your dirty work?"

"Fuck you!" Luciano stumbled back. He tasted his own blood flowing freely—metallic and hot in his mouth. He had known he would be outmatched but refused to surrender. Lunging forward, he wrapped his arms around Andrei's midsection in an attempt to tackle him to the floor.

"Fanculo," he cursed as a feeling of inferiority swamped him when Andrei was immovable.

"You'll have to do better than that," Andrei laughed as he grabbed Luciano by the shirt and flung him effortlessly across the room. His body slammed into the wall with bone-jarring force. For long moments, he lay there, dazed and struggling to breathe through his mangled nose and mouth. As he looked up and saw Andrei looming over him with his eyes alight in

controlled fury, he envisioned the gates of hell opening up for him.

“Prepare to meet your maker, motherfucker.”

“That’s enough,” Arian said firmly as he stepped forward and grabbed Andrei's hand that was now fisted around his K-bar aimed for the death strike.

“He deserves to die,” Andrei retorted with clenched teeth. “Not only for what he did to me but for Vanya.”

“Yes, he does, but he’ll suffer more by spending the rest of his life in prison.”

Andrei’s eyes glimmered as his fingers tightened around the knife. “Let’s make sure he only suffers and won’t take any pleasure of his own ever again.”

Maranzano was too weak to stop him from unzipping his pants and yanking out his flaccid cock.

“This is for what you did to Vanya. Let’s see how *you* enjoy getting raped in jail, you motherfucker.”

Andrei’s words were drowned by Maranzano’s screams of pain and horror as, with one brutal swipe, he sliced off his cock. With a grim expression, he looked at the man who was now sobbing from shock and disbelief. “And just to make sure you don’t get it sewed back on by some miracle...”

Maranzano watched his appendage being hurled into the roaring flames of the fireplace. He passed out from pain and loss of blood, with the vision of his flesh shrinking as it became scorched and slowly burned to cinders.

Vadim’s dry response muted the crackling fire in the background.

“Well, that escalated quickly.”

Chapter Nineteen



Six months later... Chateau VanZun Winery, Dubasari, Moldova...

“Herewith our updated report on the notorious capo di tutti capi, or as he was better known across Sicily, America, and the EU, the Godfather Don, Luciano Maranzano. As you know, he was captured six months ago in Romania. His trial has been the most reported upon and followed worldwide in over a decade. For years, Maranzano managed to evade incarceration since the authorities couldn’t find any viable proof that he was associated with the Mafia. Although his exploits and success as a hotel tycoon were well known, it wasn’t linked to any shady dealings. Authorities are elated that the Mafia Boss, who has been suspected of orchestrating some of the most heinous crimes perpetrated by the Cosa Nostra, has been caught. After a grueling eight-week trial, he was finally found guilty of those deeds in a court of law. Early this morning, Judge Paolo Grossi, who heard the case, issued his sentence. Maranzano received two consecutive life imprisonment sentences with no option of parole on charges, among others, of murder, racketeering, and human trafficking. All his assets, as well as over one billion euros, have been placed under forfeiture. He will spend the rest of his life in the

supermax prison, Casa Circondariale Sassari 'Giovanni Bacchiddu' in Sassari, Sardinia.”

“It’s about time this comes to an end,” Vanya said as she switched off the television. “I’m so fucking tired of seeing his face whenever I switch on the telly.”

Slapping her hands down on her thighs, she got up and stared Bogdan down. He returned her gaze dispassionately.

“Well, that’s it then.” She waved a hand toward the door. “That’s the end of all of this babysitting. Now, you, too, can get back to your own life. My wound is healed. The big bad wolf is under lock and key, shackled to the wall and all. So, off you go. I don’t need to be guarded 24/7 any longer.”

“Until the Pakhan issues the instruction that you don’t require my protection services, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Bogdan! You’ve used me as an excuse long enough.” Vanya flopped onto her back on the sofa.

That Bogdan didn’t defend himself was more than telling. She gave him the side-eye.

“Gmphf, just as I suspected. It’s time you cleared the air with my mother. You know it as well as I do.”

“I know no such thing. Your mother made it very clear that I’m no longer welcome in her house.”

“Since when does a feared Bratva leader listen to a woman?”

“Your mother isn’t a mere woman, missy.” Bogdan glared at her. “She’s the *Comare*, and like every other Guzun soldier, I respect and fear her power more than that of the current Pakhan.”

“You, my dear darling, are the only man who need not fear anything from her.”

“You’re naive. Even after all that has happened, you still believe in faerie tales.” He leaned forward. “Why don’t you practice what you preach, princess?”

“What do you mean?”

“Andrei Smirnoff. You refused to let his loyalty to your brothers stand in the way before. You took the first step back then. Why allow his pride to keep you apart now?”

“There’s nothing left to fight for, Bogdan. He made it clear he doesn’t want to have anything to do with me.”

“As did your mother, me.”

“That’s different.”

“How exactly?”

“Mother is just being stubborn.”

“So is Andrei.”

“You know she’s a prideful woman.”

“So is Andrei.”

“She’ll forgive you, Bogdan, but it won’t be easy. If you truly want her, you’ll have to fight for her. I know you love her. Maybe it’s time you told her that.”

“Maybe you should follow your own advice.” Bogdan offered her one of his rare smiles. “Yes, missy, you still love him. You always have, and you always will.”

“As will you, my mother.”

“How about a pact?” Bogdan said after long moments of watching her silently.

“I’m listening.” Vanya sat up, her heart beating rapidly. She had been wallowing in self-pity for six months, ever since Andrei went back to Russia after saving her from Maranzano... and promptly forgot about her.

A nudge from someone who believed in the love she and Andrei used to share was just what she needed.

“You go get your man, and I go get my woman. The first one to say I do wins a brand new speedboat.”

“Throw in a set of hunting knives and we have a deal.”

“Done.”



A week later... The luxurious estate of Andrei Smirnoff, Chiverevo, Moscow Oblast, Russia...

Although tired after a long day strategizing with the Red Bratva council, Andrei Smirnoff was as alert as always. The vellus hair at the back of his neck stood on end the moment he stepped through the heavy oak front door into the cavernous entrance hall. A sense of unease washed over him as his instincts screamed that someone was here who did not belong, an intruder lurking within these walls.

He paused and listened intently for any sound betraying the interloper's location. Only silence greeted him, broken by the echoing click of his Italian leather shoes on the polished marble floors. Common sense argued that he must be mistaken. After all, he had deactivated the complex security system himself when he arrived moments ago. No one could have breached the perimeter fences and gained entry in that short time.

However, Andrei had long ago learned to trust his uncanny sixth sense above all else. It was that razor-sharp intuition that had kept him alive all these years. Now, it was screaming that an uninvited presence was hiding

somewhere in the sprawling mansion.

Cautiously, he moved through the great room, flicking on lamps that did little to pierce the inky darkness outside the small circles of light. He strained his ears for any whisper of sound—the scuff of a shoe, a muffled breath—but if someone was lurking, they were masters of stealth and silence.

Reaching the sweeping marble staircase, Andrei drew the Glock from his shoulder holster before ascending silently, stepping lightly to avoid any creaking. At the top, he paused and surveyed the shadowy hallway calculatingly. Still nothing. Whoever had infiltrated his sanctuary was highly skilled, but Andrei Smirnoff hadn't become an acclaimed assassin by being careless. There was an intruder somewhere in the house, and he would find them.

“You’re slipping, Pakhan Smirnoff.” Andrei cursed as the soft, familiar melody of Vanya Guzun’s voice curled around his soul. She nudged the back of his head with what he assumed was her 9mm Makarov. “Hand it over.”

Wordlessly, he held out his Glock and released it into her grasp. Her warm breath brushed against his temple.

“Or is it the memory of the redhead *malen'kaya shlyukha*, who you had dinner with, that robbed you of your senses?”

“Jealous much, Ms. Guzun?”

“You know I don’t share, Andrei. You are mine, and it’s high time you are reminded of that.”

“Ah, you’re here to seduce me into having torrid sex with you?”

“Wrong... well, maybe later, but for now, we’re going for a short drive.”

Andrei didn’t point out that she was much too close or proved just how easy it would be to disarm her and swap places. Instead, he meekly did

as instructed and descended the stairs ahead of her.

“So, you want to add abduction to your charges?”

“Listen who’s talking. The same man who kidnapped my mother twice,” she snapped and prodded him to move faster. “We’re taking your truck. Move it, Smirnoff. Time’s a wastin’, as they say.”

Once in the truck, he waited for directions. Surprise shot through him when they came.

“Take us to the Church of St. Panteleimon the Healer.” She looked sideways at him. “It is your parish, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. So, you need to confess all your sins and ask for the Lord’s penance. Am I supposed to be there as a witness?”

“*Nyet*, I already did that yesterday.” She was silent for long moments. Andrei got the impression she was psyching herself up for an explosive reaction from him. “We’re getting married.”

His heart skipped a beat. He had deliberately stayed away from Vanya for the past six months to give her time to get over the emotional trauma she had suffered. It was never meant to be a long-term parting. In fact, his intention had been to go to Moldova in two weeks to plead his case.

Of course, his Vanya would take the bull by its horns and not wait. May she never change.

“I sincerely doubt the priest would perform a marriage ceremony with the bride holding a gun to the groom’s head. This is real life, Vanya, not a blockbuster movie.”

“Would I need to hold the gun to your head?” For the first time since her arrival, she sounded insecure.

“That depends,” he said cryptically.

“On what?”

“On how nicely you ask me to marry you.”

“Look here, Smirnoff, just because—”

“And,” he continued as if she hadn’t burst out in protest. “Mostly on whether, regardless of what had happened in the past, you still love me.”

“That’s... I... you...”

“Because I still love you, Vanya Guzun. I never stopped. I suppose I will always love you. There you have it. If you conform to that one condition, it’s a done deal because it’s the only reason I’ll ever marry you. If not, we may just as well turn the truck—”

“NO! We’re going to get married.” Her eyes glimmered with suppressed joy, but she stubbornly refused to say the words.

“Are you sure? Because you need to realize once we do, that’s it. You’ll be my wife and I your husband until death do us part. I’ll never let you go, Vanya.”

“Good. I don’t ever want to be let go.”

“Hmm. Still not sure you’re ticking all the boxes of my requirements,” he mused in pretend seriousness.

“Will you marry me?” she said in a clipped voice.

“Just like that?” He looked at her sideways. “So impersonal, no sweet nothings thrown in? Ah, well, I guess you don’t really—”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” she sneered. Twisting in the seat, she went onto her knees and faced him with hands on her waist. “So, here I am, on my knees. Is that what you want? Okay, I did it, and here comes the sweet nothings...” She swallowed hard, but he refused to surrender. He was having too much fun. “I love you. I always have, and I always will. Please, Andrei Smirnoff... marry me.”

“Well, since you’re on your knees... Hey! I’m driving,” he said with a laugh as she punched him on the shoulder.

“This isn’t funny, I’ll have you know.”

He parked the truck in front of the church and turned to face her.

“No, it isn’t, but after all we’ve been through, don’t you think we deserve some laughter and joy to fill our wedding day?”

“So, the answer is yes?”

“Yes, Vanya Guzun, I’ll marry you.” With a tenderness she had never experienced from him before, he kissed her. “I was going to come for you in two weeks, but having you here now, you have no idea what it means to me.”

“You had six months. I’m not waiting another two weeks, Andrei. We’re getting married tonight.”

“You do know we’re going to have *Comare* on our heads if we do. She won’t be happy she didn’t get to plan her little princess’ wedding.”

“She can plan an after-party to her heart’s content, but I’m not waiting a moment longer.” Leaning over him to open his door, she held out her hand.

“Now, shall we, my love?”

“We shall, *malen'kaya printsessa.*”



Two hours later, at Andrei’s BDSM club, Klubnaya Sensatsiya...

Vanya stood at the window of his office on the first floor that overlooked the dungeon. The smile on her face had been there since she had said, “I do.”

“I never believed you were my brother. I didn’t feel right, nor could I accept you didn’t love me. I kept clinging to that, the bond we had, praying it wasn’t over.”

She leaned against him as he wrapped his arms around her from behind. Contentment flowed through them in that moment of shared love.

“It never was, my love. This is the culmination of what we began a year ago. I do love you, Vanya, so very much. Even with a gun against my head, I wouldn’t have married you if I didn’t.”

“Prove it. Show me how much you love me,” she demanded in her usual Mafiosa fashion.

He shook his head. “Loving someone isn’t an on-demand action, my love. It’s in every touch, every look, every kiss, and every word we speak to each other. What I will do is prove my trust in you and our love.”

“I like the sound of that,” Her voice trembled with emotion. “So, I’m waiting, my dearly beloved. Is this proof gonna happen any time soon?”

Andrei’s eyes gleamed deviously at the flagrant, bold-faced dare.

“Strip for me, wife.” He stepped back and stood watching with his arms crossed. “Then I want you to stand in front of the window with your hands against the glass and your legs spread.”

Vanya glanced at the window, more than aware that they would be on display to everyone downstairs.

“Or do you need to be motivated by some punishment?” A brief flash of insecurity swept across his face to rustle through the doubt that lingered in his eyes.

Vanya understood then. As much as she needed him to prove his love for her, he needed the same. Trust was a two-way street. They had both made mistakes. She had as much to prove as he did.

Heat suffused deep inside her core as the intensity of his gaze raked over her naked body when she quickly undressed. Vanya took the position, secure in the knowledge that only he mattered, not all the eyes she could sense watching.

“So, you want me to authenticate my trust for you. Is that it, wife?”

“Yes, husband.”

His warm breath on her neck was the only warning she had that he was behind her before he brushed his hands over her nipples.

“Ah, love, I love how responsive your tits are to my touch. Let’s give you something to keep them occupied while I validate my trust and love for you. Shall we?”

“Oh, shit!” Vanya gasped at the unexpected suction on her nipples. A hot, piercing shard of pleasure-pain pricked her clit in response.

“These are heavy-duty magnetic nipple balls. And this one, is a heavy-duty snake sucker,” he said as he rubbed her clit until she moaned, then he attached it to the taut nub.

“Oh, fuck. No, please, I can’t... I need to come already! Please, let me come,” Vanya wailed as the combined pain on her nipples and sucking on her clitoris threatened to push her over the edge.

“Just looking at you and breathing in your tart bouquet has me so ready for you. Hmm... I love it.”

The sound of him unzipping his cock was the spark that flashed through the thin veneer of her lust. Her combustible nature was set ablaze. A probing nudge, eased upon a lubricant drop from his engorged shiny knob, was all that was needed to find his entrance between her satiny folds. Andrei pushed in against the tight, fleshy walls to the sound of her moans.

“Spread your legs wider, wife, and keep those hands against the window. Now, my love, I’m going to take my time proving my love to you. I have quite a lot of pent-up energy to spend, and I’m in no rush. I mean, I have to make you believe I love and trust you, after all.” He sucked on her earlobe and whispered, “And you know my rule, my beauty. Don’t forget. Do not come until I tell you to.”

“Please, my love, fuck me. I need to feel you inside me.”

“I intend to. Be patient. I want to savor your delicacies first.”

Vanya glowed like an incandescent flame. Waves of heat penetrated through the porous, silky nacre to sear from their tenuous perch, the nascent droplets upon her spine and send them careening into the aperture of her gluteal rounds.

“Destul, Andrei! Just fuck me.”



Andrei soothed her ache and watched as the velvety pink petals acquiesced to his tumid girth. All the mundane worries of his life had been muted. The only thing that mattered was this moment. The thick cords in his neck strained with the urge to thrust slowly inside her.

It was a sensation that always made him feel like the most powerful man on earth. That first moment when her satiny folds swallowed his shaft and coated him with a delicious warmth as he savored the rhythmic clenching that begged for more.

“You are so hot and tight,” he managed to growl.

Vanya’s breath seemed to stutter in her lungs as his hard length drove into her, filling and stretching her. Her reaction was more than familiar; it was perfect. It awakened a heat inside him that clawed for release. It rose to the surface within him as a cry of raw, wanton delight escaped her lips.

Her cries echoed in the room as the first pricks of her climax tingled deep inside. Andrei answered with sharp thrusts until Vanya was wild, twisting in spasms of unadulterated ecstasy.

“Fuck me harder, Andrei! Fuck me!”

“I love you, Vanya. You know that, right?”

“Yes, yes! I do, as much as I love you,” she sobbed, driving her hips

back to force him deeper, drowning in an undertow of euphoria.

“Because in a few minutes, you might not think so anymore. I’m going to fuck you until there is no doubt in your mind that you belong to me, that your heart belongs to me, and that I have the right to take you like I’m about to... like you’re asking to be fucked.”

He gripped her hips and plunged back, impaling her to the hilt.

“Spread your legs wider, baby, then tell me how you want me to fuck you.”

“I want you to fuck me like a stranger. Like you want to erase the memory of all those before you. Like I am the only one. Now... do it now.”

Her voice crescendoed into a scream as Andrei complied. His hips grinding and rolling as he pounded into her, rattling the window with the force of his thrusts.

With slow intent, he pulled off the nipple magnets and the clit sucker, reveling in the low wail escaping from her.

“Come for me, my love,” he growled.

It was all she needed. The sound of jagged breaths and pulsing blood pounded in her ears as she was tossed about. Andrei held her as her knees buckled.

“Finally,” she sighed as his lips caught hers in a heated kiss. “You are mine.”

“And you are mine... forever.”

“Hand me your phone,” she said once she managed to breathe normally. “I need to place an order for our speedboat.”

“Now? Can’t it wait until tomorrow?”

“Oh, no... in this, time is of the essence.” Her smile brightened the entire room as she made the call and said succinctly as soon as it was answered, “I’ll take a silver and red Nor-Tech 390 Sport speed boat. Make it

snappy, and be sure it's a brand new one, if you please." Her tingling laugh was as refreshing as the light of love that sparkled in her eyes when she looked at him.

"My hubby and I need it for our honeymoon."

Epilogue



Ferma La Guzun, on the banks of the Dniester River, the home of Zafira Guzun...

“Comare?”

Zafira stiffened as the deep baritone voice washed over her. Every nerve ending came alive, even as she strove not to react.

“Who let you in?” The chill in Zafira’s voice was undeniable. She remained sentinel where she stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling window, staring out over the dark river.

It was inconceivable that even after hardly seeing Bogdan Rusu for the past seven months, she still sensed his presence whenever he was near. Even more so was how much she missed their talks, his dry humor, and the way he always instinctively knew when she needed cheering up.

Soulmates. That’s what the two of you are.

The traitorous thought arose unbidden and was quickly suppressed, but she refused to turn to face the large man. From the reflection in the window, he stood unmoving under the arch leading into the den and watched her with inscrutable eyes.

“Well, what do you want, Mr. Rusu?”

“It’s time we talked, *Comare*.”

“Unless it’s about the Guzun business, there’s nothing to talk about. You have no responsibility left toward me any longer. Arian appointed a new bodyguard, who I highly approve of. You are too valuable as an advisor to the organization, so I won’t insist Arian strip you of your position, but your services to me have been terminated months ago. I’m done with you, Rusu. I suggest you accept it.”

The ensuing silence throbbed with unspoken words. When he finally replied, his tone was carefully neutral.

“I was never appointed as your bodyguard, Zafira, not by Arian or Viktor, hence no one can dismiss me from a role I never officially occupied.”

She whirled to face him. Surprise was etched on her delicate features.

“What do you mean? Why else would you have stuck to my side like glue all these years?”

“If you have to ask me that question, I might as well buy that fucking speedboat for Vanya and walk away now,” he muttered irritably as he passed a hand over his eyes.

“What speedboat? What are you mumbling about, Bogdan?” Confused, Zafira searched his craggy face.

“It doesn’t matter.” He still hadn’t moved as he bit the words out harshly. Behind the anger, his eyes were bleak with long suppressed emotions she couldn’t decipher over the distance. His jaw turned grim as he exhaled, then continued in a gravelly voice, “You know Andrei isn’t Viktor’s son, so why are you still blaming me for his mistake?”

“I’m not blaming you for his mistake, Bogdan. What I am doing is ridding myself of a man I trusted with my life, and who kept secrets from me, even for years after Viktor died.”

“De dragul dracului, Zafira. Grow up. It happened almost fifty years ago. It wasn’t my story to tell. If anyone is to blame, it’s your dead husband.”

“Don’t you dare bring Viktor into this. He’s dead. Leave him in his grave.”

“Vanya is wrong. You just can’t move on, can you? All these years...” He shook his head, and for the first time since she’d met him, he allowed a sadness to crawl over his face. *“I wasted thirty years of my life hoping, missing out on companionship, love, having children because I was waiting... such a fucking waste.”*

“Stop talking in riddles, Rusu. Say what you came to say, then leave. I have things to do, and you’re wasting my time... No! Let me go! What are you doing?”

Zafira gasped for breath as suddenly, he was in front of her with one of his huge paws curled around her throat as he pushed her back against the windowpane. Tension was etched in every line of his powerful frame as his hold tightened until she was forced onto her toes.

“Bogdan, stop,” she choked out with tears forming in her eyes. Unbeknown to her it was the fear that was painted over her face that doused his anger. His gaze softened although his hold didn’t. With his thumb, he traced the fullness of her bottom lip.

“So beautiful... and yet so cold.”

“B-Bogdan... please.”

“I’m done, Zafira. We end this now, one way or another.”

“End what?” she croaked, desperately clawing at his hand.

Disappointment was chiseled over his face at her response as the gulf of misunderstanding yawned wide between them.

“You just can’t admit how you...” He sighed. *“So be it. I’m done defending myself, and I’m done being your emotional punching bag. You*

want me out of your life, Zafira? Then so be it... I'm gone.”

With a muffled oath and a final sweep of his rough fingertip over her lip, he released her and walked out with long, measured steps.

Zafira gasped as her legs gave out, and she slowly crumbled to her knees against the glass door. Watching him leave, her heart brimmed with despair. For the first time ever, she had been afraid of him.

Bogdan Rusu, the once gentle giant who would kill to keep her safe, had terrified her.

Not only of him as a man... but because ultimately, he had failed the test—he had failed her.

This had been his one chance to fight for her. To finally admit the love in his heart that her own had silently been begging for over the years.

But he chose the easy way out.

He walked away.

No one stood witness to the raw pain in her eyes as she stared out of the window. There was no one to appreciate the fierce and infallible *Comare* emotionally breaking down.

The only outward sign was the silvery path of a lone tear trickling down her cheek.



Meanwhile, ten miles away from the supermax prison, on the way to Casa Circondariale Sassari “Giovanni Bacchiddu” in Sassari, Sardinia...

Hate was an insidious poison as it slowly turned men into monsters. Luciano Maranzano had seen and experienced its corrosive effects firsthand. The way

it festered and spread like a sickness while consuming all in its path. He knew intimately the black depths it could drive a man to when fully unleashed.

The months during his trial and afterward, while waiting for his sentencing, had nurtured the bitter seeds of loathing in Luciano's heart. His rage grew unchecked as it eclipsed all else until he was blinded by the need for revenge. He thought of nothing but making his enemies suffer as he was suffering.

The Guzuns would pay. Andrei Smirnoff would pay. Their arrogance in having him imprisoned here had sealed their fates.

"Little did they know that sending me to this supermax facility was the worst mistake they could have made," he said sotto voce.

Fools. He had prepared for this possibility long ago. No prison would contain him. The smile on his face was in stark contradiction to the grim darkness glimmering in his eyes. He had warned them... the Guzuns, and that bastard Andrei Smirnoff.

One thing he had learned from an early age was to never embark on any journey without covering all exit points. However much he couldn't have foreseen being caught and sent to jail, it was an unforeseen possibility for which he had prepared.

Like his father had always said, "Have a backup plan, Son, for every backup plan you have."

"And I did, Father. I will never see the inside of that fucking supermax prison."

"Stop your mumbling," the guard growled, brandishing his rifle threateningly as he swayed along with the transportation van on the bumpy road. "You're giving me a headache."

Luciano stared back impassively with his eyes that were fathomless pools of gathering violence.

“I’ll fucking mumble all I want. Go ahead, *piccolo uomo debole*, hit me. Let’s see if you have the guts,” he taunted with menace dripping from each word.

The guard laughed derisively as he pointed at Luciano’s crotch. “At least I’m still a man. What are you now? A useless eunuch!” His sneering grin exposed rotting teeth. “Ah, with no *il pene*, you are gonna become the most sought after prison *puttana* from day one. *Si*, fresh meat for the inmates.”

Rage exploded through Luciano with the force of a detonation. With a guttural cry, he wrenched at the chains binding him, snapping the links through sheer berserker fury. The guard’s eyes widened in shock and fear.

“*Gesù Cristo*—” His cry was cut short as the chain whistled through the air before crashing into his face with brutal force. Blood and teeth sprayed as the man’s jaw was ripped from his skull.

Luciano loomed over the convulsing body with his chest heaving. His lips peeled back from his teeth in a gruesome mockery of a smile.

“I am still a fucking man, you *stupido cazzo*!” he hissed. “Unlike you, I don’t need a swinging dick to prove it.”

Outside, gunshots and screams erupted. His men had arrived right on schedule. Soon, he would walk free, ready to begin his long-awaited war of retribution. The Guzuns would learn the true cost of crossing him. Rivers of blood would flow before he was done.

Luciano waited calmly amid the chaos, watching the guard gurgle his last choked breaths. Blood pooled on the floor of the van, hot and slick. Inhaling deeply, he savored the coppery aroma.

“At least I got to have some fun.”

The doors opened, and with it came the blinding lights of the intercepting vehicles. Luciano didn’t move. He blinked and waited until his

eyes readjusted to the sudden brightness.

“We are ready, Capo.”

“*Buon lavoro*. The time has come.”

Yes, he would have his vengeance against those who wronged him. No mercy would be shown. He would rain fire and death upon them until their twisted, mangled corpses lay broken at his feet.

“Now, we end the reign of the Guzuns, once and for all.” His lips peeled back in a smile of pure evil. “This is only the beginning.”

The End.

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Blurb: Zafira



Zafira Guzun

The Guzun Matriarch, or *Comare*, as everyone in the Bratva world called me. A name I earned as the wife of one of the most respected Bratva leaders ever. After his death, I stepped back, preferring to leave the hard decisions to my children... or so everyone thought.

Betrayal is a hard pill to swallow. This time, it turned sideways in my throat. Now, I'm being suffocated by those I loved and trusted unconditionally. No more... It is time they suffered the consequences.

Bogdan Rusu

The *ubiytsa smerti* or the death slayer as everyone in the Bratva called me. A moniker I earned as the advisor to the Pakhan of the Guzun Bratva. I'm respected because I'm a nice guy... but I'm feared more, because I have no mercy.

Keeping Zafira Guzun safe has been my priority since her husband passed away. It hasn't been easy, especially since she meant more to me than being my boss. She was my heart... except she didn't trust me, and that hurt... deeply.

In the end, only one thing mattered...

Who needs to forgive and who needs to make amends... or will pride and hard-headedness be their undoing?

Excerpt: Dominant Nature



The Decadent Sins Series, Book 1. A dark, mafia romance series

CHAPTER ONE

The NCS Headquarters below the Restaurant Wholesale Depot, Marginal Way S, Industrial District, Seattle, Washington...

“I SWEAR IT WASN’T ME. I WOULD NEVER betray your trust; least of all steal from you! On the life of my wife and children.”

Torin Caruso, aka The Slayer, known only as Mr. S, the Crime Lord of the National Crime Syndicate, Kings Inc., watched the cowering man with disinterest.

“Since you insist.” His gravelly voice floated through the air with solid confidence. If the vibrations of voices were stories of emotion and honesty, Torin would fail at both. Emotion in his opinion was a waste of time, and honesty—like that fucking existed in the world he lived in.

Proof in point was the wiry older man watching him with growing terror in his eyes. As one of the most feared crime lords in the United States, honesty was the one aspect he expected from everyone who swore allegiance

to him. Except for keeping his true identity from those in the crime world, and of course vice versa to those who were part of the normal life he lived otherwise, Torin was honest to the point of being insulting.

Lying to him came with a hefty price tag. Betraying his trust—well, that increased the debt exponentially—sometimes to a lethal level. William Kent was about to learn that the hard way.

Torin's eyes remained locked on the trembling man, his eyes glowing like the darkness of Hades. "Fetch his wife and children." He got up and walked toward the elevator, ignoring the fearful protest of the man who struggled violently against the ropes keeping him tied to the chair. He cast a sideways look at Razor, the Enforcer, who was almost as feared as he was. "Call me when they're here." He smirked as William Kent's wails turned shrill.

"Please! I beg you, leave them be."

"Shut his fucking mouth. He's giving me a headache," he said as the elevator doors silently slid closed behind him and immediately shot upward, carrying him the two stories to ground level. His entry upstairs as the CEO owner of The Restaurant Wholesale Warehouse was quiet. Since the elevator was hidden behind a bookshelf in his luxurious office, his coming and going underground to the operation hub of The Kings Inc. headquarters went unnoticed. Besides, no one would get past his PA, Lee Powell, who barricaded his privacy like a vicious guard dog.

He'd spent millions of dollars creating a myriad of tunnels from the entrance under the West Seattle bridge at the Duwamish Waterway. It had been done with the sole purpose of keeping the actual location of the underground hub a secret ... not only from his enemies but also from his own followers and those who manned the operations room on a daily basis. Every time someone entered through the hidden hatch, accessible only by using an

eye scanner that appeared to be a black pebble in the concrete bridge pillar, a preset electronic system lit up a different passage and locked the others with sliding walls. From there it wove in so many directions, no one could keep track of the direction they were going in. The same applied when they left, and never via the same passage as they arrived. To this day, no one knew about the shell company above that was one of the many he ran as a reputable businessman in the community.

He removed the black cap and large pilot shades that he always wore as Mr. S. It covered his silver hair and half of his face which aided to make him unrecognizable. He removed the long black coat that was part of the crime lord persona and replaced it with a blazer before he opened the hidden bookshelf and walked into his office.

To date, none of his trusted captains or soldiers knew his true identity. There were only two people, aside from his brother, who knew who he was to the outside world. One was his cousin, Matteo Caruso, who was the family representative on The Commission, as well as his advisor at the NCS. Since Matteo was a well known sports star, he had to keep his identity secret to the crime world as well. The two cousins had become known for the disguises they wore. No one challenged them about it. They were too shit scared.

The second was Razor, who had been his and Matteo's friend since Torin arrived in the U.S. thirty-five years ago and moved in next door to his family. He was the only man he completely trusted with his life.

He flicked the switch next to the door, which turned the small light above it on the outside to green, indicating to Lee that he was available. Not surprisingly, she walked in minutes later after a sharp rap of knuckles against the wood.

"I've got messages for you." She handed him a steaming latte and placed a plate filled with sandwiches in front of him as he settled behind his

desk. “You missed breakfast,” she explained as he regarded her with a rising eyebrow.

“I didn’t. I ate at home this morning.” He took a sip of his coffee. “But I appreciate that you take care of me so well.”

“It’s a shitty job, but someone has to do it.” She offered a bright smile to soften the insult. Of all the people in his life, Lee was one of the most honest and straightforward people he knew. For that, he held her in high regard.

“I don’t need to be mothered. I had one, and believe me, it’s an experience I could well do without.”

He sighed as his response brought a frown to her face. If there was one thing Torin Caruso never did, it was open up about his private life. As a businessman, he always kept associations with his employees on a professional level, but somehow the lines had become blurred with Lee over the eight years she’d worked for him. For one, he trusted her and that was one thing he didn’t do lightly—ever.

If not for that, he’d have fucked her long ago. She was the type of woman he found attractive. Tall, curvy, and sassy as hell.

“Messages?”

“Matteo phoned to confirm your presence at the charity gala for tonight. He said to remind you it’s black tie and that you have to bring a date.”

“He should know better than to try and order me around,” Torin grumbled as he bit into a decadent grilled cheese sandwich. “I don’t know why I accepted the damn invitation in the first place.”

“Because you care for the homeless children of the city, that’s why.” She tapped her fingers on her iPad as she watched him with a grin. “I suppose since you obviously forgot about the event, you didn’t bother asking anyone

to accompany you.”

“Nor do I intend to. Taking a date creates expectations of staying as late as possible, and I have no intention of being there very long.”

“Ah, you’re going to hand over a fat check and then leave.”

“Hmm.” He finished his latte and leaned back in the chair. “Messages?” he prodded again. He had no desire to ride the topic hollow.

Lee rattled off the rest, making notes of the instructions he gave in between. “That’s it. Anything you need before I go back to my office?”

Torin glanced at his watch and was surprised to see an hour had passed. Lee had a way to keep his mind focused and as always, he hadn’t realized how the time had flown. The Enforcer should be back with William’s family by now. The vibration of one of the two cell phones in his pocket proved to be just that as he glanced at the text message.

“I have a couple of calls to make and two conference calls with our Chinese and Swiss suppliers. It’ll take most of the day, and I don’t want to be bothered.” He waved her off with a smile. “Once you’re done with those, take the rest of the afternoon off. It’s been a while since you’ve taken some personal time.”

“I won’t say no. I’ve been craving a pamper session at the spa.” She sashayed to the door, and her voice floated back to him. “Thanks, Boss.”



TORIN FELT NO EMPATHY FOR THE MAN crowing his fear as he watched the crime lord circle his family, who had been forced onto their knees, cuffed, and blindfolded.

“William, what is going on? Where are we?” The woman’s scared voice rippled through the atmosphere.

“It’s just a misunderstanding, honey. I’ll sort it out, I promise,” William said softly but the terror in his voice was unmistakable.

Masking fear was a survival essential in the lives they lived but few men could tap into it when their loved ones were threatened. William was no different—other than Torin, who didn’t experience fear as others did. He’d learned from a young age to process it differently, routing it through his prefrontal cortex instead of letting the more primitive brain do the choice-making. Some things humans were born with, others were epigenetic alterations, adjustments so to speak. People could be damaged by fear, and if he allowed it, could cause harm to him just like others. The difference was, where it shut them down, it made him more alert, more adept, and creative at problem solving.

“What’s your name, Mrs. Kent?” Torin ran his hands through her short bob-style hair. She shivered under the unexpected touch.

“R-Rebecca.”

“Beautiful name. Did you know that it’s among the top Christian names, especially in the Hebrew language?” His fingers trailed through her hair again. “So soft and silky.” He smirked as she whimpered tearfully. He leaned closer to rasp against her ear. “Do you know what it means?”

“I-I believe it means to bind firmly.”

“Hmm,” Torin straightened, ignoring the continued struggles of the man sitting under the grueling light shining onto him from the low roof of the interrogation room. “Or to tie firmly and beautifully ensnaring.”

“M-my mother just loved the name,” she stammered, doing her best not to bear back against the hand in her hair.

“My mother’s name was Rebecca,” Torin said; his voice darkened as his fingers fisted around a tuft of her hair. He leaned closer again. “One of the most important women in the Bible, Rebecca, tricked her elderly husband,

Isaac, into choosing their younger son, Jacob, and not their older son, Esau, to lead the future tribes of Israel.” She cried out in pain as his fingers tightened.

“Stop!” William begged. Torin ignored him.

“Are you like her, Rebecca? Are you pretending not to know why you’re here, only because your children are alongside you? Or are you the one who is responsible for your husband betraying me?”

“I don’t know what you want from us! I swear. William—aahhh!” she screamed as Torin yanked her head back viciously.

“William can’t help you, Rebecca. So, are you truly ignorant or are you the one pushing him to take what doesn’t belong to him? Are you the beautiful ensnarer?”

“N-no! I have no idea what you’re talking about.” She struggled to breathe as she started to cry.

His breath hissed against her cheek. “Shh, there now,” he cooed as he kissed her temple softly. “Tell me, darling, what does your husband do for a living?”

“H-he’s a traveling salesman.”

“Hmm, and what does he sell that brings in so much loot that you can afford to live in one of the high class suburbs in Seattle, with your children in the most expensive private school in the city?”

“William is an entrepreneur. He sources products from various suppliers. That’s why he travels so much and is away from home every week.”

“You truly wish me to believe you are so gullible to swallow that dribble?”

“Mr. S, please ... I beg you, don’t,” William pleaded in a pitiful voice.

Rebecca screamed as Torin yanked hard on her hair again and wrapped a hand around her throat.

“Leave my mother alone, you fucking coward!” The elder of the two boys tried getting to his feet but Razor clamped a hand around his shoulder. He cried out in pain and settled back on his knees. “Hurt her again and I’ll kill you,” he sneered as he turned his head this way and that, not intimidated at all.

“Such a brave boy you have, William. Quite surprising, especially since his father is a cowering beggar.”

“P-please, I beg you. Don’t hurt my boys,” Rebecca sobbed in a broken whisper.

“You do not need to be concerned, my dear. Children are safe from my wrath. They need to be protected, no matter the sins of their parents, isn’t that correct?”

“Yes, and I’ll do anything you want, *anything!* Just please don’t hurt them.”

Torin barked out a laugh. “Did I imagine it, William, or did your lovely wife just proposition me?”

William shook his head, unable to force a word from his lips. Torin was known for his cruelty, especially when he had been betrayed. He’d seen him do much worse than use women as sexual tools to bring the mightiest man to his knees.

“Hmm, it seems your dear husband has been struck silent, so I’ll leave it to you to answer the question. Did you, Rebecca? Proposition me?”

“I...” She swallowed hard as she lowered her head when he finally let go of her hair. “I need my boys safe and if ... if that’s what it would take ... then y-yes.”

“Ahh,” Torin offered William a Cheshire-like grin as he assisted the

distraught woman to her feet. “Take Mrs. Kent to the red room, please. I’ll join her there shortly.”

“No! Mr. S, please. Dear God, I beg you!” William yanked on the ropes to no avail as he watched Razor lead his wife from the room.

“Mom! Where are you? Mom!” The younger boy was clearly upset. Torin guessed him to be around eight years old, too young to know what was about to happen. Judging by the way his older brother fisted his hands and pressed his lips together, he realized exactly what his mother had offered to appease their tormentor.

“Settle down, young one. Your mother will be back soon.” The deep intonation in Torin’s voice wrapped around the fear of the young boy and he seemed to calm down. He turned to the tall and strong boy who stood on his knees with his shoulders squared and proud. “What’s your name?”

“Brendan.”

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“Hmm, such a moldable age,” Torin mused as he watched him thoughtfully.

“No! Leave my boy alone! He’s too young and I won’t allow it.”

Within a flash, Torin was by his side and his fingers dug into his chin as he sneered into his face. “You won’t allow it? What makes you think you have any rights left, William Kent? You proved you can’t be trusted.” His voice turned silky smooth. “Perhaps your son would prove to be of more value to our organization than you.”

“No! Leave him be!”

His cry of pain followed Torin’s fist that cracked into the side of his face, followed by a torrid number of gut punches.

“You don’t tell me what to do, Kent. Not ever, is that understood?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. S,” he gasped as pain seared through his stomach from the ruthless hits that felt like it ripped through his skin to prod at his insides.

“I’ll do what you want! Just let my parents go,” Brendan cried.

Torin was impressed that even at such a young age, he managed to mask the fear from his voice that was evident in the sagging of his shoulders. He was a proud young man and that was what attracted him to the possibilities of what he could mean to Kings Inc.

“No! Brendan, keep your mouth shut. You have no idea what you’re saying.”

“What else can I do, Dad? Allow him to ... to defile Mom? Kill you, and leave Samuel fatherless?” His shoulders pulled back as he tilted his chin back. “What do you expect from me, Mr. S?”

“Are you finished with school?”

“I just started college—I’m studying architecture. I skipped a year at school when I was ten since I was too smart for the class.” The sadness in his voice was testimony that he was intelligent enough to realize that whatever the cruel man had in store for him, meant his future was about to change. Becoming an architect, his dream from the first drawing he’d made of a house, would never come to fruition.

“I’ll talk! Just let my family go.”

Torin cast a glacial look at William. “Now, you wish to talk? You were happy for me to fuck your wife and—”

“No! I-I just didn’t believe you’d go that far,” he protested pitifully.

“How long have you worked for me?”

“F-fifteen years.”

“And in that time have you ever seen me back down?”

William hung his head shamefully. He’d failed the greater test in the

eyes of his leader. He prepared himself for another foray of hits as Torin began circling him.

“Talk, Kent. I’m listening.”

“I didn’t steal from you, Mr. S, I swear.” He swallowed hard as he looked fearfully at Razor who had returned and stood watching him from the doorway. Two of his soldiers were standing in opposite corners, ready to do their leader’s command. “But I know who did.” He looked at his sons. “Please let them go and I’ll tell you everything.”

“You will tell me everything, regardless, Kent.” Torin swiped back the tails of the long coat and pushed his hands deep into his pants’ pockets. “Do you honestly think for one moment I will blindly believe what you tell me, without confirming it?”

“I won’t lie to you! I never have and I won’t start now!”

“Withholding information is a form of lying, Kent, surely you know that?”

“I ... he promised to tell you himself. I beg you, Mr. S.” His voice lowered to a whisper. “Just don’t bring Brendan into this.”

“I believe your son is old enough to make his own decisions.” Torin looked at the dark-haired teenager. “Isn’t that correct, son?”

Brendan swept his tongue over his lips but he didn’t lose the proud expression on his face. “Yes.”

“You made a commitment to me. Do you intend to honor it?”

Brendan tipped his chin an inch upward. “Yes, Mr. S. I do.” He hesitated briefly and then continued in a firm voice, “But only if you let my mother go.”

“Hmm, interesting. Before you demanded both your parents to be let go. Why now only your mother?”

“My mother is innocent in whatever is happening here. My father,” he

turned his head in the direction where he assumed William was, “he seemed to have overplayed his hand and now he has to suffer the consequences.”

“Ha! Do you hear that, Kent? Exactly the kind of youngster who will one day become a leader of the captains and then the Underboss.” He tapped Brendan on the shoulder. “You have a bright future ahead of you, my son.”

“Why do you call me your son?”

“Because soon I will be the one who will take care of you in all aspects. You will, for all intents and purposes, become my son, and one day, you will reap the rewards.”

He turned to Snake. “Take the boys and their mother home.” His eyes pierced William’s resolve as he looked at him. “William and I have a lot to discuss.”

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About the Author

“Isn’t it a universal truth that it’s our singular experiences and passion, for whatever thing or things, which molds us all into the individuals we become? Whether it’s hidden in the depths of our soul or exposed for all to see?”

Linzi Basset is a South African born animal rights supporter with a poet’s heart, and she is also a bestselling fiction writer of suspense-filled romance erotica books; who as the latter, refuses to be bound to any one sub-genre. She prefers instead to stretch herself as a storyteller which has resulted in her researching and writing historical and even paranormal themed works.

Her initial offering: Club Alpha Cove, a BDSM club suspense series released back in 2015, and catapulted her into International Bestseller status. Labelling her as prolific is a gross understatement as just a few short years later she has now been published over a hundred times; a total which includes the other published works of her alter ego: Isabel James who co-authors and alternative penname, Kimila Taylor.

“I write from the inside out. My stories are both inside me and a part of me, so it can be either pleasurable to release them or painful to carve them out. I live every moment of every story I write. So, if you're looking for spicy and suspenseful, I'm your girl ... woman ... writer ... you know what I mean!”

Linzi believes that by telling stories in her own voice, she can better share with her readers the essence of her being; her passionate nature; her motivations; and her wildest fantasies. She feels every touch as she writes, every kiss, every harsh word uttered, and this to her is the key to a never-ending love of writing.

Ultimately, all books by Linzi Basset are about passion. To her, passion is the driving force of all emotion; whether it be lust, desire, hate, trust, or love. This is the underlying message contained in her books. Her advice: “Believe in the passions driving your desires; live them; enjoy them; and allow them to bring you happiness.”

Find out more here: <https://www.linzibassetauthor.com/>

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