

*Broken*

FROM THE **BRATVA**

SASHA LEONE

*Broken*  
FROM THE **BRATVA**

Koralev Bratva Duet

Part II

SASHA LEONE

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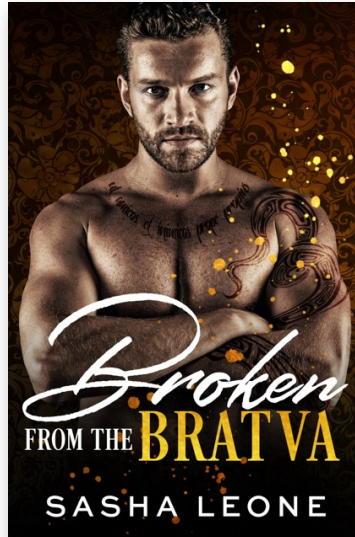
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Epilogue

FREE Novelette

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**I almost married a monster—  
Now, he's coming back to finish the job.**

*Maxim Koralev.*

Dark. Powerful. Handsome.

*Beastly.*

The perfect villain. And my unlikely hero.

Our love ignited a war that tore us from each other's arms.

... And saved my life.

But I'm still hiding so many secrets...

I betrayed him. More than once.

And if he discovers the truth before I can finally tell him why,

Then he might become too dangerous to ever see again.

... Not that I'll have a choice.

The Bratva boss gets what he wants.

And if he wants *me*,

Then eventually, his searing fingers *will* wrap back around my  
throat.

And I'll be left to wonder:

*Is this for love,*

*Or revenge?*

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Editor: C.J. Swan

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## BILLIE

**H**ow quickly things change.

One moment, I'm walking down the aisle at my own fake wedding, feeling very real love in my heart. I'm wearing a gorgeous gown that costs more than my entire college tuition; I just came from a penthouse suite in the sky, where I slept on a bed as big as my apartment, next to a man who's so handsome and powerful that my knees nearly buckle at the mere sight of him waiting for me under the arbor. All my troubles vanish in his gaze. The feds. My business. That nagging Loneliness. Poof. Gone. He only leaves room in me for one thing: *him*.

Then, boom, everything goes to shit. Gunshots. Blood. Screaming. Maxim Koralev's massive body protecting me from it all. His warmth makes me believe everything will be alright... until he suddenly goes cold.

That's when I know it's over. It's the only way they were going to manage to put him in handcuffs. I'm hauled out of the chaos by strangers. Men of the law. FBI. People are still shooting when I'm thrown in the back of a dark van and driven away.

Now, I'm here. In the next moment. The thrill of the danger and the lust and the love is gone. Vanished. It's nothing more than memories now. Sweet, steamy memories. Memories I touch myself to when I'm bored.

And I'm always bored.

At least witness protection stuck me in a house with a dryer.

Yeah, that's right. I've gone from future wife of one of the most influential men in one of the biggest cities in the world to a complete nobody, stuck in a Podunk town out in the middle of bums-fuck-nowhere.

The feds tell me I'm safe here, but I don't want safe. I want *him*.

I hardly even care about the 30 million I'm owed. Not that I'm ever expecting to get it. The Koralev Bratva have more important things to worry about than paying me. They're at war, after all—oh yeah, and their leader is in prison.

I swear I didn't put him there... at least, not on purpose. You can only fight so hard against the feds before they use your own words against you. They're adult bullies, the kind that will tell you to stop punching yourself as they grab your wrist and fling your own hand against your face.

I *had* to tell them where the wedding was. They made me. But I didn't think they'd arrest Max. They didn't have shit on him, as far as I knew. So, what changed? It wasn't like I gave them any useful info.

Only, I did; by accident.

I inadvertently connected Max to a murder they didn't know he was involved in. A murder that apparently still had enough evidence on its body to justify hauling him in.

So, in a way, it's my own fault I've been whisked away to a safehouse so far from the only home I've ever known that I get sick just thinking about it.

It's hardly even a consolation prize that I'm still alive. What's living worth if it's like this?

The cruel joke is that I'm being forced to live almost exactly the way I was at this time last year. Sure, back then I'd do more talking on the phone with potential clients and investors, but I still wouldn't have any friends to go out with, no boyfriend to have over, no social future to look forward to.



Max made me realize just what I was missing out on. He *forced* me to realize it. And now I'm being forced to try and forget the thrilling reality he introduced me to. I've been resigned to purgatory, all while the memory of a steamy hell and a carnal heaven rattle through my mind and my fingertips in the form of *his* image.

That giant chiseled body, those fiery grey-green eyes, the dominance, the protectiveness, the jealousy, the lust, the love.

I've gnawed my lip bloody just from remembering him. Even his current disheveled appearance, whether I see it in newspapers or on TV while the media covers his trial, is enough to make me reach for my shower head. He still looks so strong, whether he's wearing a dark black suit or a bright orange jumpsuit—you could hardly believe he was shot four times while protecting me.

*Shot in the back.*

*Those bastards.* The stink of betrayal almost threatens to ruin my precious memories. But I fight for them, because they're all I have left. *I'm one of those bastards...*

My business is barely being propped up by the government. Income has stagnated. I'm living off the welfare of the same people who tore me down from the rooftop and stuck me in a bungalow in the desert.

I can't even tend to a garden here.

It'd be late summer back home—a cool breeze is probably starting to provide relief from the humid summer air—but in my new state, the weather is so dry and stale and hot that I can barely walk barefoot outside, less the soles of my feet melt into the earth.

Instead, I spend most of my days scouring the internet for updates on Max's trial; trying to get a hold of someone who can tell me how long it will be until I can return to a normal life—as if I even want 'normal' anymore—and trying desperately to think up novel ways to keep my business from imploding while I wait for the opportunity to run it like it's supposed to be run.

It's lonely and exhausting and restless and it almost makes me wish they hadn't set me up with wi-fi at all. Procrastination has become my life, and it only took a couple of weeks before I addictively finagled my way back onto social media—in the form of multiple anonymous burner accounts, of course—despite specific instructions not to. *Fuck them. Give me this.*

Seeing happy pictures of old friends is enough to make me want to cry. They get to travel the world and share their successes and show off their boyfriends and girlfriends. There isn't a single worry in the world on all of my home feed. I wonder if a single person I went to school with even knows what it's like to struggle?

I wouldn't wish this on anyone.

Max's big trial is coming up. I don't know what I'll do if I can't see him again. At least for now, I have hope that he'll get out of this jam and come find me. but if he's found guilty of a murder that I helped lead the police to, then I just might have to give up. It'll mean I'll never get to see him again. There's no way the feds will ever let me visit him in prison. I'm still in a whole world of danger.

There's a war raging back in my home town. Entire sections of the city are on fire. And it all started at my wedding, because someone was looking to kill me.

Max wouldn't let that happen. He's the only reason I'm still alive today, and *I'm* the only reason he's in jail, awaiting trial. The feds always get what they want, even if I didn't mean to help them.

My complicity in the whole thing is enough to make me want to go mad. Sometimes, when news of what's happening gets too overwhelming, I shut my laptop off and go for a walk. The searing heat of the southern sun feels like a proper punishment for my sins. I let it beat down over me as I wade through cacti and rock-hard shrubs.

My 'home' is tucked away at the end of a suburban cul-de-sac. My backyard is desert. I don't dare exchange anything but pleasantries with my neighbours—I don't want to be found out, or worse: risk making any connections. The only thing

keeping me going is the hope that this isn't permanent; that I'll be moving on before I can truly settle in.

But even that hope is fleeting. It feels like I've already settled into my solitary existence. My walks of distraction are just another part of my new life—even the 'new' is slowly starting to evaporate in the stifling heat; It's just becoming my life.

*Fuck.*

The only consolation I get is what I find on the end of my walk. The foothills at the western edge of the desert contain a little oasis. A speckled waterfall, a pond, and a shaded boulder. I wash my feet in the cool water, staring at my rippling reflection while I try to stabilize my uneasy mind. I hardly look like a different person, even with my shaved head, but I feel so unfamiliar.

Would Max recognize me like this? Would I want him to? When we first met, we exchanged subtle jabs through barely withheld fire. Now, I'm an empty husk. The feds told me to change up my look so that I was unrecognizable. But even taking a razor to my scalp didn't do nearly as much as all this time in isolation.

I'm losing sight of myself, and that's not just because I've turned away from my reflection in the pond.

I climb up onto my shaded boulder and sit cross-legged, staring out over the desert and suburbia. An urge to check for updates on Max's quickly approaching trial makes me reach for my phone, but one of the reasons I come up here is to get away from it all. I don't get a good connection, and my browser is still loading when I finally give up and look back out to nature.

... And that's why it comes as such a shock to feel my phone suddenly start to vibrate. My gaze immediately snaps back from the horizon down to my screen.

There's no caller ID, but there is a number. I don't recognize the area code, but the fact that there is one means

that the call shouldn't be coming from the feds. Their numbers are always blocked.

I can see my strange reflection in the darkness around the white numbers on the screen. My face is twisted in a ball of confusion. *Who could it be?*

Sure, I'm desperate to talk to anyone who isn't a federal agent or a business associate, but is answering worth the risk? This cell phone is connected to a private number that is only known to a select few: my court appointed assistant; my lead developer; my business manager, plus whatever government official wants to call me up: those are the only ones who should have this number. But the government officials usually have a blocked ID, and I have everyone else in my contacts list.

Not knowing who's calling isn't a problem I've had to face in so long. I've been assured that my phone is untraceable, but I've also been told to ignore any non-essential or mysterious calls.

The phone rings as thinly veiled warnings echo around in my head. *This is life or death... Cooperate and you'll be fine... Don't contact anyone...*

A low burst of anger cuts through the cold emptiness inside of me.

*Fuck this. I'm tired of being told what to do.*

I let myself have this little slice of rebellion, no matter how small.

I answer the call.

"... Hello?" My voice betrays the anxiety I'm suddenly filled with. So much for being a rebel. I become all too aware of what one wrong move could mean for me.

"Hi. Billie?" The female voice is oddly familiar. Recognition dances on the tip of my tongue as I struggle to remember what face fits the voice. *At least it doesn't have a heavy Italian or Russian accent....*

“Who is this?” I ask, unable to make the connection myself.

A familiar chuckle comes from the other end of the line. It all clicks just as she reveals herself.

“It’s Jackie, silly. Jackie Stonewall... from high school.”

*Oh fuck!*

My rebellious anger and my anxious regret both collide in a sudden explosion of happiness. “Jackie!” my voice echoes through the little foothill canyon.

There’s that chuckle again. It fills my body with a nostalgic warmth. “I know it’s been a while, but I figured you’d at least still recognize my voice,” she teases.

“Sorry,” I chuckle back, pinching the bridge of my nose in disbelief. “I’ve had a lot on my mind lately.”

“That’s why I’m calling...” Jackie’s joyous tone grows a little more concerned. “I’ve been keeping an eye on what’s happening back home. I just wanted to make sure you’re doing alright.”

“I’m fine,” I immediately lie, then follow it up with a truth. “I’ve been keeping an eye out on all that too, but I’m not even there anymore.”

“Oh, thank god!” Jackie sighs. “It was looking like that stupid city was finally turning over a new leaf before everything suddenly went to shit again. It’s just like old times now.”

I can’t help but smile. “You don’t know the half of it.”

“So, if you’re not there, where are you?”

I almost answer, before catching myself. Taking this phone call was a big enough risk on its own, but revealing my location? That’s a little too much...

Still, the success of this little slice of rebellion has got me wanting more. “I’m on the west coast.”

A gasp. “Me too! Where on the west coast!?”

“Top secret,” I laugh.

“Fancy. Are you on a business trip or are you living there now?”

“Living.”

“Can I come visit?”

The question hits me like a freight train. My immediate reaction is to say yes. No, to *shout* yes. I’ve been so lonely, and the idea of seeing my long-lost best friend is so appealing I could jump off my boulder and fly to her right now.

But...

“Hey, not that I’m not thrilled to hear from you. But can I ask how you got this number?” I deflect.

The little hesitation in Jackie’s response makes me nervous. “I swore I’d never tell you...”

“What?” I push.

Jackie huffs. “Fine. Well, I was going to keep this a secret, but I don’t want you to think I’m a complete stalker—because I’m only half a stalker! But back when you first started your start-up, I made a teensy little investment, because I knew you were going to kick ass. I didn’t want to tell you—we’d already drifted apart and I didn’t want you to think I was trying to buy your love back—but now, what the heck. I’m a shareholder! I thought one of us would have reached out long ago, but I know we’re both busy working girls, and so when I saw what was happening back home, I thought, fuck it, I don’t care if she’s busy, I need to know if my bitch is alright.”

And just like that, we’re back to old times. “Oh, so that’s what took you so long!” I laugh, hardly caring that she hasn’t really answered my question yet.

“Not even,” I can practically hear Jackie’s smile. “You’re impossible to get in touch with. I only got this number because your business manager thought it prudent to give a shareholder some semblance of access to the big boss lady. She was having none of me when I asked as a friend.” There it is.

My laughter fills the canyon and washes over the desert. “I’m a very important person now,” I joke.

“You’ve always been important to me.”

“Aww.”

We start a chat that doesn’t end until the daylight starts to fade. My walk ‘home’ through the desert is the best one I’ve ever had. Still, about halfway through I get an alert telling me my phone’s about to die. Jackie isn’t happy about it.

“When can I see you? I have some time off of work coming up, so travelling is no big deal, especially since you’re on the west coast now.”

My heart feels so full—but that only weighs down my decision all the more. I couldn’t possibly tell her where I am, right? Would it even be legal? Could I get in trouble?

A little bit of anger simmers just below my heavy heart, boiling out all the bad stuff and leaving only the good.

*Fuck it.* I’ve had enough of people telling me what I can and can’t do. If I can’t see Max, then Jackie’s the next best thing.

“When are you free?”

## MAXIM

**A** *re you fucking kidding me!?*

“*That’s* what they’re trying to pin on me? Out of every last little fucking thing, it’s *that!*?” The embarrassment of that night, all those years ago, sears its ugly hand into my heart once more. I thought I’d gotten over the shame and the resentment when I’d reconnected with Billie, but now it’s all coming back to bite me in the ass again. “Why *that?*”

Vasily sits at the other end of the rickety table. We’re in the visitor’s room of this god-forsaken prison I’m being held in until my trial. Even though summer has just barely ended, the place is freezing. The walls are concrete slabs that are just as cold to the touch as they are to the eye. The metal chairs and tables are frigid, as are the watchful gazes of the guards. They patrol the sparse hall as Vasily and I try to keep our voices down. It’s easier said than done. The only thing keeping me from freezing over is the anger that’s building up inside of me at what Vasily’s revealing. And I thought my situation couldn’t get any worse...

“I don’t know for sure, but our connections say that they may have found your DNA on the guy’s body.” Vasily’s my unofficial representation. I talk to him about everything and he filters the info back to my lawyer on a need-to-know basis.

“Does DNA even last that long?”

Vasily shrugs. He’s dressed sharply in a dark blue blazer over a crisp white undershirt, unbuttoned down a few spots. *God, how I miss the feeling of a nice fresh dress shirt.*



“They might be bluffing, biding time until they can actually find evidence of some other crime. But we can’t take them lightly. All we know for sure is that they had enough to justify bringing you in here like they did. That should worry us.”

A cold shiver crawls up my spine at the memory. My wedding, as fake as it may have been, was the first time I ever felt real love. My own love. Not passed down or familial, but completely self-discovered.

But it all went to shit so quickly. And then hell followed close behind.

The four bullet wounds on my body flare up. For some reason, it’s the one that only nipped my neck that always seems to hurt the most. I rub the scar, trying to soothe the pain. “... Have you heard anything about Billie?” I ask.

Vasily somberly shakes his head.

*Fuck.*

“You don’t even know if she’s alive?”

“I’m sure she is,” Vasily tries to assure me. “They’ve probably put her in witness protection somewhere on the other side of the country. We’re looking for her, don’t worry.”

“I swear, I’ll kill every last one of them...”

“Hey, hey,” Vasily puts his hand down onto the table between us, looking around with paranoia in his eyes. “Not so loud.”

He’s right, but I so badly just want to explode in a fireball of rage. “We were betrayed,” I seethe.

“I know. I know.” I can tell that Vasily is desperately trying to suppress his own anger, but it’s hard, even for him, considering the circumstances.

We’re at war.

“How’s morale?” I ask, sitting back in my chair, trying not to let my anger stew. I can’t do anything right now. But, oh how I wish I could be out there with my men. This rage would

serve me well in a war like this. I'd be drenched in blood and better off for it...

The thought of Billie makes me snap out of that fantasy. My waiting bride makes me want to live a different kind of fantasy... But she's nowhere to be found.

'Morale's fucking amazing,' a grin crosses Vasily's thin lips as he shakes his head in disbelief. "Every single one of our soldiers is overjoyed that they're getting a final hurrah of pure unadulterated violence. It's like a dream come true to most of them. Igor is especially having a good time going after Alexei and his collaborators."

*Fucking Alexei. The treacherous scum.* It didn't take us long to figure out that he was behind the chaos that erupted at my wedding.

Or, at least, he was behind half of it.

We still aren't sure who ratted out the location of the wedding to the FBI. All we know for sure is that Alexei and Leonid Lebedev worked with Angelo Esposito's assassins to help get them a clear shot at Billie. Luckily, no matter how high-powered their weaponry was, they were still just as incompetent as those who'd made a mess of the mayor's party. Only an idiot or a complete amateur wouldn't have dimmed the reflective surface of their sniper scope in some way, especially on such a sunny day.

Thank god for their incompetence. I wouldn't have been able to save Billie if it wasn't for their slip up. And if they were better shots, I probably wouldn't be here either.

Whether I would be *here*, in prison, though, remains to be seen. We still don't know if the FBI was really planning a raid that day, but they sure as hell couldn't help themselves once the shooting started.

It was chaos. And now that chaos has spilled into the city. I didn't even have to give my men the orders. Once word spread, it was game over. Legitimacy be damned. Everyone was out for revenge.

“I have a guy who has an in with the coroner, as well as someone who knows how to get to the DNA specialist who’s been assigned to your case,” Vasily checks his watch and grinds his teeth. He has a lot on his plate, and I don’t envy the man. He’s no stranger to violence, but he’s always been one to avoid it if possible. “I just need your permission to be, uh... as persuasive as possible.”

I know what that means. He’s going to offer these guys big bucks to reveal what they know, and if they don’t take it, then he’s going to have Igor break some of their bones. “Permission granted.” It’s hardly even a passing thought anymore. This is do or die. I can’t be convicted. “I need to be out of here as soon as possible. My men need me.”

Vasily shakes his head. “The moment you get out is the moment you go into hiding. You can’t be involved in any of this violence, if there’s any hope left of going legitimate.”

I huff and slam my fist against the table. Guards look our way, but they don’t dare approach. I’ve paid them well enough to leave me alone, for the most part. “That hope went out of the window with my wedding,” I growl. “I made my choice. So did Angelo. I’ll burn this city to the ground before I sit this shit out.”

Now Vasily sits back in his chair. “And what if we find Billie?” he asks calmly. “Then will you still be willing to risk everything?”

My heart flinches. *Billie...*

*Fucking Billie. Where the fuck are you?*

Part of me still wonders if she had anything to do with the FBI showing up at the wedding. But no... I saw the love in her eyes. It mirrored my own. She wouldn’t. She couldn’t.

So why are they protecting her?

*Because she’s an innocent civilian, caught in the middle of all this shit.* They know it. I know it. The only good thing I can say about them is that they’re protecting her.

But I don’t want anyone else protecting *my* woman. The idea is infuriating. I need to find her and I need to protect her

myself. What kind of man let's others solve his problems? Let's others protect his family?

*She's not your family yet... Fake or not, Angelo stole that from you too.*

I should hardly blame the old Italian fool. He was just playing right into my hand. I set him up, and now we're all paying the price—it's my fault. I fell for Billie. My heart's made a fool of me too. Not that I care much. I'd rather be a fool with her than a wise king without her.

Vasily sure has my fucking number, though. He saw firsthand what I was willing to risk to save her life. "You find her, then we'll talk," is all I offer him in return.

Thinly veiled frustration washes over my *Sovietnik's* face. I know full well he'd rather be concentrating on tasks he finds more important. Well, tough shit. I'm the boss.

"We're doing our best," he says. "We're tracking all of her business partners and old friends, just like you asked. We're even wasting precious men on following some of them around."

"How many men do you have on the west coast?"

Vasily sighs. "We sent a few of Igor's men to go check up on that girl you told us about. Jackie Blackwood."

"Yeah, her and that other girl Callie were Billie's best friends. 'The Three Es'. We need to keep a close eye on them. Have you sent anyone to check up on Callie?"

"Callie Whitaker's in Europe," Vasily says, checking his watch again. "So, I've only sent two men to track her. If Billie's being protected by the FBI, then she's still in the country. That makes Callie a non-essential use of our resources."

I'm getting awfully sick of Vasily's pushback. It's so unlike him. I guess that's what happens when I screw the pooch so fucking hard. Still, I'm the king, and I need to make it clear that I'm not to be questioned, even if I'm stuck behind bars. Before I can make it any clearer, though, Vasily

questions me. “I know you don’t want to hear it,” he sighs, leaning towards me. “But I still don’t trust her.”

“Billie?”

“Yeah.”

I lower my voice to a whisper. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course. Forever and always, *Pakhan*.”

“Then do as I say,” I growl, showing Vasily the whites of my teeth. I may be a caged animal, but I’m still an animal.

I hate that I even have an ounce of doubt that Vasily may be taking things into his own hands. He might have seen how much I love Billie, but he hasn’t seen how much she loves me. As far as he’s concerned, she’s a tool that has outlived her purpose.

Still, he wouldn’t dare confront her without my permission... right?

What worries me more than Vasily’s suspicion of Billie, is Igor’s suspicion of her. The big brute is convinced she had something to do with the FBI being at my wedding, especially after he discovered that it was Alexei’s fault for letting the Esposito assassins in. Igor’s a little more naturally rogue than my *Sovietnik*, which is why I’ve ordered Vasily to keep him busy with other tasks. If Igor’s too busy on his manhunting missions, he won’t have time for a woman-hunting one. As much as I trust Igor in matters of violence, I do not trust him to be delicate. As fiery as Billie can be, she needs to be handled delicately, or else I risk losing her forever. Vasily’s the only one who can find her for me.

That’s why his subtle defiance is so worrying. He was far too reluctant for my liking to keep Igor out of the search for Billie, and now he’s telling me to my face that he doesn’t trust that she’s so innocent. It almost makes me question my own resolve. But no, I know what Billie and I had together. What we still have. I just need to find it again.

*At least I know Vasily’s taking good care of Georgy...*

A buzzer goes off over the heavily guarded entrance to the prison hall. Visitation time is over. Vasily and I shake it out before he leaves and I'm left to shuffle back to my dingy little cell, surrounded by guards, yet all alone.

**BILLIE**

“**N**o.”

*There's no chance. No way. No fucking way.*

“You don't have a choice.” *God, how I don't miss that voice or that fucking phrase.* Special Agent Pandro's gruffness is grating against my good mood. Or, at least, against my former good mood. Now I'm in a shit mood, and all because of an unexpected call from my two asshole federal agents.

“I *do* have a choice,” I snap back, panicking. “I'm not doing it.”

“Listen, dear,” Detective Sanderson's patronizing tone isn't welcome either. “If you don't do this, then it might all have been for nothing.”

“I am *not* taking the witness stand,” I repeat. My hands are shaking so bad I have to put my phone down on my coffee table and put the call on speaker. “You promised me I wouldn't have to.”

“We didn't promise,” dismisses Detective Sanderson. “We said you wouldn't have to if we got what we want.”

“You have Max holed up in a jail cell. What more could you want?” I'm nearly on the verge of tears. And to think, my day was going so well.

“A conviction.”

My heart's liable to burst out through my chest it's beating so fast. The thought of openly betraying Max in front of a courtroom full of people is so terrifying that it's giving me a panic attack. Detective Sanderson and Special Agent Pandero don't seem to mind that my breathing is getting so deep and hoarse that my throat might as well be an old muffler. "The DNA's not shaking up to be as reliable as we hoped it might be," explains Detective Sanderson.

"I'm not... I can't," I can hardly breathe.

"You're going to have to."

"... Then what...?" I force myself to slow down. "... I... I spend the rest of my life in witness protection? The rest of my life like *this!*?" *No way. No fucking way.*

I was only in a good mood earlier because I was secretly going to break protocol. Jackie's coming to town—but now, I don't know if I'll be in any state of mind to greet her.

"We'll figure that out when the time comes. For now, you need to be ready to talk on record. You said Koralev told you he was the one who killed your father's killer. Well, we have that man's body, and it's filled with evidence..."

"... But not the kind we need." Special Agent Pandero finishes for Detective Sanderson.

Detective Sanderson continues. "Turns out most of that 'evidence' only concludes that the man was indeed your father's killer. Your old man must have put up a hell of a fight, because he's got his blood and skin all over that ancient corpse —"

I hang up before he can finish. The image is just too much. Tears flush out of my eyes in a rainstorm of pent-up grief. My phone rings uncaringly on the coffee table. I let it go to voicemail.

It just starts ringing again.

I hate these guys so fucking much... but I answer, just to beg. "Please, just leave me alone. Take my business. I don't care. I just want out."



“It’s too late for that, sweetie,” says Detective Sanderson, I swear I can almost hear a sliver of sympathy in his voice. “You need our protection now, and in order for us to continue convincing the people who pay for it, to *keep* paying for it, you need to be useful. And that starts with getting a conviction.”

“There’s still a chance you won’t have to,” that’s Special Agent Pandero’s gruff voice. There’s a hint of sympathy in him too. I guess grown men just can’t stand the sound of a crying woman. It makes me furious. I don’t want their sympathy. I want them gone from my life.

“We still have a more thorough autopsy to do,” Detective Sanderson adds. “They could find something useful, but we just need to prepare you for the worst-case scenario.”

My head is so heavy that I can hardly bear to lift it up. “Can I go now?” It’s all I can muster.

“Yes,” Special Agent Pandero says.

“We’ll be in touch,” adds Detective Sanderson.

This time, they hang up. I almost instinctively wait for my phone to start ringing again, but when it doesn’t, I let myself collapse against my living room couch and revel in the silence.

*Alone again, naturally.*

By the time I’m done wiping away the tears, my cheeks are raw and my heart is empty. I was so ready to have a fun day with an old friend, and now that’s ruined, too. What kind of company will I be? She’s coming all the way here, and I’m barely more alive than a wet blanket.

So much for my hour of rebellion.

I’m so exhausted from the anvil that was just dropped over my head that I end up dozing off on my couch. I wake up a few hours later and check my phone. Jackie’s landed and on her way to our rendezvous point.

I wasn’t dumb enough to give her my address, so I just told her to meet me at a nearby intersection. I figured we could walk back to my place from there.

Before I head out, I quickly check my reflection in the mirror. It's kind of a relief not to have to worry about my hair, but the skin around my eyes is still dark from crying. I can only hope that it clears up before Jackie can notice. The last thing I want to have to do is explain myself.

Excuses for my situation race through my mind as I walk over to our meet-up spot. I've had a few days to think up something good, but I've gotten so used to procrastinating that I could hardly spare the time or the brain power. A little jolt of panic ripples through my body when I spot Jackie leaning under an awning on the corner just ahead. *What am I going to tell her?*

Before I can turn around and rethink this whole thing, I hear my name. Jackie's voice hasn't changed one bit, and it doesn't appear as though she has either. She's still fit as hell. Tight and athletic and gorgeous as ever. Her light caramel skin glistens under the beating sun as she skips towards me.

No matter how unbearable it is outside, her hug fills me with a comfortable warmth that expels all other heat. The sunlight suddenly reminds me of home as my old friend's long arms pull me in tighter and tighter.

"I almost didn't recognize you!" Jackie smiles, pointing up to my buzzcut when we finally untwine from our embrace. "But I could still pick out that walk of yours from a mile away."

"Is it that bad?" I smile, already feeling a little better. I'm glad I made this leap. I deserve a slice of happiness, no matter how small.

"Au contraire," Jackie teases. "It's the hottest cat walk I've ever seen. Let me tell you, I still try to emulate it to this day. Every time I see a cute guy, I go 'okay, now it's time to walk like Billie'."

I swat at my giggling friend. "Oh, stop it."

"Never again," she says, taking my arm. "So, where are we going? I'm starving."

Just like old times.

“So, you still eat like a mad woman, huh?” If I didn’t like Jackie so much, I’d be jealous. She could out eat an entire football team and not gain a single pound.

“Only when I’m happy.”

*Well, that makes two of us.*

“There’s a burrito place just down the block. You game?”

“You know it.”

Jackie and I take turns wrapping around each other’s arms as I lead the way.

“I love your hair, by the way,” she notes as I hold the door to the burrito spot open for her. “Guess the afro was getting inconvenient without me around to knock debris out of it, huh?”

I can only laugh. “No one could ever live up to your debris-knocking skills.”

We get our food and eat under a tree in a nearby park. In the shade, the heat isn’t so unbearable; next to Jackie, I might as well be in an oasis.

“So, when do I get to see the pad?”

Jackie’s been pretty respectful about not pushing on things I clearly don’t want to talk about, but I *did* tell her she could stay with me for the night she’s in town. I shouldn’t have done that—she was more than willing to get herself a hotel room—but my old hospitality instinct kicked up and I just wouldn’t let her say no.

It was dumb of me, but now I have no choice. Jackie’s going to see where I live, and frankly, I’m more embarrassed about the state of it than I am afraid of being discovered.

I’ve seen Jackie’s social media posts, and I’ve just spent the last hour talking to her about her life. She’s killing it. Hired by a major financial firm right out of college, she’s been making big bucks since day one. I’ve seen the pictures from her voyages abroad; I’ve heard about the luxurious condo she bought by the beach; I can see the expensive summer dress she pulls off so well. She’s a queen.

I, on the other hand, am living in a bungalow at the edge of the desert in a no name town. My business has stagnated and my life is essentially taking place in a prison cell. No traveling. No social life. Definitely no dating. I'd love to lay all my excuses on my clueless friend, but I don't want to burden her with my troubles. It's not like I have common ails. Getting her mixed up in my shit could be the death of her.

The most I'm willing to do is catch up.

"Seeing anyone special?" she lirts.

"It's complicated," I deflect.

We stop at a beer store on the way back to my place and pick up a few bottles of wine and a couple of cervezas for the road. I'm not much of a cook, but I've already pre-ordered a dinner of roasted lamb on rice to be delivered to us a little later.

We're both a little tipsy by the time we show up to my 'safe' house.

"Wow, your backyard's amazing!" Jackie exclaims, open bottle of wine in her hand. She peers out of my sliding back door and gestures to the foothills. "Is that where the waterfall is?"

"Yeah," I slur, a little tipsy myself.

"I want to go!"

"I'll take you tomorrow. For now, we need more booze."

"And food!"

I check the delivery app on my phone. Dinner is still about an hour away, but I have a bottle of whiskey in a cabinet somewhere around here that should help us pass the time.

"This place is great. So peaceful and quiet," Jackie sings as she collapses onto my living room couch. "I'm getting sick of the hustle and bustle of the city. Mind if I move out here with you?"

I chuckle and finally find my bottle of whiskey. "I won't be staying here long... hopefully."

I pour two glasses three-quarters full and ferry them into the living room. When I arrive, Jackie's curled up on the couch, looking like she's already halfway to dreamland. It's understandable. It's hot out and she's had a long day of travel. I'm sure the excitement of it all is a bit overwhelming. I know it has been for me. The day catches up to me all of a sudden, too.

Before I can join her on the couch, though, a knock comes at my door.

*Oh, good.* Now I won't have to worry about staying up to wait for the food.

I put down our whiskey glasses and go to answer. But when I open the door, I'm not greeted by a delivery man. Instead, a hulking figure blocks out the golden light of the setting sun.

His shadow bathes me in darkness. An icy pair of fingers pinch my heart. *This isn't good.*

"Uh, hello..." I mumble, looking up at the looming stranger. Only, he doesn't look much like a stranger at all. The red lightning bolt scar that cuts across his worn and weathered face is instantly recognizable. I can't remember his name, but he's one of Max's men.

I'm almost relieved, until I see the coldness in his eyes, and feel the strength of his hand as it wraps around my face and drags me into the dark.

## MAXIM

**W**ell, that's the first bit of good news I've heard in a long time.

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty."

I tug at the cuffs on my freshly pressed white dress shirt. The light material brushes against my skin and I savor the feeling. "So, I should probably get used to this taste of freedom," I say, holding back a smirk.

"Not yet, Max," Vasily warns. "All we know for sure is that they don't have as much DNA evidence as they thought they did, at least not yet. That was enough to get you out on bail, but we know they're looking now, and I'm sure they're ready to pounce on anything that will help put you back behind bars."

I sneer at the thought. It's too late. I'm never going back. They shouldn't have let me out if they ever wanted to drag me back in. "I'd like to see them try."

"Careful," Vasily tries to calm me. He knows how revved up I am, and he's doing his best to try to keep me out of the streets. There's a war raging beneath my feet, and I want to join in so badly, but I also understand Vasily's point of view. It would be stupid to get involved now. Let them fight. I'll stay focused.

Well, I'll *try* to stay focused.

Even without the war, I still have a lot on my mind. The most important being Billie. “Still no word?” I ask my *Sovietnik*.

Vasily just shakes his head. I turn my back from him and stare out the back window of my office. Smoke whirls up from selected spots down below. All of my hard work, rebuilding the troubled areas of this city, is being ruined right before my eyes. Angelo has smartly targeted my business projects with his violence. The boardwalk is up in flames, my revitalized properties are all under fire.

Still, everything pales in comparison to finding Billie. I’d let my empire burn for her. I burn for her. Does she burn for me?

Yes. I’m sure of it.

*I’m coming for you.*

“Have Alexei’s men fallen in line?” I ask, turning away from the window and back to Vasily.

“Most of them,” he answers. “They really just want someone to follow, and now that Igor’s killed Alexei, their looking for a new leader to be loyal to. I wouldn’t put much stock in their betrayal, they just want to fight.”

“So, let them fight,” I snap. I’m not a big fan of how lenient Vasily is being to traitors, even if I understand his logic. “Put those motherfuckers right in the shit. I don’t want any of them surviving this war. They can fight for me now, but they won’t live to see the aftermath. I’ll make sure of that.”

“We’ll have to rid ourselves of them after this is all over, anyways. We can’t have connections to those types once we go legitimate.”

I sit in my king’s chair and stroke my chin. “And you’re sure we can still afford to go legitimate, even after all this shit?”

Vasily nods. “Provided we win. There are spoils in victory, after all. Angelo may not have the funds we do, but if we beat him and take what’s his for ourselves, then we should be in the green.”

“Good. I want to ruin that asshole. It’s his fault we’re at war. He took this shit too far.”

“He was just doing what you wanted him to do,” Vasily reminds me.

It takes all of my restraint not to explode at him. *Doesn't he think I know that!?* This is obviously all my fault. But I don't need to be questioned right now, I need to be backed up. “If only he wasn't so stupid.”

“If only we weren't so smart.”

I roll my eyes, but the little bit of levity helps my mood. Vasily is on my side. He's not who I should be mad at. I need to focus, as hard as that may be. I still have businesses to run, insurance money to collect, troops to order.

“Don't forget your appointment at 3, by the way” Vasily mumbles, checking his phone as I lose myself in thought.

*Shit. I also have an interview to attend.*

I sneer in anticipation. The feds want me to voluntarily come in and talk off the record. I can bring my lawyer, but I've been assured that it's an informal kind of meeting. Vasily has convinced me that it's in my best interest to cooperate. If I can find out what these bastards are actually after, then maybe I can offer them a deal. Who knows, maybe if I help them go after the Esposito family, they'll even let me go on my merry way.

Not likely, but I have to exhaust all my options.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's a reminder for that all-important appointment. The feds have agreed to meet me at a neutral spot. I can bring my own armed bodyguards and leave anytime I want. Still, I'm nervous as all hell. The thought of being shoved back into a tiny cell, unable to directly control my empire, is a nightmare I'm not willing to return to.

At least while I'm free, there's hope. For victory, for success, for love.

I'm going to ask those motherfuckers about Billie. Who knows if they'll tell me a damn thing, but I know they know



where she is. Maybe if I give them something that they want then they'll return the favor...

I grind my teeth at the thought of cooperating with law enforcement. *The things I'll do for love.*

When the time comes, I put on a dark blue blazer and take the elevator downstairs. Outside, a motorcade of black SUVs awaits me. I get in the middle one and we're off.

The meeting is at a business campus just on the outskirts of the city. I already have it surrounded by my own men. I'm sure the feds have it equally surrounded. I'm also sure they don't want to get in another shoot out. I know they lost men during their raid on my wedding, and if there's one thing I know about law enforcement, is that they don't think a single one of them is expendable. *Arrogant bastards.*

Every single member of my Bratva, on the other hand, knows their place. I have a thousand men who would fall on their swords in an instant for me. I have a thousand more who would happily go out in a blaze of glory, fighting against the top law enforcement agency in the country for my honor. They see a firefight more as a thrill than a threat. I just hope they can control themselves today.

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"Detective Sanderson," says the younger man, reaching out his hand across the conference table. I reluctantly shake it, careful not to show too much spite. I'm here to try and strike a deal, after all.

My eyes wander to the older man, sitting to Detective Sanderson's left, my right. "That's Special Agent Pandero," Sanderson notes. I give the old Agent a curt downwards nod. He returns it with just as much enthusiasm.

I sit back down and Sanderson follows.

There's only the three of us in the room. I agreed to leave my lawyer just outside if they agreed to be searched. They consented and so did I. None of my men need to know why I

truly took this meeting. Not even my lawyer. I'm only here for one reason, and one reason only: Billie.

I know these bastards can point me in her direction. The big question is, what will they want in return?

"Thanks for meeting with us, Mr. Koralev," Sanderson smiles. I already don't like him. I can see their good-cop, bad-cop shtick coming from a mile away. *God, I hate hacks. Try something new, assholes.*

"I'm sure you would have gotten to me eventually," I say coldly. It's the truth. There's no running from the feds. At least this meeting is under my own terms.

"Be that as it may, we have a few questions for you," Pandero pipes in. His voice is hoarse and gruff, like he's seen some serious shit over the course of his career.

"And I have some for you," I answer.

"That's what we're all here for," interjects Sanderson. "So, let's get started."

"What do you want to know?" I ask, ready to reject their first offer. I might give them what they want, but only if it's in return for what I want.

"We want to know a little more about this whole beef with Angelo Esposito. Word on the street is that his son was killed by someone from your Bratva. True?"

I hold back the sneer that wants to form on my face. I know this game. That little line of questioning is so loaded that I'd be pulling the trigger against my own temple if I gave any kind of straightforward answer.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I answer flatly.

The two feds share a look like they saw that coming. "Word is that you killed Dante Esposito," growls Pandero. I already hate the miserable old bastard, too.

"Your sources must be complete shit," I growl back.

"Maybe, maybe not," Sanderson hums. "But that's not the only murder you're tied to. For all the hubbub about who you

may or may not be, you've only ever spent one night in jail. The cops found you covered in blood. For some reason, though, they neglected to take a blood sample. Or, if they did, they just so happened to lose it. I know you're a very wealthy man, Mr. Koralev, but doesn't that seem fishy to you?"

"No."

Sanderson raises an eyebrow. "Really?"

I don't answer.

"What if we tell you we have a witness connecting you to that crime? You know, the one you bought your way out of."

"I'd ask how much you're paying them to lie."

A sharp grunt escapes Pandero's weathered old lips. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was holding back a laugh.

Sanderson leans across the table, his dark eyes sparkle with curiosity. "We have the body you made a corpse that night, all those years ago. There's DNA evidence everywhere. Don't think we can match it to its owner?"

I keep my mouth shut.

"Is it a risk you're willing to take?"

I let the tense silence between us stew for a little longer before I cut through it with a knife of my own. "Am I just here to be accused of murder?" I ask, letting my frustration undercut my words.

Sanderson leans back in his chair. "No," he answers, twiddling his thumbs. "We want your help to take down Angelo Esposito. We know you're trying to go legitimate, and we know he isn't. His downfall is in both of our best interests. We'll help you rid this city of your biggest competitor and you'll help us clean up the filth you're leaving behind."

He keeps trying to catch me in some sort of confession of guilt. I'm not having any of it. "I've always been legitimate," is all I answer with.

"Sure, sure" Sanderson patronizes me. "Well, then, we want to help you stay that way." The detective makes a big

show of rolling his eyes. “For whatever reason, Angelo Esposito and his crime family have been targeting your businesses. We want to help you put a stop to that, for good. What do you say?”

I chew on my tongue, hoping that the concern clawing inside my gut isn’t showing on my face. “What do you want from me?” Of course I want to erase Angelo and his family’s existence from the face of the earth, but what am I willing to give up in return for that promise?

“We want you to help set him up,” Sanderson says, matter-of-factly.

This time, I can’t help my face from twisting in a show of confusion. *What the fuck are these assholes getting at?* “How?” I ask hesitantly.

Sanderson leans closer towards me, his hands clasped tightly together. “The same way you did the first time.”

His words are like arrows shot through my gut. All of my bullet wounds suddenly flare up at the same time. I struggle to hide the flash of realization from my face. *What does this motherfucker know?* He couldn’t possibly be privy to the plans I made with Billie, right? Only my inner sanctum knows about that, and I’m simply not willing to believe that Georgy or Vasily would reveal such a thing to the feds. Still, I struggle to interpret the detective’s implication in any other way. “What do you mean?” I finally ask, feigning ignorance.

“Angelo’s the type to want an eye for an eye, right?” Sanderson stands up and paces behind his chair. “Well, you seem to have your brother safely tucked away in a heavily guarded secret location. Why didn’t you do the same for your fiancée?”

My shock quickly wears off, only to be replaced by a burst of nearly uncontrollable anger. I clench my fists and stare daggers at the smarmy detective. “Because she was with *me*,” I growl.

Sanderson snorts. “What’s a business man like you going to do to protect a girl like that? You’ve probably never been in

a real fight in your life.”

He’s baiting me. I won’t take it. But, boy oh boy do I want to. The prospect of bashing this motherfuckers face in right now almost seems worth the ruin that would follow it.

*No. Think of your empire. Think of your family. Think of Billie.*

I dig my nails into my palms and concentrate on the pain. The scar on my neck flares up like its being held against a branding iron. I grind my teeth and try desperately to settle down. “Where is she?” I growl, tapping my foot on the ground, trying to release the pent-up anger inside of me that’s begging to be released.

Detective Sanderson turns his back to me. It takes all of my willpower not to pounce on him.

“Where is who?” Pandero chimes in for the first time in quite a while. I turn my fiery gaze towards him. I could snap that old man in half if I wanted to. And I do want to, but I can’t, not now, not yet.

“You know who,” I snap. When even Pandero rebukes my question, I stand up, tall and powerful. “Do you even know where she is!?” I bellow. I know how bad losing my temper is for me right now, but I can’t help it. Thinking of them using Billie as a pawn and a hostage against me is infuriating. *I’m the only one who’s allowed to use her like that.*

“Yes,” Pandero says, eyeing me with the utmost suspicion. “We know where she is.”

“Correction,” Sanderson interjects, finally turning back around to face me. “We *did* know. Now, it’s anybody’s guess.”

Anger catches in my throat as a sudden wave of fear washes over me.

*What the fuck is that supposed to mean!?*

**BILLIE**

**W**orst. Car ride. Ever.

Sure, I've been in minor fender benders before. I've been the sad designated driver in a group of drunk happy-go-lucky college girls. I've ridden in cabs while the driver shouts conspiracy theories and borderline racist drivel. Hell, I've even been hit by a car while on my bike. But this takes the cake for my worst vehicular experience, by far.

By the time I'm tied to a metal framed chair in some damp, dripping basement, I've had enough. Being blind-folded and stuffed into the back of a dusty truck for a cross-country road trip will do that to a girl.

"What the hell is this all about!?" I demand, as heavy footsteps echo through what I can only assume is an unfinished, cement tiled basement somewhere near the ocean. Maybe an underground parking garage? I don't know. I just want out.

When I don't get a response, my anger starts to lose its battle against the dread that I've been fighting back this whole time. The man who 'kidnapped' me is one of Maxim's soldiers. I'm sure of it. The split second I had after I opened my door and before he hog-tied me was enough to confirm it. It's nearly impossible to forget a face like his.

*So, why the hell is one of Max's guys treating me like this!?*

The monster isn't answering any of my questions; no matter how many times I ask. He's as silent as a migraine, and

his careless attitude is enough to give me a matching headache.

I know Max isn't exactly a stranger to unsavory characters, but he's the boss. Who the hell treats their boss's fiancée like this?

"Max...?" I whisper, when the heavy footsteps stop in front of me. I want it so badly to be him. Not just because I desperately want to see him again, but also because I know he won't hurt me, no matter how angry he is. I've had enough time to reflect on our time together. Even if he's found out about my connection to the FBI, I'm sure he'll believe me when I say I didn't have a choice—and even then, I didn't give them shit.

The longer I'm left in silence, though, the more I begin to worry. Max wouldn't hurt me... would he?

With my blindfold still on, I have nothing better to do than to start doubting myself.

How well do I actually know the man? Sure, we've shared such precious and thrilling moments together that I feel more connected to him than I do to my past self—but does that change who he truly is? Who he was raised to be?

He's trying to go legitimate; I know that. But the money he's using towards that end has blood and grief all over it.

One night, when we were lying in bed together, reveling in the heat of each other's bodies, I asked him if he'd ever loved anyone before. He said he loved his family. Besides them, I asked. No. You? Me neither.

My mind jumps back to the moment at our wedding when he shielding me from the chaos. He was going to say he loved me—I just know it—before a flurry of bullets shut him up. I could feel the confession in his hands, not that I needed it. I'd seen it in his eyes before. It was particularly intense as he watched me walk down the aisle just moments before everything went to shit.

Would he still be able to fight back his monstrous side if he knew about my deal with the FBI?

The only two times he's ever been to prison have been because of me. Because I acted like a frightened little girl. I thought I'd changed, but now, tied up, blind-folded and cold in this mysterious basement, I feel just as frightened and as little as ever. Is Max looking to take revenge on the woman who seems so determined to lock him away forever?

... I don't know how long I'm left in my little cocoon of darkness for, but it might as well be an eternity. I'm so used to the cold and the blackness that I instinctively flinch in retreat when my blind-fold is suddenly ripped off. Even with my eyes clenched shut, though, the light in the room is overwhelming.

The unbearable sound of metal chair legs being dragged across a concrete floor makes me wince even harder. I can feel a giant presence sit down in front of me before I even open my eyes. It takes a while, but eventually, I re-focus.

The man sitting before me is even bigger than Max. His scarred face is menacing and only half-alive. There's a deadness in his eyes that's absolutely terrifying. "Where... Where's Max?" I manage to sputter out.

"He's not coming," the giant's voice is low and stilted. He sounds like a modern Frankenstein's Monster come to life, with a slight Russian accent. Flashes of cunning sparkle behind his dark eyes. The lines around his mouth are downturned from a perpetual frown. He's wearing a tight black shirt. His forearms are like tree trunks. He'd have no problem breaking me in half, if he wanted to. I doubt he'd even break a sweat.

"Does he know I'm here?" I ask, not knowing which answer I dread the most. If Max does know I'm here, then I'm truly lost. There's no way he orders his men to treat me like this if he plans on ever seeing me again.

"No," answers the beast before me. *Shit*. That might be even worse. Are Max's own men turning on him now that he's being put on trial?

"Don't you work for him?" I don't know what else to say, but I just want to delay whatever's coming.



“Forget about Mr. Koralev for a moment,” the monster growls. “This is about you.”

His bark rattles my bones. I don’t dare respond.

He stares at me with icy cold eyes. There’s a calculation happening somewhere in the back of his mind that I don’t have the courage to consider. How many souls has this demon extinguished? I wonder what he’s risking by interrogating me like this—what does he think he’ll achieve?

I get my answer soon enough.

“How did the FBI know the location of your wedding?”

*Shit.*

“I... What... Why are you asking *me*?” I stumble over myself like a fool. A lump catches in my throat as I realize just how vulnerable I am. This monster isn’t a cop or a federal agent. He’s not bound by rules or law. Max doesn’t know I’m here. I’m completely at his mercy. He can do whatever he wants to make me talk and he doesn’t have to stop until I say what he wants to hear.

The monster moves forward in his chair. Metal legs scrape against the cement floor. I try to look past him. We’re in a small empty underground parking lot. Somewhere nearby, a pipe is leaking. Other than that, though, there’s no sound.

“How did the FBI know the location of your wedding?” he repeats, even lower this time.

A queasy feeling enters my stomach. I know I’m not going to be able to resist much longer. A giant hand wraps around my arm, which is tied to the arm of my chair. The monster’s skin is cold and clammy. Slowly, he begins to squeeze. The pressure around my forearm gets tighter and tighter. I try to resist the urge to squirm—I don’t want to give him the satisfaction—but when the pain gets too great, I can’t help but yelp and fight for my freedom. “Stop!” It’s just survival instinct at this point.

“Tell me what you know.”

“I... I don’t know what you’re talking about—” suddenly, the backside of the monster’s hand lashes across my cheek. The blow is heavy but unexpected, and it takes a moment for the full force of it to truly hit. When it does hit, my cheek is set on fire. But, to my surprise, I don’t feel weakened. No. Rather, I feel fed-up. I feel angry. A fire rises up inside of me to match the sting of the monster’s hand. “Fuck you!” I spit. Something warm dribbles down my lip. Blood? Spit? I hardly care at this point.

The monster sneers and throws his chair aside. The metal clangs against a nearby wall as he looms over me, standing big and tall and terrifying. There’s no heat coming from his body. He might as well be an ice sculpture, or something undead. Fear and dread and anger and frustration battle inside of me as I’m consumed by the big bully. “Max is going to—” The monster shuts me up with another lash across the face. My head snaps in the opposite direction and more warm liquid drips from my face. I watch it drop onto the barren cement floor below. Blood. My resolve begins to falter. *Am I ready to die here?*

“Koralev isn’t doing shit,” growls my captor. “If he was, then I wouldn’t have to be here, wasting my time with you. He’s not coming. And if you don’t answer my question, I’m the last face you’re ever going to see.”

*Oh, what a great tragedy that would be.* The monster’s face is as twisted and ugly as any damsel could hope for in her doom. There’s not a slice of thrill in this arrangement. *Maybe if it was Max tying me up...*

“I’ll ask you one more time,” the hulking man demands, slowly pulling a large bowie knife out of the inside of his black leather jacket. The blade glistens in the dim, damp light of the garage. I hold onto the last sliver of my defiance until he points the weapon at my throat. It’s cold and threatening beyond belief. I don’t want to die here. Not without Max.

“How did the FBI know the location of your wedding?”

“... I told them.”

My mind feels so heavy from the weight of the confession, that I'm forced to bow my head like a worshipper. Still, I can feel the gloat coming from the fucking monster before me. He might as well be fist-pumping in celebration. *The son-of-a-bitch.*

He takes a moment to bathe in his little victory before it's no longer enough for him. "Why?"

Before I can answer, the sound of an opening door echoes off in the distance. My interrogator whips around; I quickly lift my heavy head to follow his gaze. Two men, speaking in another language, casually barge in. They're talking amongst themselves, hardly disturbed by the scene that greets them. I guess they're the types who are used to seeing bloody women tied up in chairs. Does that mean they're Max's men? Would that even do me any good at this point, or are they in cahoots with my interrogator?

"OUT!" The monster's voice booms around the barren basement like an explosion of thunder. The relaxed air around the two new men immediately evaporates. They flinch at the scolding and immediately turn back—but not before I make eye-contact with one of them. There's a glint of recognition in his eyes that gives me hope. *He knows who I am.* He also didn't seem to have known that I was here. Maybe he'll call Max...

My interrogator snaps back around when the two men disappear again. He looks even angrier than before. I can practically see the steam shooting out of his ears and nostrils. "Answer me!" he demands, stepping closer. "Why did you tell the—" before he can finish, another sound interrupts him. A ringing phone cuts through the tense air between us.

The monster rips his phone out of his dark jean pocket, clearly frustrated beyond all hell. He looks ready to chew out whoever's interrupting our little torture session, before he sees the name on the caller ID. "Fuck," he mumbles. His eyes dart back and forth between me and his phone screen, like he's torn between his two options. "You stay here," he orders, as he turns heel and begins to march towards the door at the far end of the basement garage.

*As if I have any other option.* Harsh rope still digs into my arms, bounding me to the cold metal chair.

I watch as the monster leaves me, fading dangerously on the edge of consciousness. I haven't had anything to drink or eat in at least a day and the rattling my brain just took at his hands is starting to catch up to me.

Still, when I see the monster answer his phone, just before he can fully step out of the underground garage, I'm inundated by an urge to shout for help. "Max!" I scream, my frail voice barely gaining enough traction to echo off the cement walls that trap me.

The door slams shut before I can gauge the effectiveness of my little cry, and the effort that it took completely drains the last bits of my remaining strength. I slink over in my chair and let drops of blood drip down onto my thighs. Not long after that, the lights in the underground garage shut off, and I'm left in complete darkness.

## MAXIM

**W**hat the hell's taking him so long?

Vasily had his assistant call Igor over two hours ago, and my war general still hasn't showed up at our secret meeting place under the boardwalk. I'm well aware of how busy he's been, but I'm starting to feel disrespected. When your *Pakhan* calls, you come as swiftly as possible.

The idea that maybe Igor's been killed hardly even crosses my mind. I can't see anything killing that monster. He's been through more wars than I can count, and he's survived them all—the scars on his face can attest to his ability to live through just about anything.

So, where the hell is he?

Does he somehow already know what I'm going to ask of him—that I want him to drop what he's doing and find Billie? It'd be understandable for him to want to resist such a task—he's already suspicious of her, and dragging him away from a battle just to help find my lost bride could seriously piss him off—but it'd be unforgivable for him to actually reject my command.

The longer I have to wait on him, though, the more suspicious I become.

Last I heard, Igor was off hunting down some of Angelo Esposito's top men, including a couple of war generals. If he's succeeded, then I'll forgive him for his tardiness. Angelo without his generals is almost completely worthless. Sure, the sadistic old man is good with money and blackmail, but if this

whole thing was to be decided by a duel solely between the two of us, I'd have him cracked over my knee before he could cry out for help.

*If only that was the way things worked...*

When I have to wait another ten minutes without so much as a peep from Igor, I decide to check in with Vasily for an update.

Imagine my shock when my call doesn't even go through.  
*Piece of shit...*

The service on my phone is faltering harder than a witness under intense interrogation. I barely have a reception, and even that keeps cutting in and out. *Fuck me.* Have I really been waiting in a blackhole this whole time? I must be becoming even more incompetent than I thought.

Truth be told, I've almost been enjoying this little slice of alone time. I've spent nearly the entirety of my wait daydreaming about Billie. Being so close to the ocean, with the smell of salt in the air and the lapping waves, reminds me of our first night together, when the seawalls between us broke down and our waters finally mixed. The memories are so strong that I can nearly bear to forgive myself for being so fucking ditzy as I make my way back up to the surface.

Finally, my phone starts ringing. It's Vasily. "Max! Are you alright?" He seems short of breath and far more panicky than I can ever remember him being.

"Yeah. I'm fine. What the fuck is going on?"

"... Did you meet with Igor?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose and find my car. "No, he never showed—"

"Where are you? Are you still at the boardwalk?"

"Yeah," I answer, stopping in my tracks. Something's gone wrong, I can sense it.

"Stay there," Vasily says quickly. "I'm sending men over. We need to—"

I interrupt my *Sovietnik* with a curt grunt. “Vasily. What the hell is going on?”

There’s an unexpected hesitation on Vasily’s end of the line. “We shouldn’t talk about it over the phone. I’ll come to you. Give me ten minutes.”

“Can you at least give me a fucking hint!” I snap, getting real fed up with being out of the loop.

Vasily sighs. “It’s about Igor... and Billie.”

My heart stops. *What the fuck could that mean!?*

“I’ll explain when I see you. Go to the safehouse by that warehouse where all this shit started. Arm yourself... We may have been betrayed.”

A cold shiver runs down my spine. No matter how much I want to, I don’t ask anymore questions. Who knows who could be listening in on this call. Still, one question slips out before I can hang up. I just have to know. “Is she alright?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out.”

---

Vasily leaves the armed men outside and slams the door shut behind him. The safehouse is decked out in the latest protective technology—soundproof walls, bulletproof doors and tinted windows—but the interior décor leaves a lot to be desired. A thin raggedy carpet covers creaky floorboards, hollowed out to make room for cachets of weapons. A single couch sits on one side of the bachelor pad, while a mattress takes up the space on the floor at the other end. Hardly luxurious. But it’s safe, and that’s what a safehouse is for.

“So?” I ask impatiently.

Vasily’s pacing back and forth. His sharp charcoal grey blazer and tidy dress shirt, matched with dark tapered pants and leather shoes, stands in sharp contrast to our dressed-down surroundings.

“Who’s the traitor?” I demand, when he doesn’t respond right away.

“It’s not confirmed yet,” Vasily deflects.

I take an angry step forward. “Who!?”

“... Igor.”

The name hits me like a brick in the face. *No*. If Igor’s gone to the other side, then I’m truly fucked. He’s my war expert. It won’t matter if he’s killed Angelo’s war generals or not; he’s better by himself than all of them combined, and losing him would fast track my own demise. “... Is he with Angelo?” I ask, hardly wanting to hear the answer.

Unexpectedly, Vasily shakes his head. “No. Not like that. I don’t think.”

“Stop pussy footing around!” I blast. I’m completely fed up with how Vasily is handling me right now. He needs to start treating me like the man that I am. I’m the boss. The king. *Give it to me straight, soldier.*

“I think he has Billie...” Vasily’s words plunge me under a cold and frigid water. At first, I’m too shocked to swim back up to the surface, until I finally realize that I’m not breathing.

I draw in a deep gust of air and resurface, filled with anger and confusion. “What? Why the fuck do you think that!?” I don’t like the accusatory tone in my voice; I know Vasily’s on my side, but being betrayed is such a sign of disrespect that I need *something* to take my rage out on before I implode.

Vasily stops pacing and leans against the bared brick wall behind him. His eyes search the small safehouse as he tries to connect his explanation. “About half an hour after my assistant called Igor to set up a meeting with you, he called back to tell me that Igor was bailing. He said that Igor told him he was preoccupied with something important. When I pressed for details, I was told that none were given. My assistant didn’t know where Igor was or what he was up to, but he did say that when he’d first called to set up your meeting, he’d thought he’d heard a woman shout in the background... and he was pretty sure she’d yelled your name.”



My fists instinctively clench and my pulse kicks up a notch. The thought of Billie crying out for me tugs at my heartstrings until they're bare and raw. I want to punch through the safehouse's brick walls and go find my girl, but I know Vasily's not done yet.

"I tried to get a hold of Igor myself, but he wouldn't pick up. You weren't picking up either. Fuck, I was starting to panic. Then, I had a visitor. A soldier who works under Igor's command. He was alone and twitchy, like he wasn't sure he should be doing what he was doing."

I listen quietly as a volcanic rage builds up inside of me.

Vasily shakes his head before continuing. "I assured him he'd be safe if he just told me what he had. After a little convincing, he admitted to seeing a girl he thought might be Billie... tied up and bloody in an underground garage not far from here."

My vision immediately goes red. The world trembles under my feet as my tensed muscles shake with more fury than I've ever felt before.

"He said the only other person in the room was Igor, and he immediately ordered him and his partner out when he saw them. Apparently, that was just before my assistant called Igor to set up his meeting with you."

"That rat fucking bastard..." The words leave my mouth like tremors from an earthquake. I'm so enraged that I can hardly think straight. "Where is the garage? Where the *fuck* is the garage!?"

Vasily's frown tells me all I need to know, but he says it anyways. "We immediately checked the location. It was empty... but there were blood spots on the ground."

"Why didn't you call me!?" It doesn't matter how soundproof this safehouse is, I'm ready to shout so loud that the whole world hears me.

"I tried calling you two dozen times, but I never even got the phone to ring. The service has been shit down here ever since the war started. It makes meeting under the boardwalk a

perfect place to stay hidden from listening devices, but an awful place if you need to be contacted. Who would have thought that I would have had to warn you about Igor, of all people!?”

Now it's my turn to pace. I chew down on my tongue and sweep the thin rug with the soles of my leather boots. “Why does he have Billie!?” I think out loud.

“I don't know,” Vasily sighs. “Maybe he thinks he's helping us. Maybe he's taking her to Angelo to end this whole war.”

I could almost laugh; the concept is so absurd. “Bullshit,” I snap. “Since when do we know Igor to want to put an *end* to violence? He loves this shit. He must be pretty sure of himself that Billie's the one who betrayed us to the FBI. I swear to god, if that fucker's laid a hand on her...”

“And what if she's a rat?” Vasily blurts out, obviously immediately regretting his candor. I shoot him a glare of intense displeasure and he winces. “Sorry...” he whispers. “I know... I know what she means to you, and I don't condone Igor's behaviour. I... I just—”

I raise my palm to him and Vasily trails off. This isn't what I want to hear right now. All I want to hear is that we know where Billie and Igor are. “Where are they?” I demand.

“I don't know,” Vasily mutters.

Before I can tell him that's not good enough, the vibrating sound of a ringing cell phone catches both of our attention. Vasily rips his phone out of his pocket and his eyes go wide as he reads the contact name on the screen. I don't even have to ask who it is; he just turns his phone around and shows me.

*Igor.*

---

We're dangerously close to Esposito territory, not that such a thing is going to dissuade me. I'm here for one reason and one reason only. The love of my life is missing, and the only man

who knows where she is waits for me in an old warehouse, not dissimilar to the one where all this shit started.

This warehouse isn't near the ocean, though. Instead, it's just outside the city, inland, in a factory district that borders my territory and Angelo's. It's where Igor demanded we meet. He could have said the moon and I'd be there, strapped to the teeth and ready to kill.

I bring my own entourage of men, but I have no plans to use them for anything other than show. Igor's a beast of a man, but no one's allowed to touch him. He's all mine.

The big lug seems to have roped some of my men into this whole thing, because a perimeter of low-level Bratva soldiers surrounds the gritty warehouse when we arrive. One nervously asks me to leave my men out front while I go inside. He doesn't have to convince me. Even Vasily is left in my dust as I make a beeline for revenge.

I'm passively led into a backroom office, where I wait impatiently for the man of the hour. It doesn't take long for his hulking figure to appear, approaching from the far end of the warehouse. I march out to greet him.

"Where is she?" I growl.

"*Pakhan,*" the giant bows ever so slightly.

*Oh, fuck off with your phony show of respect, you motherfucker. You betrayed me.* 'Where is she!?' I repeat, without stopping my advance. Igor's eyes are cold and unpassionate, a far cry from my mood. It only makes me angrier how detached he is from the whole situation. This isn't about strategy; this is about love. I'm going to kill him. And I'm going to do it with my bare hands.

I unholster my Glock and Igor doesn't flinch. He's a stoic motherfucker, I'll give him that. But I'm not here to shoot him... at least, not yet. I toss my gun aside and it slides across the dusty warehouse floor. Golden afternoon sunlight streams in through slits in the roof. I charge through them like a bull. Igor seems to accept what's coming. He unstraps his own gun and throws it aside, cracking his knuckles and stretching his

tree trunk of a neck. Soon enough, his black leather jacket is on the floor, too, and his muscles are pulsing under a tight black t-shirt. I roll up the cuffs on my crisp white dress shirt, ready to stain it with his blood.

“*Pakhan*, just let me—” I interrupt the start of his little speech with a big punch. His jaw is like iron and a shockwave of pain ripples down my arm upon contact. Luckily, I put enough power into my jab to send him stumbling backwards. *Good*. I don’t care if it hurts me, as long as he can actually feel it. I was almost worried there for a second that I might be punching out of my league. Hell, I still might be, but at least I know now that I can deliver some damage.

Igor’s one of the few men I’ve ever met who’s physically bigger and more solid than me in every way. It makes him the perfect muscle for my operation, and a terrifying opponent, but I’m in no mood to be terrified. I’m too pissed off for that.

Igor rubs his red cheek as I lunge at him again. This time, before I can make contact, he dips down and dodges my blow. I immediately regret my forwardness as my former trusted general wraps his hulking arms around my waist and body slams me to the ground. The back of my skull just barely misses the concrete slab below. After a struggle, I manage to get both of us on our side. He’s even stronger than I could have imagined, but I’m fueled by pure fury—and love.

“Where is she!?” I demand, working my hands through Igor’s heavy grip towards his throat.

“She’s here,” he snarls, pushing me away before I can choke him. I slide through the dust and quickly jump back to my feet, hardly taking a breath before I charge again. It’s not like me to be so bereft of strategy, but I have no desire to think of anything other than getting my imminent revenge.

Igor dodges my jab at his jaw, but falls victim to my other fist, which lands just under his chest. It’s like hitting solid metal, but he stumbles backwards and grabs at his waist. “Listen, Maxim!” he bellows, before I take another swing. This time, he dodges backwards, giving him a big windup to land his own punch against my shoulder. I’m nearly thrown off

my feet as I stumble sideways. “Angelo and his men are waiting on the other side of the district. They’re ready to take her off our hands. She deserves it. She’s a—” I interrupt his spiel with a combo; left, right, uppercut. Blood spurts from his mouth but he barely stumbles backwards this time. Instead, he wipes his lip and stares down at me with disdain. Something dreadful seems to click within him. “You’re weak. *Malen’kiy mal’chik*... You don’t deserve the power you wield. You’re not strong enough for it.”

The pain shooting through my arm almost makes me believe him. My bullet wounds flare up and I slap the scar on my neck in an attempt to calm it down.

“You don’t want to listen. Fine. I thought I could talk you down. But you’re too far gone. We won’t survive with you leading us anymore. First, you fail to go legitimate, and now, you’re failing to lead us through a war caused by your own terrible decisions. I had hope for you. I even loved you like a family member once. But I love the empire more. The Bratva is my family, and your carelessness is going to be the death of us. I can’t let that happen.”

I try to catch my breath as Igor reaches behind his back and pulls out a massive bowie knife. The huge blade glimmers in the sunbeams seeping in through the warehouse roof. “This knife will taste her blood, too,” he growls, “once it’s done with you. Farewell, old friend.”

Before I can blink, Igor stabs at me—I’m only just barely able to lunge aside quick enough to avoid being cut. My lungs are on fire and my legs are throbbing almost as hard as my scars. I roll painfully through the dust and then force myself back up onto my feet.

Hardly anything Igor’s said registers in my brain. Only one thought reverberates through my searing mind. *She’s here.*

Igor was going to hand Billie over to Angelo. Whether he believes her to be a traitor or not, that isn’t his decision to make. He knows that I’m the final word on *everything*, and he’s betrayed his vows to my family and the Bratva. I’m not just fighting for myself or for Billie anymore. I’m fighting for

an empire, a legacy. If this giant defeats me, then the Koralev name goes extinct. I know Igor won't hesitate to go after Georgy next—then I'll have destroyed everything I love.

I can't let that happen.

This fight has evolved past the need to release some pent-up anger. It's purely survival now. For myself. For my family. For my legacy. For my love.

**BILLIE**

**I** watch the whole thing from my prisoner's chair, stuck behind a glass window pane on the warehouse's top floor office. Duct tape around my mouth, rope digging into my skin, a pounding headache and a thrashing heart, it all barely even registers as Max and the monster battle down below.

I can't hear what they're saying, but their low voices and grunts echo through the building like thunder while they fight. The monster's the only man I've ever seen who could make Max look physically small, but Max doesn't seem to give two shits about that. When the monster takes out the same bowie knife that he brandished against me, Max barely even flinches. The little switchblade he pulls in response hardly even compares, but Max is faster.

Blood glistens on the floor after the little switchblade cuts through the monster's big arm. My cries of encouragement are muffled by duct tape, but I can't stop cheering my man on. Before I can revel too much in his small victory, though, the monster swings wildly at him, roaring like an angry beast, and smacking him backwards. I'm far enough away that it takes me a second to see it, but when Max recovers from the blow, the switchblade is gone from his hand. It glimmers in a seeping sunbeam a few feet away, but Max has no time to retrieve it. I try to cry out a warning to him, but it's no use. The monster's huge blade comes down over Max's shoulder, only stopping because Max manages to grab the beast's wrist with both hands at the last second. They struggle to the ground as my heart tears itself apart. The butterflies that were released

in my stomach when I saw that Max had arrived are crushed by a heavy boot of fear. The two men wrestle on the warehouse floor until Max is somehow able to expel the knife from the monster's grip. The shimmering blade goes flying and Max rolls away from the scuffle. He looks exhausted, panting like a wounded animal; staring down the giant beast who's taken me hostage.

I want to help so badly. But the ropes holding me down hardly budge as I struggle against them. I'm so worn out and sore, but seeing my man fighting for me with all his might gives me a second wind. I swear I can almost feel my tethers finally starting to budge when I see Max reach down and pick up something black and sleek from the warehouse floor.

The monster charges towards him—before Max stops him in his tracks with a series of deafening booms that are so loud they nearly knock my chair off of its legs. The office window rattles as I watch the giant monster double over and collapse to the ground.

Max stands as still as a statue as the monster tries to push himself back up—but he's hurt too bad. His strength vanishes all in an instant and he falls back down. Slowly, a pool of dark crimson blood seeps out from beneath the fresh corpse.

I watch, completely in shock, before the realization of Max's victory hits me like a tidal wave. A new burst of energy finds me struggling against my restraints, until I'm somehow finally able to wrestle myself loose.

The pain hardly even registers as I rip the duct tape off my mouth and start banging wildly against the office window. The glass rattles and I shout. "Max!"

Finally, my hero looks up. I swear his fiery grey-green eyes glow in the golden light of the evening sun. All of my exhaustion suddenly catches up to me. Before I can make another move, my knees go weak and I collapse in a heap.

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“Billie. Billie.” The familiar warmth of a big rough hand gently slaps against my raw cheek. *Max*. His other hand cradles the back of my skull, palming my shaved cranium with the utmost care and tenderness. The warmth seeps into my exhausted brain like a comforting blanket.

I open my eyes and see him for the first time in months. My savior. My fiancée. My love.

He’s drenched in sweat and stained with blood. There are scars on him that I don’t remember, but his earthy smell is exactly the same, so is the wet lushness of his lips against mine.

Our kiss melts the heaviness in my heart. The passion we share is soft and understated—we’re both too exhausted for anything else—but it’s perfect. I couldn’t have asked for a more reassuring reminder of our love.

“Are you alright?” His hot breath washes across my face.

“I am now,” I whisper. My throat is so dry that it’s hard to get the words out, but I have to know. “Are you okay?”

His rugged smile corrals the butterflies back into my stomach. I might as well be floating on a cloud. “I’ll be fine,” he assures me. His grey-green eyes sparkle with tenderness. I swear I can hear the pitter-patter of rain drops start to fall against the tin roof of the warehouse. “Let me take you home.”

Max lifts me up gingerly. His hard, throbbing body gives me strength and makes me weak all at the same time. I steady myself with a hand against his broad chest. His heartbeat is slow and steady. If I didn’t know any better, I’d be hard-pressed to guess that he had just got done fighting for his life.

I lean against my protector’s arm and let him carry me to the door. We both limp like damaged goods, but our broken pieces fit perfectly into one another. The rain outside picks up. Thunder rumbles off in the distance. I could almost fall asleep.

As we pass through the threshold of the office doors, though, the peaceful sounds turn harsher. That low rumble isn’t thunder... is it shouting? Yes. Men outside the warehouse are barking orders and yelling at each other. The pitter patter

against the outer walls starts to sound odd, too. The drops are too heavy, too scattered to be rain.

Before I can quite make the connection, Max sweeps me off my feet. “Fuck,” he growls, as he whisks me down the rickety warehouse staircase like we’ve just been married. Funny enough, the flashback to our disastrous wedding makes me realize what’s really happening.

That’s not rain I hear. That’s the sound of bullets pouring down over the warehouse.

We’re in the middle of a shootout.

“Max!” I yelp, as a tin tile collapses from the roof.

“Shh,” he whispers, picking up speed. “I’ll protect you.”

I bury my head into his chest and try to drown out the deafening sound of gunfire with the beat of his heart. His pulse has picked up, but it’s still not loud enough to escape the chaos that surrounds us.

“Boss! This way!” Max follows the voice. I want him to drop me. I want him to save himself. I want to be able to fight on my own. But I know I can’t. I barely have the energy to fight back the pounding headache that threatens to knock me out again.

Max carries me through a set of doors and the golden afternoon light smacks me across the face. I bury my cheek deep into his chest, my head ready to split into two.

The bevy of gunshots being levied around us sounds as loud as erupting volcanoes. My body starts to shake in response to the violence, but Max stays as steady as a rock. The only thing keeping me from falling apart is his broad chest and racing heart. He’s so warm, but I find little comfort in his heat. He was warm and protective at our wedding, too—until he wasn’t. Dread fills my entire being as I just wait for him to go cold again. It was a miracle he even survived the first time; there’s no guarantee he will again. I can feel the scars on his back throbbing against his effort.

*Please don't go cold. Please don't go cold.*

Suddenly, I'm thrown into the backseat of a dark car. The cool air-conditioned interior gives me a bit of relief, but only for a second. A harsh screeching sound follows my entrance and the smell of burning rubber fills the air. We peel out.

Max is still warm. *Thank fucking god.* His touch is enough to keep me from shattering. He holds me as we're whipped from side to side, window to window. Our driver swerves and speeds through the action until the overwhelming boom of the chaos finally starts to fade in the background.

I don't look up, even as we're enveloped in the newly discovered silence. Fear grips my frigid body. Max feels like a torch against my icy figure, but even he can't seem to warm me up.

"It's okay, baby," he whispers, rubbing his big hand across my back. "We're going to be alright."

I want to believe him, but who knows if I even can anymore. Is anywhere safe when I'm with a man like him?

Eventually, our getaway car pulls into an underground garage. Our backdoor is opened for us and Max carries me out. I'm too shell-shocked to look around, but when he carries me into an elevator, I know where we are. I recognize the smell.

He's brought me home.

"Blinds, close!" he orders when the elevator doors open back up on the main floor of his penthouse suite. Sweet comforting darkness slowly drags over the room. I keep my eyes shut as Max carries me upstairs to his bedroom. The soft sheets of his massive mattress greet me like silk-lined clouds. It almost feels like I'm drifting out of my own body...

The next thing I know, I'm being gently shaken awake.

"Billie. Billie," Max's voice comes down from some ethereal plane. Slowly, it sharpens, until I'm snapped back to reality.

"Max?"

His smile lights me up like a Christmas tree. “Hey, how are you doing?”

Before I can answer, my stomach rumbles so loudly that it sends a shot of pain through my aching head.

“Hungry, huh?” Max chuckles.

“Yeah...” I whisper, trying to sit up. Something catches on my arm and I look over to see a tube in my wrist. I’m about to freak out when Max’s big hand caresses my chin and he pulls my gaze back to him.

“It’s okay. I had a doctor come the other night and check up on you. He said you were dehydrated and a little bruised up, but otherwise fine. That tube’s just making sure you get your liquids, okay?”

I take a deep breath and try to remember how I got here. Flashes of dreadful violence pulse through my weathered mind. I decide to let myself forget. “I’m okay,” I whisper, both to myself and to Max.

“You’re tougher than you look,” Max chuckles, sitting down on the edge of the bed. His hand falls from my chin and onto my shoulder. The calmness in his touch puts me at ease. “I like the new haircut, by the way.”

“How long have I been out for?” I ask, trying to fight back a bit of nausea. I can hardly tell what’s more powerful: my hunger or my sickness. I feel like I could eat an entire buffet, but even the thought of a single morsel of food makes me want to puke.

Max checks his phone. “Well, about 24 hours now. I joined you for the first 8 or so. But a man can only sleep so much.”

I stare up at his bedroom ceiling, which seems to stretch out forever. The blinds on the windows are closed and the room is dark. My muscles ache and it feels like two assholes are playing tennis inside my head. My skin feels sticky and gross and my eyes feel raw and puffy.

Nonetheless, Max plants a soft kiss on my cheek.

I feel better.

“We need to get you washed up and fed,” he says, standing. “Do you think you can handle a shower right now?”

“Maybe with a little help,” I smirk, faintly. A nice hot shower next to Max’s naked body seems like heaven. But first, I need to drag myself out of bed.

Max helps unlatch the tube from my wrist. I’m wearing a silk nightgown that he must have slipped on me at some point after I was passed out. It’s cozy, but I’d rather be nude under his rainforest shower head. Max leads me through a maze of stuffed suitcases and half-packed travel luggage. The bags litter the floor along with a flurry of clothes, both for men and for women.

“Are we going somewhere?” I ask, half joking. I’m in no state to travel, obviously.

Max isn’t laughing, though. “Yeah. We’re leaving tomorrow. The city’s not safe for us anymore.”

*Duh.* But, wait. What?

The heated tiles of Max’s luxurious bathroom greet my bare feet like a gift from the gods. The warmth eases my mind just a little bit. I trust him, even if the last thing I want to do right now is get in another car, or, even worse, a plane. “Where are we going?” I ask, as Max slips off my nightgown for me.

He just smiles oh-so sweetly. “How would you like to meet my brother?”

**MAXIM**

**T**he awe and wonder that sparkles just behind Billie's big brown eyes as I show off the interior of my private jet almost makes me okay with the whole 'fleeing a war I started' thing. Running from the violence seems less cowardly when I see it through the lens of love. I'm doing this for her. She doesn't deserve to be put in any more danger, and I'll be damned if I'm going to leave her again.

Billie's doing better after a hot shower, a couple of good meals and some more sleep. Her skin is tender around the wrists and her cheeks are still a little raw, but it's nothing a few more soft kisses won't fix. I'm trying to be gentle with her, even though I miss her body like crazy. It's been so long since we last fucked that being this closed to her again is making me twitch. But I won't push. She's been through enough.

I let her rest her head against my lap and doze off as we fly over the Atlantic Ocean, through Europe, and towards a small but noble territory in my ancestral land. Mother Russia waits like a safety blanket, ready and primed to protect us from the dangers that threaten our lives back home. Vasily has somehow convinced me to hide out with my brother until Angelo Esposito and his family can be wiped completely off the map. He's also done something even more impressive: convinced the judge overseeing my case to grant a travel exemption on my bail. Oh yeah, and he even notified me just before take-off that my trial has been indefinitely postponed, thanks to a few well-placed bribes. It turns out the feds might

have jumped the gun with my arrest. The evidence they have against me is weak and getting weaker by the day, especially compared to my deep pockets and crooked connections.

Sure, this ‘trip’ to Russia isn’t going to help my case—it’s going to make me look like I’m on the run—but this isn’t for me. I only agreed for Billie’s sake. Though, it doesn’t hurt that I’ll finally get to see Georgy again. He’s been informed that I’m on my way, but we haven’t talked since my wedding day.

I wonder if he’s changed at all?

My mind is haunted by worrying thoughts as Billie breathes softly on my lap. The showdown with Igor flashes like a nightmare just behind my eyelids. He had to die. Not just so I could save Billie, but so that I could save my honor, too. He questioned me and tested my leadership to its limit. I couldn’t let him get away with that, even if I’d wanted to.

Still, his last words echo through my head like a bullhorn.

*You’re weak. Malen’kiy mal’chik. You don’t deserve the power you wield. You’re not strong enough for it...*

Anger and disappointment whirl around inside of me at the insult. *Maybe I am getting weak... But is it really weakness if it’s out of love?* My father never thought so, but he also found my mother before his rise to the top of the underworld. I’ve been burdened with the curse of trying to lead an empire while also attempting to discover a life of my own at the same time. It can be overwhelming, especially now that I’ve found an outsider I want to bring in—but I always thought I’d be up to any task. Now, though, it appears that I was mistaken. I’m running from my troubles, and I don’t know what the future holds. My empire, my family’s legacy, and the safety of everyone I love is more out of my control than ever before. The more I think about it, the angrier it makes me. Eventually, the gentle weight of Billie’s sleeping body is the only thing keeping me from flying off the handle.

I caress her shaven head, kind of liking how the stubble feels against my fingertips. She looks beautiful with or without hair, but I wonder who made her shave it? It hardly disguises her.

Billy and I still haven't had the chance to talk about where she's been since the wedding. I don't want to push her too much, but I also know it's a conversation we need to have. If she was being protected by the FBI, I'll need to know exactly why, and exactly what she had to give them in return for their services—if they even gave her a choice.

I have no illusions about Billie being tangled up with the feds by now, but I also can't imagine her betraying me. I saw the look in her eyes when she walked down the aisle at our wedding. It couldn't have been her who let the law inside of our lawless enclave.

Still, Igor seemed so sure...

My heart clenches as I reflect fully on what transpired between me and my old friend. I hate that I miss him, and not just as a General. He'd always had my back before. But he just took things too far this time. Even if he's right about Billie—that she only came into my life as a rat—would that matter anymore? Whatever it is that's developed between us seems so much bigger than any promises we could have made to anyone else. I feel like an entirely different person than the one who slyly agreed to have Billie killed in the name of strategic revenge. Will Georgy even recognize me?

My chest aches at the thought that he may not like who I've become—or, almost worse, he won't see what I see in Billie. I'd never even considered that Igor might go against me. What's to stop Georgy from following the same destructive path? He's so innocent... yet I allowed him to become the mastermind behind the death of another person. Will he be mad or relieved that Billie hasn't been killed?

I call on a stewardess for a glass of whisky. My mind swirls with countless troubling thoughts and doubts and questions. How sure am I that Billie's worth all this trouble? I love her, but if it comes down to her or Georgy, who do I choose?

I don't even want to think about that. I down my shot of whisky and call for a bottle of vodka.



I've risked everything to be with Billie, but I'm not in the clear yet. My brother has more sway over me than anyone; not because he has any formal power over me, but because he's the only person in this world, besides Billie, who I truly love—and he has seniority over her in that regard.

The captain announces our final descent just as I pass the halfway mark on my bottle of Russian vodka. My head swims and my stomach burns, but I do feel better. The little slice of domestic bliss that's circled up on my lap reminds me what this is all for. My father always taught me that there was more to life than just business and worldly success. Family, both inherited and discovered, is just as important as achieving one's grander goals.

I wish I'd truly understood his lessons sooner, then maybe I could have avoided this whole mess in the first place. A fake marriage would never have seemed like a good idea to a man who appreciated real love.

I can only hope that Georgy sees it the same way.

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A thin layer of white snow carpets the vast field that leads up to the ancient palace. Our car drives down the one path that cuts through the long flat piece of land, whipping up dead leaves that have fallen from the forest that surrounds the immense property. Even I'm in awe of the luxury of it all. I can't imagine what's racing through Billie's head.

This place used to belong to a noble family that was massacred in the revolution. For many years, it was left empty. The remote location warded off any potential buyers, until a certain crime lord stumbled upon it one day. Ilya Fetisov. He didn't need the money to purchase the land, because he had the force to take it. Peasants had been plowing the vast fertile fields out front, but they were no match for his goons. Ilya moved in and set the palace up like a fortress—a safe place for a big time criminal to lay low.

His grandson, Pavel Fetisov, would later become friends with my father. It was Pavel who accepted the task of protecting my brother. This arrangement was kept from me for my own safety, but now that I need to hide away just as badly as my brother, I've been filled in and let through the gates.

"Brother!" Georgy's voice is the first thing I hear when I step out of the car. It's like music to my ears. His breath dances like smoke in the cold air.

"*Mladshiy brat!*" I give my little brother a flurry of playful punches to the shoulder before we wrap each other in a hug. His straight blonde hair is nearly past his ears now, and I get an eyeful of it as we rock back and forth. "You look healthy," I point out, when we finally stumble apart.

"Well, if there's one good thing I can say about this place is that the chef is top-notch. I've been eating like a king. Though, maybe I should be exercising more." He rubs his belly and I can't help but role my eyes. There isn't an ounce of fat on the kid. He does look well-fed, though. His pale skin is glowing and his face is filled out and as sharp as ever. His blue eyes twinkle with excitement as he studies me back. "You've got some new scars," he teases, before his gaze wanders behind me.

I turn around, too. Billie's being helped out of the car by our driver. I quickly shuffle over to help. She's understandably still sore as hell from her ordeal. I am too, but I'm just more used to the pain.

I grab Billie's hand and quickly shoot Georgy a look of warning. *Be polite*, I try to tell him telepathically. Georgy doesn't need my warning. He immediately looks impressed. I should have known my little brother's a sucker for hot girls. If only he'd seen Billie before he'd thought of the plan to have her killed, then he'd probably never have even proposed it in the first place. I'm sure Vasily's updated him on the progress of our relationship since then. She's not a pawn anymore.

"Billie, this is my younger brother, Georgy. Georgy, Billie." The two smile and shake hands. *Good start.*

“Nice to meet you,” Billie offers. Her voice is still weak and she’s been sleeping for most of the trip, but Georgy’s more than willing to pick up the slack for her.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” he smiles back. That smile quickly turns into a smirk. “And here I was thinking that my brother didn’t have any taste. How wrong I was. Welcome to the family!”

Billie nearly collapses at the compliment. I don’t think she was expecting such hospitality. I’d told her that this place is owned by a crime lord, and I guess she just thought that I was the only criminal in this world with any manners. Poor girl, if she thinks I’m the high standard for class.

“Let’s get you two inside,” Georgy announces, ever the host. He claps and the staff waiting around the entrance spring into action. They help our driver with the luggage as I help Billie inside. She nearly faints again at the excessive luxury of it all.

“Wow...” she whispers. I’m almost as impressed as she is. A giant golden chandelier is the first thing that greets us. It must hold about a thousand candles. Underneath, a white marble floor stretches out as far as the field outside, until it meets two intertwining staircases that lead up to a second-floor balcony.

The palace is magnificent, and I can feel Billie crumbling a bit under the weight of it all. I hold her up and turn to my brother. “Mind leading us to our bedroom? We’ve had a long trip. I think a little rest is in order.”

Georgy nods. “If you say so. You know, I wasn’t going to say anything—being a polite nobleman and all,” he gestures around at the grand hall. “But yeah, you look like you’ve been through hell and back.” I catch that playful smirk of his again and a wave of nostalgia washes over my soreness. I’m almost glad to be here, within arm’s reach of the two people I care for most in this entire world.

“You don’t know the half of it,” I bounce back.

“Let’s talk,” Georgy chuckles. “It’s not like there’s anything else to do in this hell-hole.”

**BILLIE**

2 months later...

**F**uck me, I'm so bored.

It's almost surreal, being so sick of something so nice and quiet, but I guess that's what you get when you hook up with a bratva boss who puts you in constant danger from day one.

Sure, at first, this was a peaceful little vacation—a good opportunity to recover and rest with the man I've fallen for—but now it just feels like another prison; albeit, a much more massive and luxurious one than I'm used to. Still, it's just as suffocating as ever; especially with the constant snowfall enclosing us inside. My former bungalow prison at least had a surrounding desert to explore. Here I just have rooms; most of them just as boring as the next. A lady can only look at so many classic paintings before she gets sick of them all together.

The closest I get to any kind of thrill these days is when Max has enough free time to bend me over some railing and pound me into oblivion. Don't get me wrong, the sex is amazing, but I just wish we could spend more time together.

Ever since we arrived at the palace, Max and Georgy have been spending most of their days in the war room, which is what they call the bar. They drink vodka and draw up plans of attack for soldiers to follow back home, usually in the dead of night. Their booming voices echo through the palace, and I can seem to hear them no matter how far away from their 'war

room' I choose to sleep. The massive estate feels like it's shrinking more every day; I'm slowly starting to think we're all losing our minds.

I don't know if it's cabin fever or what, but, by my estimation, everything started to unravel about three weeks after our arrival. The reason? I'm not so sure. I wasn't in any state to investigate. I'd never been so sore and exhausted in all my life when we first set up shop here. Max was so patient and caring at first. I didn't even leave the royal bed he stuck me in for the first two days. I was pampered like a queen, by him and by the staff that waited on my every need. Still, it didn't take long before things started to turn cold and lonely.

I was out of commission. I get it. A man like Max will inevitably become restless when he's cooped up. Him and his brother started catching up while I recovered, and they haven't stopped since. By the time I was strong enough to join them, they were so lost in their own little world that I didn't feel like I could fit in.

What a gut punch that was. Here I am, on the other side of the world, snowed in at a giant empty palace, aggravatingly close to the man I've fallen in love with, and I feel myself slipping into the same pit of despair that I was lost in during my lonely stay in witness protection.

Listen, I'm not some jealous bitch. I've gotten to know Georgy a bit. He seems like a good kid. I'm sure the bond between siblings is stronger than I can even imagine. But the more they reconnect, the less I feel connected to Max. It's like he's being overcome by his past.

Where does that leave me?

I'll tell you where it leaves me. Swimming in the glass-encased, Olympic-sized pool on the third-floor balcony of my palace prison, all alone—as delicate as ever.

I come here nearly every morning while Max sleeps in after spending the entire night drinking and corresponding with his troops back home. The warmth of the water helps soothe my restless soul, as does the endless view of the eternal snow-covered forest outside.

It's the only slice of boredom that I can actually tolerate. But even it is getting tiresome. That's why, when I spot two black cars break through the edge of the forest with the pale dawn light, heading directly towards the palace's front entrance, I immediately jolt out of the warm water and run downstairs. The prospect of a visitor is way more exciting than anything I've been able to experience in far too long. I hardly even care who it is.

I grab a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie on my way down, but my hair's still soaking wet when I reach the bottom of the grand staircase at the front hall. I wait off to the side as the huge entrance doors are opened and a small delegation walks in.

A cold wind blows a gust of snowflakes through the entrance before the double-doors are shut again. I shiver under my damp hoodie and try to make out the mysterious guests. Servants take their hats and coats, exposing their pale faces. I don't recognize anyone. Until...

"Ms. Parker!" comes a familiar voice. I perk up. It's Mr. Zuev. He waves to me in a far friendlier manner than I'd have expected from him. He's always seemed so cold to me before. Still, the arrival of someone I actually know is enough to send a boost of adrenaline rushing through my veins.

"Mr. Zuev," I greet him with a subtle bow of the head as we approach each other under the grand chandelier. The other men he's come with break off, heading towards the ground floor dining room in the west wing of the building.

"Please, call me Vasily." The handsome older man's cheeks are red from the cold, but his slicked back hair is perfectly placed and his eyes twinkle with a calculated warmth. He smells of frost and when he reaches out his hand, I shake it, finding his skin frigid. "Just got out of the shower?" he asks, gesturing to my wet hair.

"Pool," I say.

"You'll have to show me where it is. I love a good swim." Vasily looks past me and up the long staircase that I've marked with my watery footprints. "Is Max here?" he asks.

I nod.

“Where?”

“Still sleeping.”

A small smile crosses Vasily’s thin lips as he playfully shakes his head. “Of course. The time difference must be frustrating, huh? I bet he’s up all night and sleeping all day. Hardly the honeymoon you two deserve.”

“We’re not married yet,” I remind Max’s closest advisor. The truth is, our whole arrangement seems like a distant memory now—Max and I have hardly even talked about it since our arrival at the palace... which is weird, right? Where has my head been for the past two months? Max is at war; he should need his father’s assets now more than ever.

A sudden impatience grips my gut. It’s a far cry from the apathy that I’ve gotten used to over the past two months. Should I ask Vasily for an update? I’m owed a lot of money. Will I still be getting paid for my, uh, ‘services’, even though Max and I still aren’t technically married? As far as I know, my start-up still needs the influx of cash, not that I’ve had much of an opportunity to look up the exact numbers. The palace gets internet, but only barely—and I’ve long since had to leave pretty much everything in the hands of my business manager and lead developer. At one point, before the wedding, I’d hinted to them that a big investment should be on its way, just to keep them excited about the work, but I don’t even know if that’s true anymore. Is the plan to go after Max’s father’s remaining assets still on? If we get married now, will it still be ‘fake’? If Max and I tie the knot for real, will I ever need my own money again?

The thought of losing that independence sends a shiver down my spine. Do I even want to get married? At least, anytime soon? The last year of my life has been under the constant thumb of everyone from Max to the FBI. And now, I’m stuck in a foreign country, without any free-will to leave or go anywhere on my own. The hope of finally gaining some independence again sounds like heaven. But independence comes at a price. And I’m owed, right?



I make a mental note to think up a delicate way to ask Vasily about the money. For now, I'll leave it be. I'm not particularly worried about being forced to undergo any kind of marriage ceremony out here, anyway. I can only assume that Max needs the wedding to happen back home.

"Is there a bar anywhere?" Vasily asks, snapping me back to the present moment.

"Um, yeah," I mutter, still trying to swat back all the troubling thoughts racing through my mind.

"Can you show me the way? I'd like to talk to you about something."

The flame of excitement that flickered inside of me at the idea of finally having a new visitor quickly dies; it's replaced by a heavy sense of dread. Suddenly, all that I can think about is how little Max and I have talked about so many very important things.

He's yet to press me on why I was being protected by the FBI after the wedding; he hasn't pushed me to talk about what happened between me and Igor, either; and he definitely hasn't talked about when we finally need to get married for real.

In a way, I understand his hesitancy. I guess I've justified it as an act of mercy. He knows I'm not used to this harsh lifestyle and he's letting me recover before we get back to the hard stuff. He even let me call Jackie—who'd called the cops after I suddenly disappeared—to let her know I was alright.

Vasily, on the other hand, has no reason to treat me with safety gloves. We haven't ever shared a tender moment together or made a real connection. As far as he's concerned, we're still just business partners.

So, what does he want to talk about?

"Yeah, sure thing," I gulp, turning around; trying to hide the uncertainty and fear in my face. Slowly, I lead Vasily up the grand staircase and towards the bar that I've recently been avoiding at all costs. It's no place for me; I found that out the hard way. There were a few nights earlier on when I tried to join in on the 'fun' that takes place there, but it quickly

became overwhelming. The war strategy, the bribery, the blood in their words, the casual threats of violence; it was all too much. What I inadvertently heard in the few hours I spent with the drunk plotting brothers was enough to have them both put away for the rest of their lives. It's the *only* thing keeping me thankful that we're stuck in such a remote place, because if the FBI ever gets their hands on me again, I'd actually have something useful for them this time. Will I be able to keep my mouth shut, if that day ever comes?

As long as they don't treat me like Igor did...

Or like Vasily might.

We step inside the enormous barroom, which is more like a ballroom actually, and Vasily immediately makes a beeline for the bottles behind the varnished counter. I walk more gingerly over the hard-wood floor and pull up a white cushion stool at the bar.

"Want anything?" Vasily asks, pouring himself a shot glass full of vodka.

*Yeah.* But I can't risk it. I need to keep my story straight, and vodka makes my head swim. "No, thank you."

"Have it your way," Vasily mumbles, downing his shot and then immediately another. "It's cold out there."

Despite Vasily's show of congeniality, there's an indifference about him that makes me rub my arms. I sure as hell could go for a drink right about now. "How was your trip?" I ask, trying to make small talk.

Vasily shrugs and takes out his phone. "I've been on worse. Enjoying your stay here?"

I sigh. "Can't complain," I reply.

"Good."

I check out my reflection in the barroom mirror behind Vasily as he fiddles with his eyes on his phone. The cavernous room stretches out behind me until it meets white, gold-encrusted walls that rise up to the sky. Dim, moody lamps line

the corners and yellow lightbulbs hang over the bar, drawing shadows over Vasily's thin face.

“Ah, here it is,” he suddenly says, looking back up to me. “You had quite the experience with Igor, huh?”

*Fuck.* A heavy chill seeps into my bones. I've since been told the monster's name. *Igor*. What a dreadful beast. “You could say that,” I mumble. “You know what, maybe I could use that drink, after all.”

Vasily smiles and quickly whirls around, grabbing a new shot glass and filling it up with Bolver Bears vodka. Each shot costs about as much as I pay in rent per month—well, as much as I *used* to pay in rent. The FBI took up paying my bills while I was in witness protection, but who knows what's happened to my stuff since then.

The bitter liquor burns going down my throat, but I've learned not to even ask for a chaser. That's not the Russian way.

“Better?” Vasily asks.

I nod but my stomach twists and turns. I have no idea what's coming, but there are so many things that could mean the end of me.

“I'd like you to listen to something,” Vasily says, placing his phone on the counter between us. “Ready?” he asks. His tone is a strange mixture of friendly and formal; it's almost reassuring.

*What's the worst that could happen?*

“Yeah.”

Vasily presses the play button on a recording he has saved on his phone. I listen intently, completely frozen still.

At first, nothing but static comes over the speakers. The static then gives way to loud rustling sounds, like the phone's being tossed around inside someone's pocket.

I look up from the recording to find Vasily glaring at me. His eyes are so fixed and unmoving that I immediately look away. *What the fuck is happening!?*

Slowly, voices start to come over the speaker. One is low and rumbling and the other is high pitched and panicked. A man and a woman.

I try to parse out what they're saying, but the clearer the voices become the more distracted I get. They sound so familiar...

My heart literally stops beating when I realize what's happening.

The woman is me.

The man is Igor.

I'm listening to my own interrogation.

Igor was recording it all.

*Fuck.*



## BILLIE

I already miss being bored. I'd take it any day of the week over being absolutely and completely terrified.

Vasily's glare doesn't leave me as my confession reverberates around the palace barroom from the little speakers on his phone.

*Shit.*

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

*I'm so fucked.*

My first instinct, after the shock of what I'm hearing wears off, is to grab his phone and smash it against the counter. Maybe I can destroy the evidence before it destroys me?

One more quick glance at Vasily is enough to dispel me of that foolishness, though. His eyes are so cold and calculating that even the thought of him not having backups is so stupid I could slap myself.

The recording seems to go on forever. Igor's heavy breath fills the space in-between my admissions. When the audio finally fades out, a thick suffocating silence wraps around me. I can't bear to look back up at Vasily.

He lets me stew in the unbearable stillness.

"Have you told him?" I finally manage to whisper.

"No."

My dead heart stirs just a little. Does that mean there's still hope? "Are you going to?" I ask, barely daring to hope.

"Yes."

*Fuck.*

"Is that why you're here?"

"It's one of the reasons."

Slowly, my frozen nerves begin to painfully thaw as reality comes whirling around the corner. There's nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. I'm completely and utterly fucked, and entirely at the mercy of the half-stranger who glares at me from the other side of the palace bar.

"What took you so long?" I ask. I'd at least like to know the details of my downfall.

"Well, it took a while for me to get this voicemail in the first place. The reception is pretty shitty down at the boardwalk where your interrogation took place. The message only slipped into my inbox after you and Max had already left the country."

I don't know if that's better or worse for me. I was in no state to make a run for it back then, but now, I can't. Sure, I'm well fed and all healed up, but not even the mightiest warrior could survive a long trek through the Russian winter.

"Why haven't you said anything until now?" Suddenly, a terrifying thought hits me. "Wait, does Max already know!?" That might actually explain why he's been so cavalier when it comes to grilling me for details.

Vasily chuckles as he re-holsters his phone. "Not really." He's so casual about this all that it only makes me more scared. Vasily's no stranger to death; I'm sure he's been responsible for countless before—I can only hope that I'm not next.

"What does that mean?" I whisper, hardly wanting to know the truth.

"That shouldn't matter to you right now."

“Then what should!?” I’m surprise by the sudden fire in my voice, but I know it’s only fueled by desperation.

Vasily doesn’t answer, he just grabs my shot glass and refills it, along with his own. I watch as he downs the bitter liquid. “Vasily...” it seems so strange to call him by his first name under these circumstances. “Why haven’t you told him yet?”

“Drink first,” he orders, gesturing towards my vodka-filled glass. After a moment of hesitation, I defiantly comply. The fiery liquid shreds down into my stomach. My face twists against the bitterness. I slam the glass back down onto the counter.

“Why?” I demand. Vasily looks pleased. What game is he playing? I know the man is smart and cunning, Max has told me as much, but what is he getting at?

“I wasn’t sure if I could believe my ears.” He’s trying to hold back a mischievous grin, but his skin is so tight and shiny that every little movement is amplified by a thousand. “I’ve never believed in the results one gets from torture. Cowards will say anything under enough duress. So, I’ve been trying to independently corroborate your little confession ever since I found that stray message from Igor.”

I can feel my face contort in confusion the same way it did from my last shot of vodka. “How did you do that?”

There’s that restrained little smirk again. “I didn’t.”

*What the fuck is he getting at!?*

“You didn’t what?”

“I didn’t confirm anything. The FBI is way out of our control. They can’t be bribed like mayors and local cops and judges, or even like statesmen. They don’t bend to people like me or Max.”

“... So how did you know?” Vasily’s like a cat playing with his food. Weirdly, though, he doesn’t seem entirely malicious in his teasing. The further this goes on, the more unsure I become of where it’s all heading.



“I didn’t.”

“But... the recording... why did you show me?” I don’t know what’s going on.

“To get your reaction.”

Suddenly, it all clicks. Vasily’s played me like a fool. *God fucking damn it.* “You didn’t know?”

He shakes his head. “Not until just now.

I pretty much just ratted myself out. *Stupid. Stupid.* “I... I never admitted to anything.” I try to backtrack.

“You didn’t have to. Your reaction said it all. You weren’t lying to Igor and you weren’t lying to me just now. The only reason you came into Max’s life post-high school was because the FBI forced you too. You’re the rat I’ve been searching for. You told them the location of your own wedding.”

“I didn’t know they were going to arrest Max!” I plead. “I swear. I didn’t tell them shit.”

“Except that he was responsible for a murder.”

“That was by accident!”

Vasily leans back against the bar and chews on his tongue. I’m having a hard time reading him. He doesn’t seem pissed off, but he doesn’t seem happy, either. It’s almost like this whole thing has left a bittersweet taste in his mouth. Maybe that’s what he’s trying to drown out with all the vodka.

“What are you going to do to me?” I ask, dreading the answer, but needing to know.

“That’s not up to me,” Vasily sighs.

“Stop fucking around, Vasily!” I beg. “I love Max. It doesn’t matter how we got here, all that matters is what we feel for each other.”

“Do you think he’ll still feel the same way when he finds out the truth?”

I collapse onto the barroom counter, completely defeated. My slow, deep breaths bounce off the varnished wood, right

back into my face. I can hear Vasily pouring another glass of vodka. “When are you going to tell him?” I ask.

“I thought I’d give you the chance to talk to him first.”

A pinprick of hope pinches at my aching heart. “... Why?” I ask, slowly sitting back up on my stool.

“Because this is bigger than business,” Vasily says, just before downing another shot of vodka. “I worked with Max’s father, and he was big on family. He would have been thrilled by what you’ve discovered with his son, even if it came out of something so treacherous. It’s not my place to interfere in love. That’s why I’ll let you two work it out amongst yourselves.”

He pours another shot into my empty glass and I swish around the clear liquor, lost in thought. I’m still not completely convinced. “If you’re not getting involved, then why did you make me confess to you?”

“For business reasons,” he says, gesturing for me to drink. “I still needed to know who ratted us out to the FBI. Now that I know it was you, I can use it to our advantage.”

I take the shot. The firewater gives me a little boost of courage. “And what if I don’t confess to Max?”

“Then I’ll tell him for you,” Vasily responds flatly. My heart sinks. “He’s still the leader of this *bratva*, after all. He needs to be kept up to date on such important matters.”

“How long do I have to tell him?” I ask, shaking my empty glass at the barman. He pours some more liquid courage into my container.

“I’ll give you until dawn tomorrow.”

*Fuck.*

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I never knock. But nothing else seems appropriate right now. I feel like I’m about to reveal myself as a stranger to a man who

knows me as anything but. Will he even recognize me after I tell him?

*I haven't been left with much of a choice...*

I tap at the half-closed door to our chambers. The old wood groans open and a sliver of light from the hallway sneaks into the dark room. I spot Max, strewn naked over the red velvet sheets of our bed like a chiselled renaissance painting of a sleeping god.

I instinctively bite my lip at the sight of him. When's the last time we even fucked? For the past couple of weeks, the closest we've gotten to passion is when we wrestle around in the morning, just as I'm waking up and he's going to bed. We're both in our own dazes, and the love is more primal and unconscious than beautiful. It fills me up, but the emotional emptiness of the rest of my captive life usually has me drained again by midday.

It's been a couple of hours since Max collapsed in bed beside me and I got up for the day. We didn't share anything this morning. He didn't push, and neither did I.

Now, his nude figure is making me want to make up for lost time. He's on his stomach, and his back muscles rise and fall with his deep breaths. His tight, powerful ass curves like a holy mound; thick thighs that could crush a watermelon wash out from beneath it.

I'm wet by the time I sit down on the edge of the bed. He looks so perfect with his closed eyes and pouty blood red lips. I hardly want to wake him. Will he even be able to register what I'm saying? This news seems too big to share with someone who just left dreamland.

I sigh and take his hand. If I don't do this now, then I might never. He deserves to hear the truth from me, anyways.

"Max..." I whisper softly.

My beast's eyes immediately flash open.

I'm startled by the suddenness of his alertness. But the smile that quickly washes over his face at the sight of me lulls me back down.

“Hey, babe,” he whispers, not getting up. Instead, he starts to rub my hand. His big thumb brushes up and down my wrist and I want nothing more than to just forget all this and wrap myself around him.

“I have something to tell you,” I say, with my head held low. My thoughts are so heavy that I can barely look Max in his gorgeous eyes. He helps me with that. Before I can even blink, he’s pulled me down beside him and rolled on top of me. The hardness between his legs fills the space between mine. My toes curl under the pressure of his heat.

*Don’t get distracted.*

“Max.” His lush lips immediately find my neck. Tension is expelled from my body in soft waves as he makes his way up to my lips. “Max. I need to—” he shuts me up with a big long kiss.

For a moment, I try to struggle. This is important. But the longer he holds his lips against mine, the less I’m able to resist. My nails instinctively brush along his rippling back, tracing over the scars he got from protecting me, as he wraps his big strong arms around my body and slips a wandering hand under my hoodie. It only takes a second for me to become just as naked as he is.

Max’s tongue greets my newly bared legs with thick wet lashes. I squirm as he kisses me again, this time below the waist. I claw at his messy hair and hold on for dear life as his mouth makes me wiggle like a leaf in the wind.

*No. I need to tell him. I can’t give in...*

I yank at his hair, trying to pull him up towards me, but he barely budes. I’m not strong enough. “Max!” I cry.

His massive hands grip me around the waist and I’m pushed backwards until my head hits the mountain of pillows that line our headboard. The force of the contact causes a drape to shake loose from the bed’s canopy. The white satin falls over my face like a veil. I grab onto it, trying to pull myself off my back, but before I can manage to, Max is all over me again. He forces my hand away, exposing my neck for

a gentle bite. A shiver of ecstasy shoots through my body. *I'm in love. I'm so in fucking love.*

*That's why I need to tell him the truth.*

I fight my way out of his grip and go to push him back. But my hand is barely on his broad, heaving chest for a second before he's grabbed my wrist again. Max whips my arm back away, obsessed with the tender skin around my clavicle. His other hand palms my tit, rubbing my nipple between two of his thick rough fingers.

I don't have another chance to push him off. Max's thumb is suddenly in my mouth. I suck it without a second thought. My eyes close as his hardness wanders up to my chest. I make one last push to get him off, before I let myself give into him completely. Max isn't having any of it. His thumb leaves the warmth of my mouth and helps his other hand tie the fallen bed curtain around my wrist.

I gasp. Insanely aroused. My thighs quiver in expectation, a waterfall bursts from between my legs. Max shoves his huge cock into my mouth.

He's not gentle. Maybe it's just been too long since we last fucked; maybe he's angry at me, or maybe he's just still half-asleep. I don't really care. The thrill of him finally taking off his safety gloves is enough to send me over the edge. My legs flail as I choke on his thick manhood. Drool dribbles down the thin slits between my lips and his throbbing erection. His giant thighs hold me in a vice grip as he tears down another curtain and ties up my other wrist. I'm truly trapped now. And I love it.

Max wraps his big palm around the back of my head and leads me back and forth, groaning like thunder under the pleasure my tongue provides him. He pushes deeper and deeper until my vision starts to go black, and then he pulls out.

I stare up at him with pure lust in my watering eyes. He steams down at me like a bull. The fire in his grey-green eyes makes my ass lift off the mattress. My body fights for more of him.

“What did you want to tell me?” he growls, as he slips his hand down along my face, over my soaked lips, and around my throat. My back arches under his grip. His hold on me is so rough, yet so tender. Whatever I did to deserve this, I want to do it again. I could live an eternity under his passionate weight.

“Do you love me?” I gasp for air. *Do I tell him the truth? Like this?* I’m trapped. Truly. My arms are bound. My body aches for his. My heart wants to lunge through my perked-up chest just to get closer to the man who holds me completely captive.

“I do. I want to make you mine. Forever and always.” With his hand never leaving my throat, he slides down on top of me until his throbbing manhood pierces the sanctity of my drooling thighs.

“I love you too,” I whisper through his chokehold. “But I need to tell you something.”

Max nibbles at my nipples and traces the entrance to my pussy with the head of his giant cock. Slowly, he lifts his gaze back up to mine, resting his chin between my breasts. “What?” he asks.

His thumb brushes the tender skin just under my jaw. I grind my hips against his hard body, desperate for relief. But how much is too much? Can I tell him the truth and keep this going?

“I’ve been bad,” I whisper.

“Do you need to be punished?” he asks, sliding up from my chest. My back arches as he pushes against me down below. The heat of his breath on my neck makes me weak. Too weak. I can’t tell him. Not now. I’m bad. I need to be punished.

“Yes!” I gasp. Max hardly even lets me finish. He enters me with all the force of his giant muscle-bound body. “Yes!” I scream again. The palace is big enough that I’m hardly concerned about being overheard by our new guests, not that I’d care if they were standing right outside. I’m delirious. This

is all I want; for now and forever. “Fuck me!” I shout, ordering the most powerful man I know to use me as he sees fit.

He complies. Fully. The smacking of our skin echoes around the elegant chamber room as we fill it with our filth. Max’s chiselled abs flex as he balances himself inside of me with every deep thrust. I scratch and claw at his chest, desperate to be relieved of all the pressure I’ve had building up inside since I saw his perfect naked body waiting for me in our bed.

He wraps around me, covering my little body completely in his warm hard muscles—his low rumbling grunts overcome my whimpers of pleasure. We’re lost in a raging storm, deaf to the outside world. Max speeds up, pounding into me at a thousand rates per second. I start to shake like a bursting pulsar. The world goes blurry. All that exists is the heat of our two bodies, wrapped around each other.

My universe explodes.

“Max!” I shout as I’m overcome by pure ecstasy.

“Billie,” he grunts, following right behind me. His searing muscles dig into my trembling skin and I dig my nails into his heaving back. Together we crash against each other’s seawalls, until our waves are spent and we’ve died down into the little lapping ripples of everlasting satisfaction.

“I love you,” I sigh, as Max falls off of me. I turn on my side and gather him in my arms.

“I love you, too” he says, his heavy eyelids falling over his fading grey-green eyes. I rest my head against his heaving chest. The sound of his beating heart is like listening to the ocean. Oh, how I miss the ocean. I can practically smell the sea salt in the air.

I let my frustration evaporate as I fall asleep beside the love of my life, knowing that now I’ll be up with him after the sun has set. That’s when we’ll talk. I swear it. I’ll have every single one of those dreadful hours between the twilight and the dawn to make my awful confession.

For now, though, I'm going to let myself savor what I have, because I don't know how much more time I have left with it.





## BILLIE

**W**hen I wake up, Max is gone.

I can already hear his booming voice coming from the 'war room' down the palace halls, though. That's where I'll be in a moment, but first, I need to prepare, both mentally and physically.

I haven't been this worn out since our first day here. At least this time it's because of Max and our love, and not because I've been taken hostage by a monster.

Although, depending on how Max reacts to my confession, there might not be much of a difference between the two.

The lightness in my feet quickly gives way to a heaviness in my heart as I pull myself out of bed. Will I ever get to experience something like this again?

My gut twitches and tightens, but I try to ignore it by distracting myself with another task: making myself look presentable. I don't want to get too dressed up, but I'm not about to enter the 'war room' looking like a bum, either. Max needs to see me for who I truly am.

... *Who am I?*

I have a quick shower to loosen up my sore muscles, then I dry up and put a light layer of dark red lipstick on, and a little foundation, too. When I flip through my closet, every single outfit seems too over the top. The last thing I want to do is make Max think I'm trying to 'seduce' him into staying with me, into forgiving me. I need to be straightforward and honest.

No frills. That's why the only thing that seems appropriate is the thin-laced silver night gown that I find strewn across the floor at the edge of our bed. I quickly check the digital clock on the nightstand—it is the middle of the night, after all. I slip it on and take a deep breath. This is it.

It's now or never.

I take my first ginger steps towards the rest of my life. The dim lamps in the hallway cast a long shadow as I pull open the door and step outside. My thin night gown suddenly doesn't feel like enough, but I know if I turn back now then I'll never go through with this. My only hope is that Max hears my confession from *me*. If Vasily has to break the news to him, then I'm fucked.

I might be fucked either way... but at least I got one last good fuck in before everything went to shit.

The palace is old and has seen countless footsteps crawl through its ancient halls, but the wooden floors and masterly woven carpets are so expertly made that they don't creak even the slightest bit under my hesitant weight. I give thanks to that fact as I sneak past the grand staircase, towards the barroom.

It doesn't take long before I can actually hear Max and Georgy's voices coming from behind the slightly ajar barroom doors. In reality, they're not being nearly as loud as they sound in my mind. I can barely even hear what they're saying as I approach the barroom doors. The two brothers sound more like muffled thunder, or silencer gunshots, than actual humans until I'm right up close.

"Lucky!" It's the first fully formed word I hear. Georgy's ribbing his brother about something. "What I'd give to have a piece-of-ass like that keeping me company in this frigid wasteland. I'm surprised you're even letting her sleep on a different schedule than you. If it were my girlfriend, I'd make her stay up during the night, so we could fuck whenever I felt like it."

He's obviously talking about me. I'm not sure whether I should be flattered or horrified, but I can't help but stop in the

shadows just outside the doorway so that I can listen in on Max's response.

"Billie's not like that," Max chuckles. "You can't just tell her what to do. Not if you want her to actually do it."

The two men laugh together. "You've got a real live-wire there," Georgy teases.

"Better to have a live-wire than nothing at all," Max mocks him back.

"Hey, I've got my hand!"

More laughter.

Their good mood almost makes me feel worse for what I have to do. I'm about to ruin their night, or at least put a damper on it. These two have so much on their plates, the last thing they probably want to think about is more betrayal. Although, maybe Georgy will get *something* out of the bad news, if Max is angry enough to let him take it from me...

*No. Max wouldn't do that. Not even if I put him in prison for a third time.* He loves me, and even if he's heartbroken, I'm still nobody else's but his. Giving me to another out of anger would be so out of character for him.

But how well do I actually know him? He probably thinks he knows everything about me, too, but I'm about to shatter that illusion. Does he have an equivalent secret he's keeping from me?

My breath starts to shorten as horrible images of what could actually await me on the other side of this door flash through my mind. These are killers. Powerful men who've only ever faced consequences in their life because of me. Do I trust the connection I feel with Max so much?

*Yes.*

*I have to do this.*

My hand falls on the golden doorknob. It almost feels like I'm watching myself from a camera on the ceiling. The detachment is the only way I can even begin to push the door open.

“Some wrench she’s been in our grand plans,” Georgy chuckles, before I can slip into the barroom.

I stop again, curiosity freezing me still. They don’t know I’m listening, and I’ve always been suspicious about their ‘plan’. The seeds of doubt that Detective Sanderson planted in me have never truly left. What *is* their actual plan, anyway?

“Thank god for that,” Max laughs. I hear their glasses clink together as they give a toast. His response leaves me confused. *What does he mean?* How could me ruining his ability to grab hold of all of his father’s assets be a good thing? “It was a stupid plan, anyway.”

“Hey!” Georgy responds playfully, making me think that it was his idea in the first place. “I thought it was pretty clever. You just had to *not* fall in love with the sacrificial lamb and we’d all be sitting on easy street right about now. Hey, I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t give up a piece-of-ass like that either. Still, you should have showed me a picture of her before you asked for my help, then maybe I’d have come up with something else.”

*Sacrificial lamb? What the fuck?*

“Really!? Even though you knew how much I hated her!?” Max teases. His words are slurred just enough to make it obvious that he’s at least a little tipsy.

“Well, maybe I’d still have come up with the same scheme, but I *definitely* would have made sure to ask you if I could have had a little fun with her first.”

“Ha! She’s out of your league, *brat!*”

“She wouldn’t have had much say in the matter...”

“Fuck off! That’s my fiancée you’re talking about!”

The exchange is followed by booming laughter and more clanking glasses. The clashing sounds ring out from behind the half-open door that I’m hidden behind. My stomach twists and turns as I try to process what I’m hearing.

It’s no secret that Max hated me. I was the one who called the cops on him that night all those years ago, after all. But

what did his anger towards me have to do with their plan? It's obvious now that the promise of my start-up had little to do with Max's decision to go into business with me. But what else could I have possibly offered? It's not like him marrying me has any strategic value. I'm not the child of some powerful family. Hell, I'm practically an orphan. So, what's the fucking deal!?

I get my answer soon enough. It hits my ears like a strike of lightning.

"Nostrovia!" Georgy bellows. "Cheers to not killing her like we planned!"

"Nostrovia!" Max replies, hardly blinking at the massive revelation. *Duh*. It's no secret to him. *They were going to have me killed...* But why!? Just to get revenge on me for calling the cops on him all those years ago!? It hardly seems worth the effort.

Still, I know these two men are very capable of making true on such threats. I wonder how many deaths they've been responsible for?

My mind is suddenly overcome with images of blood and violence. I feel like running. I feel like packing my things and taking a chance in the wild Russian country side. But I can't seem to move just yet. There are still more questions to be answered. *Keep talking you bastards, I want to know it all*. I pinch myself to make sure I'm not still asleep and dreaming this all up. Fear and uncertainty grip my heart, but I can't turn away. Not yet. I want to know the truth.

"Fuck Angelo Esposito! He can't have her!" Max roars.

"Nastrovia!" Georgy replies. "He's getting hell instead!"

"That fucking bastard... And to think, I was going to serve Billie up to him on a silver platter."

"To a long and happy life together, instead!" Georgy toasts.

"Nastrovia!"

"... Unless she ends up being a rat, of course."

The two men don't even hesitate to drink to that. *Fuck*. I'm suddenly snapped right back to reality. This is no dream. This is a nightmare. I can't go in there. Especially not now. They'll know I overheard them.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

A gust of frightful energy suddenly finds me shuffling away from the bar at light speed. I need to leave. I need to get out of here. Vasily's going to tell them I'm a rat. Not even love can save me from that.

Suddenly, I'm back in my bedroom, ripping through outfits in my closet, trying to find the warmest clothes I have. I stuff whatever I can fit into an empty bag of luggage and get re-dressed into something warmer. I need to get out of here.

My only hope is the garage where they keep all the palace cars. Luckily, I know where the valet keeps the keys. Unfortunately, I don't know if they'll be guarded or not. I don't have much of a choice, though. I'll have to find out the hard way. There's no walking for help, especially not in this weather. I need to drive. But to where?

How far away was the nearest town again? I can hardly remember. Was I even awake for the whole ride into the palace?

The garage is on the other side of a little pond that borders a pocket of forest on the northeast side of the palace property. I remember hearing that there was an underground servant's entrance, but I have no idea how to get into that. I'm going to have to venture out into the cold Russian night if I want any chance of getting my hands on a car. But even then, even if I manage to grab a key, match it to a car, and escape the garage, how long before I'm chased down? How long before someone sees a car driving away that shouldn't be driving away. I don't know this land from the crack in my ass.

Still, I'd rather take my chances out there than in here. Vasily's not playing games. He's going to tell Max and Georgy that I was a rat—I don't have the courage to do it myself anymore. They'll kill me; Max didn't even hesitate to drink to Georgy's suggestion that they would.

I fill my luggage with as much fur-lined clothing as possible. It becomes so heavy that I can barely carry it. There's no room for anything else... but do I have time to stop by the kitchen to steal some food?

Before I can make up my mind, I hear a faint sound coming from my bedroom doorway. I whip around and I'm nearly shocked to death by the sight of a ghostly silhouette blocking my path out.

"Ms. Parker?" The apparition whispers. My heart is on the brink of destruction, just about ready to give out, when the silhouette steps forward... revealing itself as a small, frail woman. A young woman, maybe a few years younger than me. She's dressed in a servant's uniform. "Ms. Parker?" I don't recognize her as a usual member of the staff. Does she even exist? I'm just about ready to start questioning my sanity. The stress is just too much. "Are you alright, miss?" The girl has a strong Russian accent, but her English isn't so bad. She looks almost as scared as I am.

"What!?" I whisper to her, trying to hide my impatience. She winces at the harshness of my tone. I immediately feel bad. This poor girl doesn't deserve any of my stress. "What is it?" I ask, trying to ease my voice and the both of us with it.

"Uh," the young woman hesitates. She pats down on her apron nervously as she struggles to find the words she's come to speak. I watch her carefully, unsure of what's coming next. Her skin is fair and paler than any ghosts. Her cheeks, though, have a slight pink blush to them, like she's just been outside in the cold. I take a step forward; I can smell the frost on her. *What's going on?* "You have visitors who would like to see you," she finally manages to eke out.

I turn to the digital clock on the nightstand by my bed. It's far too late for visitors. On an ordinary night, I'd be fast asleep right now. "You can tell Vasily to wait until tomorrow," I say, trying to sound as brave and confident as possible.

The frightened servant's face betrays her confusion. "No. Not Vasily," she says.

Now it's my turn to twist in confusion. "Then who?"



“I can’t say, miss. Please come with me, I beg you.” There’s a frantic innocence in her voice that makes me believe she’s not trying to lead me into anything malicious. Can I trust myself?

“Tell me who,” I beg, defiantly. I’m so sick of being left in the dark, but I don’t dare to hope that anything other than more darkness waits for me anywhere in this god-forsaken palace

“They’re waiting in the garage. They say they’re here to help. Please, Ms. Parker. Come.” The young servant girl turns and leaves the room; before I know what I’m doing I’m following close behind, luggage in hand.

“What’s your name?” I whisper as we turn down a hallway I’ve never been through before.

“Anna,” she responds.

“Who sent you, Anna?”

She doesn’t respond. Instead, she grabs the handle of a nearby wall-mounted lamp and pulls. To my surprise, a secret doorway suddenly appears before us. “This way.”

She disappears into the darkness and I hesitate to follow her any further. My heart is gripped with fear. I swear I can hear the booming voices of Max and Georgy getting louder and louder. I didn’t think Max would let anyone hurt me. But if the whole reason I’m even here in the first place is because he wanted a ‘sacrificial lamb’ to send to the slaughter, and that I was only saved because he changed his mind, how can I be sure he won’t change his mind again? *Especially with news of my betrayal...*

I love him. But I’m too scared to go back. I decide to take my chances in the darkness.

Anna’s light footsteps echo through the damp and chilly passageway. I follow them blindly, without any other option. The further we travel, the colder it gets. There were no winter boots in my bedroom, so I had to make due with a pair of cozy slippers. They’re keeping my feet warm, but they’re hardly good ‘fleeing’ shoes. I keep having to stop and re-fit them as I try to keep up with Anna.

The tunnel seems to go on forever. The darkness envelops me, until, finally, I see a sliver of light in the distance. It's in the shape of a doorway, and it gets bigger and brighter the closer we get.

"This way, Ms. Parker," Anna whispers, as her silhouette passes through the threshold of light. I stumble after her.

The small room we enter is much warmer than the passageway. A single lightbulb hangs from the ceiling. The walls are white and drab. A peeling door stands in front of us. Anna opens it.

I immediately recognize where we are next.

The garage!

"Anna!" I whisper, as she turns the corner.

"Ms. Parker," a deep, gruff voice replies for her.

I freeze in place. I know that voice. My eyes dart around until they fall on two familiar figures. I don't know if I'd rather run back into the palace or right into their arms

"Let's get going."

Detective Sanderson jingles a pair of keys in front of his face.

Special Agent Pandero just grunts.

*Fuck it.* They don't have to tell me twice.



## MAXIM

**N**ot again.

“Where the fuck is she!?” Even Vasily winces a little under my fury. This is a different level of anger. This place was supposed to be secure. No one’s supposed to be able to get in or out. Yet, here we are. Scouring a massive property for Billie, who seems to have vanished into thin air.

“One of the servants has informed me that a bag of luggage is missing from your bedroom, along with a handful of outfits and coats.”

“I don’t care what else is missing!” I roar. “You find Billie or it’s your head!” I’m hardly phased by the callousness in my voice. I don’t like the timing of this. Vasily shows up and suddenly Billie’s gone.

My *Sovietnik* doesn’t take the confrontation lying down. As scared as he may be, he steps forward and keeps his head. “It’s only been a day,” he tries to assure me. “She couldn’t have gotten far.”

“You said there were no cars missing from the garage?”

Vasily shakes his head. “Not as far as we could tell”

“So, she might be out there in the cold, trying to escape for god know what reason.” I step forward and tower over my old friend. “What did you say to her to make her choose the Russian wilderness over this palace!?”

“That’s something that will have to wait until we find her,” Vasily says calmly.

I'm not having it. I'm not calm. I'm furious. It's been just under 48 hours since Vasily arrived, and a little less than that since Billie and I last had any contact. We still don't know exactly when she left, but we've had the staff scour every inch of this godforsaken palace and there's no sign of her. It doesn't help that there's currently a snow storm raging outside that could put any hurricane back home to shame.

"Were you followed here!?" I ask Vasily, full of accusation.

"Obviously not as far as I know," he shoots back.

"Doesn't sound like you know anything useful," I spit.

"I know more than you think," he growls with venom on the tip of his tongue. "Don't question my loyalty, Max."

"What the hell are you even doing here, anyways?" I flounder. I don't like that there's even a sliver of doubt in me that I can trust Vasily. He must have been followed by someone. He would never willingly lead anyone here who didn't belong... right?

"I'm here to deliver some good news... and some bad news."

"Well, give me some fucking good news!" I demand.

"... Angelo Esposito is dead. The war back home is all but won."

*Well, fuck me.* That *is* some good news, but it's not like I'm in any mood to appreciate it.

The overwhelming anger controlling me does die down just a little, though. Still, I can feel the smoke continue to fume from my nostrils. "And where does that leave me and Georgy?"

"Almost ready to go home."

"And Billie?"

"Once we find her, she'll come with you. She's no longer under threat."

*Bullshit.* “So, who the hell is she with? She obviously hasn’t been kidnapped by Angelo’s men, since you just assured me that they’ve all been wiped out.”

Vasily shakes his head. “They haven’t *all* been wiped out. Just the main faction. There are still some stragglers left. Maybe they decided to take her for negotiation purposes, thinking you’d go easier on them if they had something of yours to bargain with.”

“They don’t know me very well, then. I’ll slaughter them all.”

“I know.”

“Well, get in fucking contact with them!” I command.

Vasily’s eyes are shimmering with barely withheld frustration, but his demeanor is otherwise calm. He’s a good *Sovietnik*, but I need to release this fucking anger that’s tearing me apart inside. “That’s already underway,” he assures me. “Everyone back home who’s *not* already involved in the transition team with the mayor is currently in talks with the remaining members of the Esposito family. I haven’t heard anything from them yet. But you’ll obviously be the first to know what comes from it.”

I grunt and turn away. “This is such fucking bullshit. Why can’t things go smoothly for once in my goddamn life!” I can hear the whine in my voice. It only makes me angrier. I’m not some kid anymore. I can’t throw a tantrum when things don’t go my way, but what else can I do right now? I’m stuck. Even with the threat back home finally being contained, a snowstorm has decided to sweep in and board me into this palace prison.

And here I thought this time away would be a nice little vacation. I’m sick of being separated from my empire. I need to get home and work this all out for myself. I’ll use every single resource available to me to get Billie back. “I need a drink,” I grumble.

“Let’s go to the bar,” Vasily says.

It’s the first time I’ve agreed with him since his arrival.

We march in silence, leaving behind all the bodyguards Vasily brought with him. They can have a drink on their own time, right now, everyone's on the clock. The top priority is finding Billie; I don't care if they have to tear this palace apart to do that.

In the war room, Vasily grabs a bottle of vodka and tosses it at me. I catch it without a second thought. My anger towards my *Sovietnik* is already fading. He knows me well. I pop open the lid and take a swig; he does the same with his own bottle.

The burn in my stomach is exactly what I need. A little bit of punishment for letting this happen. *Where the hell are you, Billie?*

Vasily and I drink in silence for a little while before the liquor starts to take its effect. That's when I put the bottle down. A little release is good, but I still need to be sharp.

"What was the bad news you had for me?" I ask Vasily. He leans against the bar counter and I sit down on one of the white cushioned stools.

My *Sovietnik* sighs. "I should really wait until we find Billie first. She was supposed to tell you."

*What the fuck does that mean!?* "Vasily, I trust you and your judgement, but you can't hold things back from me at a time like this. I need to know. Tell me what the bad news is." My temper has calmed under the influence of some good old Russian Vodka, but I'm still itching for action. The forecast says this storm should pass by tomorrow, but if Billie's in danger, then we might not have that long.

Vasily swirls around the remaining liquor in his half empty bottle. "She was the rat," he suddenly blurts out.

It's like a slap to the face. Not even the liquor can keep me calm. "Excuse me?" I growl. My nose twitches as I try to rein in my shock.

"That's what Igor found out when he kidnapped her from witness protection. Billie's an informant for the FBI—or, at least, she was. That's why she wanted a business partnership with you in the first place. I guess they thought she could get

close to you. And... well, I guess they were right. She told the FBI where your wedding was. It's because of her that you were put in handcuffs... again."

My immediate reaction is to blow it all off. "*Igor*," I scoff. "I wouldn't trust that corpse as far as I could throw him."

"Neither would I," Vasily says. "But I didn't rely on him to confirm it... what I heard came directly from Billie's mouth; right here, actually."

He gestures to a stool that sits beside me. I can just imagine Billie there; god, how I wish she was.

"I don't care." The words come out of me before I even have a chance to think. That's how I know they're true.

"What?" Vasily asks. His voice is steady, but I can tell my complete dismissal of the betrayal comes as a shock to him.

"I don't care." I repeat. "I don't care how she came into my life; all I care about is what we've built around it. So what, she gave away the location of our wedding to the feds—she didn't give them enough dirt to lock me away for long."

"It was her fault they even had any cause to put you in handcuffs in the first place," Vasily points out. "She connected you to that same murder that put you behind bars the first time around, all those years ago. She told the feds that you confessed to her about killing the man who killed her father... though, she claims telling them about it was an accident."

"So? I believe her." There's no room in me to be angry at Billie. There's little room for me to be angry at Vasily anymore, either. I just want to be okay with those few people who I'm actually close with. Everyone else can go to hell.

"And what will Georgy think?" Vasily asks.

"What will I think about what?" We both whip around to see Georgy pushing his way through the barroom doors. He looks exhausted. He's been putting just as much work into finding Billie as anyone.

I put the cap back on my bottle of vodka and toss it at my little brother. He catches it like a natural, popping off the top



and taking a big swig all in one swift motion.

“Any updates?” Vasily asks, when Georgy wipes his lips clean of the liquor.

“Yeah.”

I sit upright. We haven’t had a single clue yet. “What?” I demand.

“Well,” Georgy starts. “We’ve been in contact with some of Fetisov’s men. They’ve been searching all the nearby villages for us. They didn’t find Billie, but they have found something interesting.” My little brother joins me at the bar, sitting on the stool next to mine, the same one Vasily just said Billie was sitting on when she confessed that she had worked with the FBI.

“What did they find?” Vasily and I both ask at the same time.

“Apparently, someone found a village girl with one of our servant uniforms. She had it tucked away under her mattress or something.”

“So?”

“So, they gave me her name. Anna Lunev. I checked the palace’s registry for any employees under that name.”

“And?”

“None. She doesn’t work here. I asked Pavel Fetisov to look through his books. He didn’t find anything on her either.”

“So, why the hell did she have one of our servant uniforms?”

“That’s what I’m going to go find out.” Georgy slams the bottle of vodka against the varnished counter.

“You’re not leaving here,” I tell him. “The storm...”

“Fuck the storm!” the young rash Koralev shouts playfully.

“Georgy, I’m serious. You can’t go out there in this weather. We’ll find her. But now’s not the time. You have to stay here until the storm’s blown over.”

“No way, bro. I’ve had it with waiting out storms in this prison. I know how much Billie means to you. I’m going now.” A mischievous smirk crosses his face. “Plus, there’s a badass Russian snow plow in the garage that I want to try out.”

I roll my eyes and look over at Vasily. He just shrugs. The fact that Georgy seems to care so much about Billie’s well-being, even if it’s only for my sake, is uplifting.

“How far away is the village?” I ask, considering his proposal.

“I was told it would take a few hours to get there. Maybe a little more in this weather.”

“And why are you so sure that this lead is important enough to require your presence?” I ask, trying to impart a little of my limited wisdom on the young man. “Part of being a leader is knowing what’s important enough to spend your time on. You’re going out to a strange village, in a raging storm, in a country that’s not your home, on what basis?”

There’s that mischievous smirk again. “Just a hunch.”

*The fucking maverick.* A chuckle escapes my lips. “How many snow plows are there?”

“Three.”

“Make sure they’re all filled to the brim with security. You can go, but if you don’t come back, I’ll fucking kill you.”

Georgy’s smile only widens. He jumps off his stool and stands straight up, imitating a soldier saluting his general. “Aye aye, captain. Mr. *Pahkan*, sir,” he grins.

I wave him off. “Go. Go. Find out why the young woman has one of our server uniforms. You’re right. It smells fishy. She might very well have had something to do with Billie’s disappearance.” A knot forms in my stomach as I watch my brother go off on his mission, leaving me alone again.

Sure, Vasily’s still here, but it’s not the same. I trust and respect my *Sovietnik*—hell, there’s even a certain form of understated affection that’s developed between us from working so closely together for so long—but it’s nothing like

what I have with my brother, and it's definitely nothing like what I have with Billie.

"You think he'll find anything?" I ask Vasily, turning back around to the bar and reaching for another swing of vodka.

"I wouldn't be surprised. He's learning from the best, after all."

The compliment just washes over my shoulders. *Bullshit.* I'm a failure. Even with a war almost won, I still can't protect those who I care about the most.

What kind of leader is that? What kind of brother? What kind of lover?

Another swig of vodka helps me start to replace the gnawing hold of despair that my past and current failures have over me. In its place comes another emotion: anger. It's low and simmering at first, but the more I think about what I *have* accomplished, the more furious I become at the few remaining obstacles that stand in the way of my perfect future.

By the time the bottle's finished, I'm so heated that I feel like I could walk out into the Russian winter storm and melt the snow with my anger and determination alone.

*I'm coming for you, Billie Parker. And no one's going to stop me. You'll be mine before this is all through. Count on it. I'm going to make you a Koralev, even if it's the last thing I ever do.*



## BILLIE

**W**hat a far cry from that frigid Russian winter wonderland.

The weather here isn't exactly *warm*, per say, but even the mildest of climates would seem like a tropical paradise compared to what I just came from.

Heavy globs of snow were just starting to blanket the world when we took off in a little three-person plane, hidden in some run-down barn on the outskirts of a shanty village. The makeshift runaway that some peasant had plowed for us in his field was almost invisible, and we quickly disappeared into a white haze... before coming out of it all above the clouds, under a crisp night sky.

Turns out Detective Pandero's used to flying under much harsher circumstances. The trip out of Russia was pretty much a walk in the park for him. I wish I'd known that beforehand. My fingers are still sore from all the fist clenching I did on the rocky flight here. We were only in the air for a few hours, but it felt like a hellish eternity. Even when the weather around us cleared up, every little bump and rattle sent a shiver down my spine. It was the complete opposite of my ride *into* Russia, which was so luxurious that I'd almost forgotten what turbulence felt like. Oh, how well I was reminded.

As stressful as our treacherous escape was, it seems worth it now, as I stand on the balcony of a little villa in a seaside town somewhere in southern Italy.

Soft sunlight seeps down through a thin layer of clouds. The smell of sea salt invades my nostrils. I'm only an ocean away from home now. The lapping waves below calm my frazzled nerves... they also remind me of Max.

*Max.*

My heart goes heavy at the thought of him. Did I do the right thing, fleeing like I did? Would he have ever let anyone hurt me? Would *he* have ever hurt me?

The truth is, I'm not so sure anymore. The man who once used his body as a human shield to protect me didn't hesitate to drink when his brother suggested that I be killed if I were a rat. Still, the warmth from his protection on that chaotic day will never leave me. When we fuck, I feel the scars they left behind. When we make love, they seem to melt under my touch. I thought I was healing him; I *knew* he was healing me. But then I learned the truth.

I was supposed to be a blood sacrifice. A lamb sent to the slaughter. A pretty pawn to be pushed into danger so that my king's enemies could feel vindicated.

Detective Sanderson and Agent Pandero had been right. Angelo Esposito didn't want war, he just wanted to kill a Koralev. So, Max tried to make a Koralev. He lied to me about why I was to marry him, and he schemed behind my back to feed me to the wolves.

I should have known better. But I was stupid, and full of lust... and love.

*Max wouldn't hurt me...* The thought seems empty now. If that was the case, why did he drink to Georgy's words? *A rat needs to be killed.*

*Even if you love her?*

Max didn't provide an answer.

That was enough to sow a seed of terrifying doubt in me. Did I act rashly? Maybe. But I'd rather be here now than still stuck in that prison of a palace, at the mercy of those I don't feel like I can trust anymore.

At least the FBI has rules and regulations. They follow laws, and as long as I'm with them, I don't have to worry about being cut up and buried next to some massacred royal family in the backyard of their haunted palace.

"How are you holding up?"

I can't help but jump a little at anything coming from behind my back. By now, Vasily's almost certainly told Max about my betrayal—how long do I have before they come after me? I wonder if they know I'm with the FBI again...?

Detective Sanderson leans against the railing by my side, locking his eyes on me instead of the ocean view ahead. I don't return his gaze. I don't feel like looking at anyone head on right now. My life is so fragile that I worry one wrong move could shatter me into so many pieces that I'd never be able to recover.

"I'm fine," I lie. Visions of Max run through my mind as I try to concentrate on the present and not on the past. It's hard. I have so many memories of him, both good and bad, both thrilling and terrifying, both steaming hot and absolutely frigid. My head and my heart are at war with one another, and they're constantly switching sides. I worry I might be falling apart. But at least I'm physically safe... for now. "When are we heading back home?"

"Pandro's just checking out the jet now. It seems to be in good shape. It should get us across the Atlantic—something that couldn't be said about that little matchbox we flew out of Russia in."

I shake my head, trying to dislodge the memories of Max that haunt my soul. I can deal with them when I'm actually safe. Right now, I'm still close enough that I can almost feel his hulking presence. It's both terrifying and alluring. Half of me wants to fall into the blackness with him and the other half wants to run away as far as I can. I guess I'm giving into my other half right now. Running. It seems so cowardly...

*No. That's Max talking. That's the bratva. You're not a criminal—at least, not like them. You don't have to be ashamed about running from a fight.*

“Why did you use that plane, anyway?” I ask, watching the waves crash against the rocks below. “Can’t the FBI afford better?”

Detective Sanderson turns away from me and looks out over the ocean. “Sure, but we had to be sneaky; fly in under the radar. Our relationship with the Russian government is tenuous, at best. In fact, they’re probably friendlier with the mob boss who let you stay at his palace than they are with us.”

“So, how did you even find me, then? ... Was there another rat?” I hate the visceral reaction I have to that word. *Rat*. I’m almost angry at this imaginary snitch, all while being fully aware that I’m hardly any different. *You’re not a gangster, Billie. You’re just a lost scared little girl who got swept up into a dark and unforgiving world...*

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Detective Sanderson shaking his head. “No. We just tracked Mr. Zuev. We figured he’d visit you guys eventually.”

*Shit. So, it was Vasily’s fault?* Max is going to be so mad when he finds out that his trusted advisor is to blame for my disappearance. Hell, even I’m a little frustrated and surprised with the man. Vasily seems too smart to make such an enormous mistake. And just to come reveal me as a rat...

Thank god he chose to deliver the news in person. If he had just called it in, I might have already been dead by now... or worse.

“Who was that girl who led me to you?” I ask, suddenly remembering the pale young woman who’d found me before I could make the mistake of trying to brave the cold on my own.

Detective Sanderson shrugs. “Just some villager with dreams of coming to America that we recruited. She needed money and a passport, so we promised her both in return for her services.”

“I hope you plan on paying the poor thing,” I say, remembering how afraid the young woman looked. She was risking a lot by coming to my rescue. And what if I had refused to go with her?



“She’ll be fine,” Detective Sanderson assures me, before adding, “She just needs to lay low for a week or so, then we’ll make all of her wildest dreams come true.”

“A whole week?” I ask, worried. “Max is going to be knocking down every villager’s door for miles around looking for me. You couldn’t have fit her on the plane?”

“There was no room. We wouldn’t have been able to take off with another passenger, no matter how small she was. Not to mention she was hardly our top priority. Sure, Anna may eventually become an American, but you currently *are* an American, and American’s always take priority.”

That doesn’t make me feel any better. The poor girl. I hope she’s alright...

“Plus, we still need your intel,” Detective Sanderson adds.

My gut twists and turns in response. *Fuck*. This time I actually have some good shit, too. Am I actually willing to rat on the man I love, even if I’m currently scared shitless of him?

I still haven’t decided yet when Detective Sanderson answers his phone. “Alright. Okay. Sounds good. See you in a bit.”

He hangs up and pushes off the oceanside railing. “That was Pandero. The plane looks good, but it still needs to fuel up. We’ll grab an early dinner then head home. How does a red eye flight over the ocean sound?”

*Terrifying*. “I just want to go home.”

“Well, that’s contingent on what you have for us,” Detective Sanderson reminds me, coldly. He has an amazing ability to quickly wear out his welcome. As thankful as I am for his rescue operation, he has no trouble making sure it’s clear that none of this was for my personal safety, so much as it was to ensure the continued use of my services. “You can’t actually go *home* home until we put Koralev away and cripple his empire. As long as he’s still out and running about, you’re still in danger. I hope you heard some juicy shit during your stay in the palace. For your own sake.”

*Bastard.* I suddenly want to start crying, but I hold back the tears. I won't give him the satisfaction of breaking me. Only Max gets to feel that satisfaction. Only Max *got* to feel it...

Familiar waves of loneliness crash over me as Detective Sanderson waltzes back inside. Just for once, I'd like to *not* be used as a tool by powerful men.

I'm still just as much a captive as ever, and you know what? I'm getting sick of blaming myself. Sure, I fudged some numbers at my start-up. Hell, I'll admit it: I committed corporate fraud. But I don't deserve this. No one does. If Max has shown me one thing, is that I'm a woman worthy of being a queen, with or without a king.

*Oh, but how I miss my king...*

A shot of excitement ripples through my body at the thought of Max's raging eyes and bulging muscles pulsing in anger at my disappearance. I imagine him tearing through the forest that surrounds the palace, a one-man army, shirtless and steaming, melting the snow with his mere presence alone.

He's coming for me. I'm sure of it. And part of me wants him to win. I still feel like I'm his, in a way. But it's different than how I feel confined by his *bratva* side, or even by the FBI. The side of Max that I miss isn't the powerful business man or the fearful mob boss, it's the grey-green soul behind all that. I can still feel his hot hand around my throat; his throbbing manhood filling me up inside; the tenderness in his voice when he says he loves me. I've been branded... and I love it.

But I'm not ready to die. Not yet. If Max wants to have me killed, or even kill me himself, he can try it, but I'll do my best to survive. Because that's what I am. A survivor.

The sea salt in the air reminds me of love and fear, lust and innocence, danger and comfort. I take it all in, as hot as ever.

*Come get me, big boy... but don't think I'm going to make it easy on you.*



## MAXIM

I'm in no mood to appreciate the mild weather. It doesn't match my seething anger, anyways. I'm hot as a fucking missile, and I'll tear through this world until I find my girl. Russia. Italy. America. It doesn't fucking matter. I'll blow it all up.

"The plane's been ransacked," Vasily tells me. "But there's no sign of Billie or anyone else."

*Fuck.* "Do you think they already left?"

"I don't know. What I do know is that our friend has shut down every road and runway in this town. Andrea Conti has assured me that every last one of his men is on the lookout for unfamiliar faces. If our intel was right, and they came here after escaping the palace, then we have a good shot at finding them."

*A good shot. Ha! That's not good enough. I won't be happy until I get to the bottom of this.* "Keep looking."

Vasily and I, along with the crew he brought to Russia with him, are in this little seaside southern Italian village for one reason and one reason only: to find Billie.

The whole process has been a blur. With our Russian host's help, we got in contact with some crooked members of the Russian government; they got us access to a radar map that helped us track the voyage of a little three-man plane in and out of a village not too far from the palace. We followed it until it left Russia, and then we made calls to all of our connections from the Ukraine to Spain. We called in so many

favors that we may never be able to pay them all back, but it'll all be worth it if it leads to *her*.

So far, we were able to track the small plane's flight path through the Ukraine, over Hungary, past Croatia, and into Italy.

*Italy.* Thank god the fools came here. We have powerful friends in Italy, and they were able to get us into contact with a few mob bosses in the southern region of the country. Out of everyone we talked to, only two gave us any useful information, but that might very well turn out to be enough.

First, the capo of a little village confirmed that a small plane, matching the description of the one we're looking for, landed in his territory not long ago. Then, another boss, the head of a crew who reigns over territory a few villages over, mentioned that while no plane matching our description had landed under his jurisdiction any time recently, a jet plane had—and it was being prepared for immediate takeoff.

Vasily made the connection before I did. Billie's kidnappers must have used the small plane to fly into Russia under the radar—but they weren't going to be able to cross any oceans in it, so they landed in one village and had a seafaring jet prepared in another village nearby. They're trying to take her back to America, I just know it.

I'll be damned if I'm going to let them get there.

I immediately called in a favor to the capo of this village. Andrea Conti. I told him to make sure that the jet never takes off. He did his job well. Apparently, the plane's barely more than a skeleton now. Billie's captors are going to have to find another way out of this village, and with all the roads blocked off, they're going to have a hell of a time.

“Any update from Georgy?” I ask Vasily, as we head in the direction of a witness who said he'd seen a dark-skinned woman with two pale faced men a little earlier.

We still aren't sure exactly who took Billie or why, but Georgy's been grilling the village girl who had the servant's uniform under her mattress. Apparently, she's tougher than she

looks. I told him to take her with him to his new hiding spot—the palace has obviously been compromised; he’s not safe there anymore—and he seemed happy to oblige. I wonder what he’s doing to the poor girl—not that I care much, as long as he gets results. But I’m curious to know just how sadistic my little brother is. He’s the one who came up with the plan to use Billie as a sacrifice, after all.

“He’s left Russia and he’s taken the girl with him. So far, all she’s told him is that she was paid to sneak into the palace and go find Billie, but that’s about it. He’ll get her to talk more, though, I’m sure of it. You and I both know how persuasive he can be.”

I grunt in the affirmative and stare out over the glistening ocean, trying to think of where someone could be hiding in a village like this. The sea is choppy, but there are still fishing boats, as well as some faster vessels, cutting through the roughness out in the water.

Suddenly, it hits me. *Fuck*. “Did Andrea Conti close off the docks?”

Vasily looks out onto the ocean, spotting the boats as well. “He must have... right?”

“Then why are there still so many people out on the water?”

“Fuck,” Vasily reads my mind, connecting the dots. “You don’t think...?”

“I swear to god,” I grumble. We immediately abandon our meeting with the witness who might have seen Billie and start marching down the rocky village terrain towards the shore. “Call Conti; confirm that no one’s been let out of here in a fucking boat!”

Vasily gets on his phone while rage blinds my vision. The choppy waves crashing against the rocky shoreline gets louder and louder until it feels like the only sound in the world. I keep my eyes peeled on the water, trying to spot a suspicious looking vessel, but I’m too angry to see straight. I can’t believe I might have let them escape...

“Fuck!” Vasily’s curse cuts through the crashing waves. “Conti’s men just got to the docks. They say at least one boat is missing from this morning.”

I clench my fists so tight that my knuckles nearly pop out of their joints. There’s no room for disappointment or despair in me. I’m just furious. “Can we track a boat like we tracked their plane?”

“I don’t know,” Vasily admits.

We climb over a barrier of rocks and sea water splashes up all around us. On the other side, a wooden path leads us to the village’s docks. Rickety old fishing vessels mix with modern day speed boats. I look out over the water and see a speed boat racing back to shore. Vasily and I pick up our pace, and we make it to the dock just as the boat pulls in. I recognize some of the men onboard as Conti family soldiers.

“Did you find anything?” Vasily asks in Italian. I can’t speak the language, but I can understand it to a certain extent. I don’t need to be fluent to understand the men’s body language. *Fuck.*

“Some of the fishermen say they saw a speed boat filled with unfamiliar passengers’ racing through here a couple of hours ago. It was heading west.”

“Towards France?” I butt in, speaking English.

“There’s also Spain, and a few islands along the way,” Vasily adds.

One of the Italians interrupts. “No. No,” he waves off our suggestions in broken English. “Too far. West. Only one place for them. Cagliari.”

Vasily already has his phone out. “It says here the boat ride is at least 12 hours long. Would they even have enough fuel to get to Cagliari?”

We look to the Italians. They just shrug.

Suddenly, a roaring sound comes thundering down from the sky. I look up just in time to see a seaplane swerve over the village. It darts towards the water and skids across the waves

in no time flat. Before I can process what's happening, the plane's pulled up to the dock and a frantic Italian man is waving us into the cockpit. "Come! Come! No time!"

Vasily and I share a look. *I guess that's one way to catch up to a fleeing boat.*

"After you," Vasily smirks, gesturing towards the aircraft. I don't hesitate. I'm finding Billie, and that's that.

"Mr. Conti apologizes for his lack of foresight," the pilot says as Vasily and I buckle in. His English is better than the Italians on the boat, but only slightly. "He's been busy with his daughter's wedding. He blames himself for not closing off the docks first thing. This is my plane. It is fast. We will find the boat before it finds land."

And with that, we're off.

Waves break against the seaplane's floats and then shrink beneath us as we rise into the air. I don't waste anytime appreciating the amazing view. My eyes are trained on the sea below, scouring the ocean for my love. *I'm coming.*

The further we get from the shoreline, the less traffic there is on the water. Rickety fishing boats are the most common sight, but a few slow-moving pleasure vessels also catch my eye. They're not what I'm looking for, though. The longer we fly from land without any sign of our mysterious fleeing speed-boat, the more desperate I get. I can't fail at this; if something happens to Billie, I'll never be able to forgive myself.

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"There!" We've been flying for almost two hours when the pilot's voice cuts through the racket of the plane's engine like a bullet. His announcement catches me in the shoulder, turning me away from my lookout and towards the front of the plane. It takes me a second to see it, but when I do, my heart skips a beat. A lone speed-boat cuts through the waves below. It's far enough in the distance that it only looks like a pebble with a



wake, but it's the first bit of hope we've gotten since I hopped aboard.

I shuffle forward and reach for the gun I've tucked under my belt, behind my back. It suddenly occurs to me how we have no plan of attack. Are we going to land? Are we going to follow the boat until it reaches wherever it's going? Fuck if I know.

"Vasily," I shout, gesturing towards my gun. "What do we do?" The look in Vasily's eyes makes it clear he has no idea either. We both turn in unison to our pilot. He has a big smile on his face at the sight of my gun. *This fucking maverick.*

"Do you want to sink it?" he asks, through a wide grin.

I immediately shake my head. "No! We want to board it, or follow it!"

The pilot doesn't seem to understand. I look desperately to Vasily and he tries to translate. I can tell the pilot finally gets the message, because a frown comes over his face. "Not enough fuel to follow. For both." He points at his fuel gauge *and* down to the boat racing off in the distance.

*What the fuck?*

I look back at Vasily. He's on his phone. "We're still about 45 minutes from being even halfway to Cagliari. We either board the boat, or follow it for a little longer and then turn back," he says. "We don't have enough fuel to go all the way to Cagliari."

"Then how the hell does the boat have enough fuel to keep going?" I demand.

"They probably had some extra fuel on board, but even then, they won't make it to land unless they turn back soon."

*What are those fuckers in the boat doing? Do they even know they won't make it...?*

Before I can finish that thought, something strikes me as odd.

We're close enough now to the boat that I can separate it from the wake it's causing. "No..." I whisper, as it becomes

clear what's happening.

The boat is heading in the wrong direction. "It's heading back to Italy!" I shout, pointing towards the vessel.

Sure enough, it's racing right towards us. I've been giving these motherfucker's more credit than they deserve. They probably just panicked when they heard about what happened to their jet, so they grabbed a boat and fled, not knowing that they'd never be able to make it all the way to land. *Idiots*. Now, they're turning back, right into my hand.

"Oh shit," Vasily seconds my surprise. "Should we follow them back?"

It's the smart thing to do, but I'm not feeling smart. I'm furious. I want a fight, and I don't want to wait a second longer for it. "Land!" I order.

"Max, no." Vasily pleads. "That's stupid. That's so fucking stupid."

I grind my teeth and blow smoke out of my nose. He's right. Fuck. "Fine." I huff. "Let's follow them back to land. But get closer! I want to confirm who's in that boat!" I just want to see Billie again. I can't wait another fucking second. Her beautiful image dances just behind my eyelids. Her sweet scent lingers in my nostrils. I can feel her curves under my fingertips; her body wrapped around mine. I want her *now*. I *need* her now.

The pilot does as instructed. He waits until the boat passes underneath us and then does a wide 180, sweeping through the wind until we're close enough to the water to actually see the details of the whitecaps.

We approach the fleeing boat from behind. I lean as far forward as I can, yearning with all my might to get just one glance at Billie. It hasn't even been that long since we last fucked, back on the morning Vasily arrived at the palace, but it already feels like an eternity. I didn't spend nearly enough time with her when we were stuck at that stupid palace. I was too busy with my war games and my brother. I won't ever apologize for spending time with Georgy, but I will fault

myself for allowing Billie to fall to the wayside. I'm a fucking idiot. I'll never take her for granted again.

"Can you see inside the boat?" Vasily asks, angling around the dashboard to try and get a better look. I do the same. We're quickly approaching the vessel, and even though I don't know a lot about the type of plane we're in, I'm pretty sure it won't be able to hover. We'll get a quick glance inside, then we'll pass over. Do we have enough gas to turn around and do it again?

The closer we get, the more restless I become. Why can't I see anything? Suddenly, it hits me. *Fuck*. There's a goddamn fucking tarp covering the inside of the boat!

"Are you fucking kidding me!?" Vasily yells as we dart overtop of the fleeing boat.

Without being able to confirm who's onboard, we're basically chasing a ghost ship. It could be anyone, and if it's not Billie, then we're only wasting our time by following this lead.

"Can you get any closer?" Vasily asks the pilot. The older Italian man, with his salt and pepper hair slicked back and a bushy mustache, just nods. He does another 180, passing the boat in the opposite direction, then he does one more 180 and we're chasing it again. Suddenly, the plane kicks and my stomach drops and we descend even closer to the water below. The waves are starting to get bigger now. The boat is barely able to cut through the choppiness. We approach and I desperately search for a way to see inside.

Before I can find one, the boat leaps over a tall rogue wave and then slams back down into the ocean, coming to a complete stop. We fly over top of it and I twist in my seat to keep my eye on the stalled vessel. "Turn back around!" I order. The pilot complies.

Two 180s later and we're quickly approaching the stalled boat again. It's not moving and we're still a way out from any land. The plane's going to start running low on gas pretty soon. "Should we land?" I ask my *Sovietnik*. The truth is, I'm not sure what to do. If the boat is out of gas and dead in the

water, then I want to rescue Billie, but would I just be putting her in more danger if I try it? She can't be alone, and I can only assume that the men who took her aren't going to let her go without a fight.

Well, I'm ready for a fight. But am I ready to put Billie in anymore danger?

"We might have to land..." Vasily says.

"Fuck it. Land!" I order the pilot.

The plane drops again and my ears pop. The waves are choppy and rough, but the Italian pilot seems to have no problem landing on the water. We skid along the chaotic surface, bumping up and down, until we're close enough to the boat to throw a hook in it.

Vasily and I watch in awe as our pilot lassos a rope round a docking cleat from his open window. We come to a stop some five feet away from the stalled vessel. I immediately rip open the plane's passenger door and make a jump for it.

There's no time to think about my safety. The best I can do is catch whoever's on board by surprise. I tear at the tarp until it flaps half off in the wind.

What I see makes my heart drop to the ocean floor below.

In the driver's seat is a rope tied to the steering wheel, just below it is a brick, which has clearly just been dislodged from the accelerator pedal.

Someone must have rigged this boat up to drive itself, because it's completely empty.

Completely fucking empty.

*FUCK!*



## BILLIE

I take in a deep breath of the crisp mountain air.

I've never been to this part of the country before, but it somehow has a familiar scent—it smells like home.

I'm finally back on solid ground. Finally off of foreign soil. Finally finished with running.

My relief at finally being done with that all is interrupted by the shitty thought of what comes next.

Now, it's just time to hide.

*More hiding. Boring... though, maybe I could go for a little boring...* At least I'll be bored in the country of my birth and not in some other land, locked away in a haunted palace, surrounded by killers and men who I thought I knew.

The thrill of escaping from Russia, and then Europe—and then a little bit of North Africa, too, if I remember correctly—should tide me over until whatever's coming my way actually arrives; my big problem now is that I don't know what that'll be. I don't even know what I *want* it to be.

When I look to my future, I still can't help but think that it will be with Max. I try to push him out; tell myself how unrealistic us being together ever again is, but my heart won't have it, and my mind is too weak from exhaustion to put up any kind of real fight.

Still, whenever I manage to put a realistic lens on my situation, the truth becomes all too clear: my horizons are lonely. My options are grim. Maybe the feds never find

anything worth putting Max away for. Maybe they do. Maybe his empire crumbles and I get to go back to my home city and pick up where I left off.

But do I even want that anymore? I'd be lying if I said I knew for sure, but I'd also be lying if I said I was leaning in that direction. Normal seems almost as awful as death to me now—*death*; death at the hands of the man I still love, for something I was forced to do...

Fuck, I don't even regret getting involved in all this anymore. The connection I made with Max was so special that I wouldn't change it for the world, even if it does mean I get stuck out here in purgatory for the rest of my solitary life. At least I'll have the memories we made together to pass the time. Though, this new place doesn't even have a dryer...

"All settled in?" Detective Sanderson's detached voice comes over the speaker on my new phone. I'm thankful that I don't have to talk to him in person anymore, though I don't know how long that's going to last for. I think they know that I know more than I'm letting on. They took it easy on me after dropping me off in my new digs—I guess they have more sympathy than they let on—but I'm not expecting that to last long. *Give the girl a break, we'll prod her when she's recovered...*

It's been about a week now since I've been left alone again. I have a government provided shack that overlooks a small mountain town of about 1500 people. To the south, I can see into Mexico. The land out there isn't populated much but for the occasional smoke stack of campers and coyotes, but I'm not really complaining. I almost find this new place sort of nice. It's relaxing to look out over a peaceful world that I know to be so dangerous and foreboding. That doesn't mean I haven't already started to get restless, though. Every time I think of Max, my legs twitch...

"I'll get by," I answer.

"No contacting friends this time, or we'll slap you with a federal charge..."

I huff. He doesn't have to remind me. It barely matters to either of us that it was *Jackie* who reached out to me, because *I* was the one who escalated the contact; I was the one who suffered for it. "As if I have a choice," I mumble, staring at my laptop screen. The article I clicked on about five minutes ago still hasn't fully loaded yet. Shit out here in the mountains moves at a snail's pace and the internet connection is no exception. I can't help but wonder if that's why they stuck me here in the first place.

"You provide us with the information we need to put Koralev away, and you get to move back to the big bustling city. Your business is still putting along just fine, with our help, thank you very much, but a start-up like yours can't last forever on our meager government funds. You need to go on the record with what you learned at that Russian palace, or else you'll be an old mountain maid before you know it."

I bite the inside of my lip. I'm no maid. Max has made sure of that. But I do suddenly feel like doing some laundry...

*Fuck, no dryer.*

"Is there anything else?" I ask, ready to be alone again. It's not like I have anywhere to be, but I've been so occupied with trying to come up with ways to fill up my free time lately that it feels like a job all on its own.

"Did you get the number we sent you?" Detective Sanderson sounds distracted, but Special Agent Pandero isn't on this call. I wonder what they're up to?

"Yeah," I say, scrolling through my contacts list from the rickety stoop on my mountain shack. Detective Sanderson had sent me a number a little earlier and told me to save it in my contacts list under the name 'Fred'.

"There's a solid population of FBI agents in the surrounding area. They mostly focus on drug smuggling and human trafficking, but they'll come to your rescue faster than we can if you ever need it. That number's a secret hotline that will send out an APB with your last known location and all your details. No one's going to be able to drag you back east this time. At least, not if you can send off a text first."



“I didn’t have a chance to send off a text last time,” I remind him, remembering the dread I felt when that monster Igor kidnapped me from my last supposed ‘safehouse’. “How safe is this new place anyway? You just said it was surrounded by drug smugglers and human traffickers...?”

“I said it was surrounded by FBI agents who track that sort of thing. You’ll never be safer than where there’s a strong police presence, and we usually only have a strong presence in places that need it. So, I mean, try and stay indoors and all, but if you have to go to the shop for milk, make sure you have Fred’s number on speed-dial.”

“Wow, that’s comforting...”

“You get what you pay for, sweetie.”

I bite my tongue. I’m getting used to Detective Sanderson’s indifference to my feelings, but it still sucks to know that all I am to him is a brain that might possibly contain some useful information. “Can I go now?”

Detective Sanderson hesitates on the other end of the line. “... Why don’t you want to give Koralev up?” he finally asks. His voice betrays a building frustration that I’ve been doing my best to ignore. Sure, FBI agents have to follow the law, but even they must have a way to get unwilling witnesses to talk...

Now it’s my turn to hesitate. I suddenly want to profess my love for Max; exclaim that he’s the only one in this whole shitshow who actually cares for me—but two thoughts stop me.

The first is the memory of his silence when Georgy suggested I should be killed if I turned out to be a rat. My stomach still twists and turns at the sound of their clinking glasses. *How little they care for the lives of others...* What makes me think I’m truly any different? Just because Max said he loved me, and I believed him? He *also* said we needed to get married so that he could gain control over all of his father’s assets, but I know now that that was a lie. What else has he lied to me about? Has he lied more or less to me than I have to him...?

I hate thinking about all the deceit, that's why I choose to concentrate on the second reason I can't answer Detective Sanderson's question truthfully.

It's a trick. The seedy detective is implying that I know more than I'm willing to let on—which is true... but he doesn't need to know it. "Who says I know anything?" I spit, maybe a little too forcefully.

"No one spends that much time with someone and doesn't learn at least a little about their bad side... I know you two must have spilled your guts to each other with all the pillow talk that was going on..."

This time I can't control myself from blurting out the first thing that comes to mind. "Excuse me!?" I snap, completely offended. He's not speaking any lies, of course, but he's also supposed to be a goddamn professional.

"Oh, come on," I can practically hear the detective rolling his eyes. "Who are you trying to fool? It's no secret."

"It's none of your business," I growl.

"Actually, it *is* my business," Detective Sanderson snaps, with a new edge to his voice. This is clearly a sore spot for him. Is he jealous? *No*... "As little as we both like it, *you* are my business, and you're making this whole fucking operation a lot harder than it has to be. Understand?"

I don't answer. I'm getting so tired of all this bullshit that I barely even want to try and think up a response. I'm seriously getting to the point where I'd almost prefer to just be left alone forever in this little mountain town. Sure, I realize I'm being difficult, but that's because *they've* made my life difficult. Does Detective Sanderson think he's put me in an easy spot? Even if I hadn't fallen for Max, even if I still hated his fucking guts, even if I still thought he'd killed my father, the risk of snitching on him would be so great that I don't know if I could do it. *Well, maybe for papa...* but that'd be the only reason.

Detective Sanderson doesn't seem to appreciate my silence. I can hear him recalibrating on the other end of the line. God, I'm so glad I don't have to deal with him in person

right now. Our little cross-continental escape from Russia was made all the more tiresome by the constant foreboding presence of *his* mission: to get me to speak. That was the last thing I wanted to do, especially when we were hopping boats in the Tyrrhenian sea, or racing motorcycles along the Tunisian coast all fucking day long. It was just so goddamn exhausting that I almost wanted to give in and die already. Was all this effort even worth running away from the man I love? Would I rather be wearing a black veil under the scorching Northern African sun to hide my face from potential witnesses, or a white one, covered in blood, after I let Max get his revenge on me once and for all?

There were times when I truly thought about escaping my rescuers and running back to him.

*I could beg for his forgiveness... Maybe my tears of regret would soften his hard heart again... I know there's a tenderness in him that others don't see. I've felt it.*

The further we got from Russia and Italy, though, the less energy I had to consider going back. It's like the feds were purposely making our escape harder than it had to be, just to keep me from second-guessing myself. Well, it worked, because here I am, right where they want me to be; stuck in some remote southwestern town, completely at their mercy... again.

But it doesn't mean I'm going to tell them shit.

"Do you remember that young Russian woman who led you out of the palace to us?" Detective Sanderson's question snaps me out of my little self-reflective reverie.

"... Yeah," I whisper. I need glass of water or something. All of this confrontation is giving me a headache. I get up off my mountain shack stoop and head inside. If there's one upside to being stuck here, despite the forced peace, it's the water. It's fresh and glacial and it hits just the right spot, especially while I wait for Detective Sanderson to get to his point.

"Well, we haven't heard from her since we left Russia."

*Fuck.* The revelation sends a bullet through my heart. That poor girl... she was so sweet and helpful. As much as I've since questioned my decision to leave the palace that night, I'm well aware of the possibility that I might not even still be alive if it wasn't for her. My frantic mind had been made up, and I was more than ready to brave the cold outside. I could have easily frozen to death long before any human killer had been given the chance to get to me.

"I..." I don't know what to say in response. *God, I hope she's alright.*

*Anna. The light that led me out of my dark spiral.*

"She's disappeared," Detective Sanderson continues. "God only knows what's happened to her. Last I heard, your boyfriend and all of his men, including every single member of the Russian mob that was shielding him, were out desperately searching for any clue that might explain your disappearance. If they found anything suspicious about her..." he trails off and lets the dreadful implication settle like a heavy stone in my gut. I know he's trying to manipulate me, and I'm trying to fight against it, but the thought of that poor girl paying for my shitty decisions makes me want to cry.

Detective Sanderson must be able to sense that his new approach is working, because he goes for my throat. "If you don't make a meaningful contribution to this operation, then her sacrifice will be completely in vain. Do you want that, Ms. Parker? Can you live with yourself knowing you've fallen for the wrong side? That you're the reason for the loss of an innocent?"

I struggle to comprehend the magnitude of what he's saying. Sure, after all my time spent with Max, I'm no stranger to death. Hell, I saw him murder my kidnapper in cold blood. But Igor wasn't innocent. *Fuck*, he was far from it. He deserved to be eaten by the same world that he made a living in.

But Anna? She doesn't deserve that. I don't either, but at least it was my own greed that got me here. She just wanted a better life for herself.

“You need to find her...” I whisper, staring down at the rusty drain of my kitchen sink. “Please.”

Detective Sanderson knows he has me. “You need to start talking.”



## MAXIM

3 months later...

**E**ven with everything on my plate, there's still only one unsettled score that really matters.

*Billie.*

She's still missing. It's been what, three months now? I'm back in the city I once ruled, and, fuck, I rule it again—although in a different capacity now. But it has never felt less like home.

The mayor's inauguration. The grand re-opening of my boardwalk strip, along with all of the other property of mine that was damaged in the war. The fact that my little brother is actually enjoying his time in isolation this go around. None of it really makes a difference.

I sign papers, take pictures, make deals and open buildings, but there's a warm ghost wrapped around my mind that makes it all seem so empty. It doesn't help that my only remaining means of finding her are 'legal' ones. When Vasily and I first return to America from our chase overseas, I tried to get info on Billie the old-fashioned way. I employed the lowliest of low, the seediest of all the folks who survived the war, but Vasily quickly put an end to that. It took a little convincing, but I understood his concerns. We're legitimate now. Any tethers to the underworld needed to be severed so completely that it could hardly be said they ever really existed. Plus, there are plenty of 'legal' options for men of my status to find those who don't want to be found.

The thought still makes my heart ache. Does Billie not want to be found by me? Does she really think I'd let any harm come to her?

It took me a while to truly forgive Vasily for his mistake. He confronted Billie about the truth without coming to me first, and it might have been the reason she allowed herself to be taken without a fight. It's not like I don't understand Billie's possible fear about how I would have reacted to the news of her relationship with the FBI, but it also hurts to think that she'd even consider that it would affect our love.

There must be something wrong with me, though, because Vasily had the same concern.

My *Sovietnik* and I had been at each other's throats for weeks after our miserable failure to find Billie in Italy. But then he told me the real reason why he went to Billie first about his 'discovery'.

I have anger problems, it's no fucking secret. I've killed before for no more reason than I needed to let off some steam. Vasily knows this; he also knows how much I care for Billie—though, obviously not quite entirely; otherwise why would he ever fear that I could hurt her?

That was his concern, after all. He thought I might hurt her in a fit of rage upon hearing the real reason why she chose to partner up with me in the first place—to dig up dirt. He wanted to prepare her, not scare her off. He thought that giving her the opportunity to find a way to tell me the news herself would keep her cool-headed enough to calm me as well. But Vasily's too used to dealing with mobsters. Even after all I'd put her through, Billie was never anything more than an innocent civilian, and innocents don't confront monsters head on, no matter how much they love them.

Billie must have thought her only option was to run; to go with those who sought to separate her from me.

Every time I think of her choosing to take her chances with someone other than me, I'm filled with a rage and a sadness that don't ever lift, but only build up inside of me. I've never



felt heavier than I do now. Even with all my worldly success, I feel like a complete and utter failure.

“Any update?” I ask Vasily. It’s how I’ve started every conversation I’ve had with him for the past three months.

“We might have some leads, but they’re so spread out across the country that I can hardly give them any credence.”

We’re in my rooftop office, the same one where I first met with Billie way back when this whole stupid plan seemed like the only way forward. How long ago that seems now. So much has changed. If someone had told me back then how this would have all turned out, I’d have been ecstatic. I’m the richest, most powerful man in one of the biggest, most important cities in the entire world, and all of my money is *clean*. Hot-fucking-dog.

But looking back on the man that I was only makes me pity him. His life was so empty. The only love he’d ever experienced was that which was given to him. He’d never taken any for his own. He’d never experienced what I got to experience with Billie.

And you know what? Right now, sitting atop my lonely tower, in one of my weaker moments, I almost envy him. He was so used to his emptiness, whereas I know better. I know what it means to take love. I know what it means to chase it and win... but I also know what it means to chase it and lose, and that hurts more than anything I’ve ever experienced before.

“Still no idea who took her?” That’d be the biggest step in finding Billie. But the sad fucking truth is, we still have no clue.

“Only educated guesses,” Vasily answers, checking through his phone. I turn from him and look out of my office window, down onto the city I own. How small it seems compared to the love I’ve lost. What good are skyscrapers and restaurants and boardwalks and penthouse suites if you don’t have anyone to share them with?

“With what we currently know, what’s our best educated guess?” I know the answer. I know it hasn’t changed since yesterday. Vasily and I are of the same opinion, but it’s yet to get us anywhere.

“Well, the kidnapers went to Italy first, so it wouldn’t be ridiculous to assume they had some connections in the country. That’s why we still can’t rule out that Billie’s been taken by a remaining faction of the Esposito family. But, why would they take her if not for negotiation purposes? We’ve yet to hear a single peep from any of the Esposito clan who survived the war. They’ve gone deep into hiding, and you’d think they’d at least be smart enough to know that the longer they hold your fiancée captive, the less mercy you’ll show them.”

He’s right. The idea that Billie’s being held by someone from the fallen Esposito clan is unlikely. But I almost hate our next most likely option even more. “What about the FBI?” I grind my teeth just saying it out loud. If she’s back in witness protection, then we might never find her.

“Well, honestly, as much as I hate to say it, that’s looking more and more likely with every passing day, especially with the info we’ve learned from that Russian village girl, Anna. She’s told Georgy that Billie voluntarily went with the men, almost like she recognized them, which would make sense, since, you know, she’s worked with the FBI before.”

“Are we sure that Anna doesn’t know anything more?” I ask, admiring the budding trees that line the street below. It’s spring time, and the city is blooming, but my heart is just as dead as ever.

“If she does, she sure is doing a good job at hiding it. I’ve heard that Georgy and her are getting along exceptionally well...”

“Billie and I got along pretty fucking well too, and she didn’t tell me everything,” I snap, whipping around with a sudden fire behind my eyes. My rage comes and goes these days, like the tide

“You didn’t tell her everything, either,” Vasily reminds me.

“I was going to,” I mutter. “I *am* going to.” I refuse to give up hope. It’s why I weirdly hope Billie’s with someone from the Esposito clan. I can go after them. I can’t go after the FBI. My hope is being crushed more and more with every passing day.

“... Georgy keeps asking when he can come home,” Vasily says, meeting my fire with a reminder that I still love someone in this cold godforsaken world.

“He can’t come home until we’ve been able to definitively rule out the Esposito family. If they’re still out there looking to steal those I love for political gain, then there’s no way I’m going to risk putting Georgy in harm’s way. He’s safe where he is now—and he’s even got a plaything to keep him busy.”

“Sounds like more than just a plaything to me...” Vasily notes.

It’s the truth, the way Georgy talks about Anna reminds me of Billie and I...

I should be happy for my brother, but I can’t help but worry. The last thing in the world I want is for him to ever experience what I have. The heartbreak is worse than any bullet wound, any war, any exile. It’s like all of those things have collapsed into my chest, and I can’t quite seem to shake myself out of the quicksand that they’ve melted into.

*Let him have the honeymoon I never had... as long as they’re safe.*

“Speaking of the devil...” Vasily says, looking down at his suddenly buzzing phone. My deflated heart perks up just a little bit. “Georgy, my boy! How’s the vacation going?” Vasily answers the call. I can make out Georgy’s muffled voice on the other end of the line but I can’t hear what he’s saying. I motion for Vasily to put him on speakerphone.

“... And boy have I got some news for you.” It’s the first thing I hear my little brother say as Vasily slides his phone onto my desk. We both lean in with expectation. Georgy sounds happy, and that’s enough to make me feel better—though I’ll admit to feeling a little pinprick of jealousy at the

thought of him getting to relax with a woman he's falling for while I've never really had the chance to let my guard down with mine.

"Yo," I shout into the speakerphone.

"Ehhh, *bol'shoy brat*. Remind me again why I don't have your number? I *should* be calling you with this info."

"Max is too important now to take calls from lowlifes like you," Vasily teases, though there's a hint of truth to it. My *Sovietnik*'s phonenumber is more secured than mine because he still has to deal with the occasional underworld contact. It's impossible to make a clean break, after all; especially when your brother's hiding out with a South American syndicate.

My hands need to be completely clean from here on out, so I can't risk being connected to any of that shit. But I'll make time for my brother no matter what—as long as it's on Vasily's phone, that is.

"Well, this lowlife has got some big news!" Georgy sounds a little tipsy. I swear I can hear a girl giggling somewhere in the background. The bastard must be having the time of his life.

"Well, lay it on us, you motherfucker!" I poke. I'm glad to hear from Georgy, but I'm not in a good enough mood overall to play these games. I'm still a man on a singular mission.

"It has to do with your fiancée..." Georgy lilts.

"Georgy," Vasily scolds. He knows as well as anyone that this subject matter is not to be toyed with.

"Well, I've been interrogating our little Russian witness non-stop." I hear more giggling in the background. "And it turns out she knows more than she let on." I can't stand how cavalier Georgy's being about this whole thing. *Doesn't he know how hurt I am?*

"Georgy, tell us already," Vasily pleads for me.

Georgy chuckles and I hear the creaking of bed springs in the background, followed by more giggling. "Anna says she knows who took Billie from the palace."

“Who!?” I roar.

“It was the FBI!”

*Fuck.*

A long heavy pause fills up the air around us. Vasily knows that’s not what we wanted to hear; I wonder if Georgy thought that far ahead?

“Does she have any names?” Vasily asks.

I quickly step over his question. The news only serves to make me angry. “If you and Anna are so fucking kissy-kissy, then why the hell did it take so long for her to tell you something so fucking important!?”

My open frustration clearly takes Georgy by surprise. I don’t entirely blame him; I know what those first few months of carefree love feel like. He’s probably in heaven right about now. Well, I’m in fucking hell, and I need him to throw me down a ladder already.

“Woah there brother, don’t blame Anna. She didn’t *have* to tell me anything.”

“We didn’t have to be so delicate with her, either,” I snap back, immediately regretting it. The last thing I should be doing is threatening the woman my little brother is falling for. “Listen, Georgy, just tell me everything. Why did it take so long for Anna to decide to tell you Billie was with the FBI?”

“Because they promised her something... and she was afraid that if she told us, they’d renege on the whole deal. *The bastards.*”

“What did they promise her?”

“American citizenship.”

A half chuckle escapes Vasily’s lips. I stare daggers at him. This is no time to laugh.

“That’s a pretty good deal,” Vasily shrugs.

“It wouldn’t have been if we’d sent anyone but Georgy to go interrogate her.”

“Hey man, don’t blame her, okay? She was just trying to make a better life for herself.”

I stifle my anger for a second and collapse backwards into my office chair. Billie being with the FBI is good news in the sense that she’s probably safe, but it’s bad news in the sense that it also means she’s ‘safe’ from me. I’m used to dealing with scum like whatever skeleton factions are left of the Esposito family, but the FBI? They’re legit.

Well, I guess it’s a good thing that I’m legit now, too.

“What do you want to do?” Vasily asks.

I think about it for a moment, before a plan starts to form. “I say we let Anna collect her prize.... and we follow the trail.”



## BILLIE

**I**t doesn't pay much, but it's good honest work.

“Another round of shots over here, Ms. Adler!” Billy the Bear calls to me from his group of regulars over in the corner booth. The old rotund man looks like a rough and tumble prospector from days gone past, with a big white beard and thin strands of messy grey hair and all, but he's as nice a fellow as you'll find. The other regulars are alright, too. Or, at least, as nice as you can expect a bunch of hill folk to be to a dark-skinned out-of-town city girl.

Still, no matter how much we talk or how many times I serve them, it never really feels like we're making a true connection. How could we? They don't even know my real name...

Tracy Adler. The alias feels so foreign, but that's what everyone in this little Podunk mountain town knows me as. I've been hiding out here for a few months now, and I'll be damned if I haven't forced myself to treat this stint in witness protection different than the last one.

This time, instead of longing to rekindle old relationships, I went looking for work. First, I tried hopping on a construction crew that was renovating a little barn, but folks around here still have some old-fashioned views about what a woman can and can't do. Fortunately for me, one of the things they think a woman *can* do is handle the booze. That's why I went to the shanty saloon next.



The woman who owns this bar, Harietta, must be 102, but there she was, shuffling around behind the counter, serving orders. I offered my services and she put me through the ringer, making me serve a bunch of scary-looking bikers who were just passing through. I managed to survive, and Harietta gave me the job.

Since then, I've almost come to see the dusty saloon as more of a home than my federally mandated shack. Sure, I see the occasional drug runner come through my doors—there's a tough and shady crowd that regularly passes through these mountains— but I've seen tougher. Hell, I've been locked in a giant ice palace with tougher men.

Still, I keep my head down, and so far, there hasn't been a single instance where I've felt the need to dial up 'Fred' on my phone, and I'm glad for it. The less talking I do with the feds, the happier I am. I have secrets they want to know that I've decided I'm not willing to spill.

It turns out that I just might be able to spend the rest of my life here, fighting off heartache in the snow-capped mountains just north of the Mexican border—at least, if the alternative is turning on the man I love.

And, boy, do I still love him. I swear I see his face under every hood and bandana and cowboy hat that passes through my doors. I spend my days dreaming about Max kicking down those very same doors and sweeping me off my feet. *Oh, how I've missed you*, he'd say, before flying me back home once and for all.

But those good fantasies don't always last. I have nightmares about him, too.

After all, the beastly bratva boss has no way of knowing that I would never turn on him; for all *I* know, he thinks I already have.

Those thoughts can be too painful to concentrate on, so I'll often have a few drinks with my regulars, Billy the Bear included, in an effort to try and forget my dark past and my unclear future.

I've already shared a few shots with the old boys when the saloon doors are kicked open and a new crowd shows up.

I don't recognize them per say, but I sure know the type. These dudes are trouble. Shadows in trench coats and leather jackets. Bikers who could be into anything from drug running to human trafficking. I quickly scan their group for the undercover cop. I've found that there's usually at least one special agent hiding in most the gangs that come through this town. Detective Sanderson wasn't lying when he said the feds were littered throughout these hills. I've become an expert at spotting the one member of every group who's probably got a pension. I've obviously never confirmed my abilities, though—that'd be too dangerous—but, depending on my mood, I either treat them just a little bit sweeter, or a little bit meaner. If I've just been chewed out by Detective Sanderson and/or Special Agent Pandero, then they're in for an earful, otherwise I'm nice to the only person in the room who'd possibly protect me from a rogue outlaw.

I can't seem to spot any obvious undercovers in this new bunch, though. That's a little dangerous; it means there's no one to help if shit goes south.

*Whatever, I can protect myself...*

I'm already on edge when I get my first order from the overpacked table. There's six men, and they're all giant. Girthy as fuck and thicker than stale oatmeal. Despite the overcast outside, they're all wearing dark sunglasses, which, along with their thick beards and low riding bandanas, make their faces look almost indistinguishable from one another.

"Six beers," the one sitting closest to me orders. His voice is low and crackling, like an earthquake rippling through the desert.

"Any preference?" I ask, trying to keep my voice low and calm. I've found it best not to give these types of men even a hint of how scared you might be. They might not respect much, but most of them seem to respect someone who can stick up for themselves.

"Something strong," he grumbles.

I have just the thing. There's a type of beer they brew somewhere nearby called Rattlesnake. It's essentially half moonshine and can put a dragon to sleep. It's a good choice for these guys, I think. They look grumpy and I'd definitely be more comfortable if they were knocked out.

I grab their order quick and toss the bottles in front of them. "Anything to eat?" My question is met with dismissive grunts. Guess they aren't hungry. That doesn't bode well; it means they're here to get plastered, and there isn't anyone in this town big enough to stop any of these angry lugs from wreaking a drunk havoc should one single thing not go their way.

I decide to return to my table of regulars instead of going back behind the counter. I'm pretty sure Billy the Bear carries a big gun on him, and I'd be surprised if his friends didn't as well. They all cheer when I pull up a chair at their table. I let a little smile wash over my lips before another sound pulls it down into a frown.

"Shh!"

Did one of those biker dudes just fucking shush us?

I quickly look around my table to make sure no one's thinking of talking back. Billy the Bear doesn't seem too bothered, he immediately takes a wide-eyed sip of his beer and then gives me a wink as he polishes off the shot I'd brought to him earlier. Everyone else seems cool, too... except for the skinny man at the end of the table. I haven't talked to him much before, but I'm pretty sure his name is Adam—Adam Two-Shoes or something. He's a thin, wiry man somewhere in his thirties and he's jittery enough that I've always assumed that he's at least somewhat of a junkie. That's not too much of a problem with me, as long as he's respectful, which he usually is. But I spot a wildness in his eyes at the shushing that makes me uncomfortable. I try to cut through it with some good news. "Hey, how about another round of shots, on me!" I shout, feigning excitement—but I hardly have to feign it; my dirty little secret is that I *am* kind of excited. I miss the thrill of danger, and it's not like this is any more dangerous than what I've gotten used to. The last thing most of these outlaws want

is more trouble—even they need a break once in a while—but still, their dark presence is enough to remind me of all those times Max and I walked on the edge together, even if we weren't always hand in hand when we did it.

“Would you shut the fuck up!” comes a booming voice from the biker table. I swear the dusty bar house floor rattles in response. I flinch a little, too. Adam is off his feet before I can even blink.

“If you don't like how we do things around here, then maybe you can leave!” he says sternly, but his voice is so jittery and disjointed that it comes out like broken glass. I can't imagine that's going to calm our visitors.

I quickly jump up and try to get between the two trouble makers before things can escalate any more. Two of the bikers have shoved their way out of their booth and are standing like boulders between me and the exit out of here.

“You wanna say that again, little man?” one of the men growls. He's wearing a white bandana, stained with dust and soot. His friend, a similarly massive human wearing a black bandana, slowly reaches into his leather jacket pocket. *Fuck*. I instinctively hold my palm up to him, trying to calm the man like a cowboy trying to ease a wild steed—as if I could stop any of these guys from barrelling right over me.

When I turn back around to my regulars table, I get a real punch in the gut. Adam Two-Shoes has a pistol whipped out and cocked. He's swinging the barrel like a madman just over my head. The glint in his eyes is too crazy to trust. I have no confidence that he'll be able to hit the bikers without nicking me as well.

“Put the gun down!” I shout at him.

Adam looks a little shocked that I would talk to him like that. Still, he listens... until suddenly, his pistol comes swinging back up. I turn around to see that the two bikers have unholstered their own weapons. At least they don't have guns... but the machetes they're wielding are almost more ominous.

“Boys, there’s no need for this. Why don’t you just finish your drinks and move along now?” As tense as this shit is, I almost feel right at home in the middle of it all. It makes me nostalgic for the days when I had a lover by my side, leading me through the chaos...

When I look back to my regulars table, I see that old Billy the Bear has stood up now, too. He has his big gun cocked and loaded and pointed just over my shoulder.

A glance back at the bikers tell me that two guns just might be more than they bargained for. The four men who’ve remained seated mumble amongst themselves while the two knife-wielders slowly put their blades down.

I get a weird feeling that all eyes are on me. I guess that’s only natural, though, since I’m the only thing standing between peace and a bloody barroom brawl.

The little standoff lasts for what seems like an eternity. I’m so filled with adrenaline, though, that the tension in my body is more exhilarating than exhausting. I almost feel in control of my life again as I watch the biker’s quietly sheath their knives. “Let’s get the fuck out of here,” the white bandana grumbles. He grabs his bottle of booze and chugs the rest of it down, before smashing the glass on the barroom floor. For some reason, it feels like his gaze is fixed on me the entire time, even though I can’t see his eyes through his dark sunglasses, and even though I’m not the one holding a gun to his face.

The rest of the bikers follow the white bandana’s lead, rustling out of their dusty booth, polishing off their beers, and smashing the bottles on the floor before they turn heel and waddle out the front door.

I barely even mind the mess; it’s nothing compared to what I just avoided having to clean up, if I even survived to have to clean it all up.

I watch as the saloon doors swing shut, but the tension in the air doesn’t start to ease until we hear the distant roar of motorcycles being revved. Even then, it’s only when the metal thunder finally disappears on the horizon that we allow ourselves to breathe again.

“We showed those assholes,” Billy the Bear grunts jovially, as he collapses back down into his rickety wooden chair. *Fuck me, he was actually having fun.*

*Well, I sort of was, too...*

It's not until I hear Adam Two-Shoes re-holster his gun that the full weight of what almost just happened hits me. My tensed arms suddenly feel like they weigh a thousand pounds. They drop to my side and I sigh, exhausted. I'm quickly reminded of the toll such danger takes on a person. *Do I really miss this? Or do I just miss Max...?*

“Won't be seeing them around these parts again,” Adam declares, sitting back down in his seat and taking a swig of his own beer. He doesn't look as pleased as Billy; I have a bad feeling that he was actually looking for a fight.

I make a mental note to stay on Adam's good side. “How about a round on the house, boys?” I offer.

That draws a big cheer from the regulars. They aren't going anywhere, free drinks or not, but I figure it's the least I can do.

I fetch their orders, tired and a little frightened, but also thrilled and somewhat proud of myself. *I'm not so helpless after all... I didn't even have to call 'Fred' to come bust me out. And if I didn't this time, I might never have to.*

Turns out I can protect myself... But I'd still rather have Max around to help me.

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Harietta comes by a few hours later to relieve me of my duties. The old woman still seems to revel in her job; I can only hope to have even an ounce of her vigor for life when I'm her age... if I ever make it that far.

*Hey, you did good today, kid. You just might make it out of here alive, after all.*

The regulars are still huddled around their table and Billy the Bear is already regaling Harietta about what happened earlier when I toss my apron under the counter and take one last shot of vodka for the road. It's not good vodka—at least, not compared to what I've gotten used to—but it reminds me that I'm strong. It also reminds me that somewhere out there, someone is thinking about me. I just don't know if it's with revenge in mind, or love.

I step out into the cool spring night feeling alright. *I wonder if the feds will let me carry a gun...?* A Colt-45 on my hip would only make me feel more badass. Or is it cooler to go weaponless?

For the first time in a long time, my late night stroll back to my lonely little shack isn't so bad. I hardly even think of Max, other than to speculate on what he'd think about my newfound courage. The more I think about it, though, the less I understand my courage as 'new'.

What kind of coward gets involved with a bratva boss, anyway? Sure, I had revenge on the mind, but that only excuses my initial fervor to stick by him. What about after I found out that he hadn't killed my papa? That took pure guts, right? *More like pure insanity...* Yeah, maybe. But I've somehow survived this all so far without welching on my morals. I haven't ratted out Max, I haven't killed anyone...

*But what about Anna?*

That thought sends a prick of pain through my heart. I push through my front door and am instantly wrapped in the darkness of my state mandated 'home'.

*She'll be alright... right? Max wouldn't hurt an innocent woman...*

I'm suddenly confronted by a flashback to the night Max 'proposed' to me on his office building's rooftop terrace. I was bound and captive and his rough hands searched me with no regard for my feelings on the matter.

Had Max already started to catch feelings for me by then? And, if he hadn't, would he have been even rougher?

Dark thoughts of all the evil things my bratva boss has probably done in his life dance around behind my eyelids as I crack open a beer and collapse down onto my raggedy living room couch.

Max may not have killed my father, but how many children has he *actually* made orphans? I've only ever seen him kill those who deserve it, but am I being naïve to think that's the worst he's done?

My good mood is ruined as I begin to drift off to these troubling thoughts...

... I don't know how long I'm out for before a familiar rumble snaps me out of my half-asleep daze. I sit up on my couch and rub my eyes clear, as if that'll help me hear better.

*Is that what I think it is?*

*Oh, god. I hope not.*

Before I know it, the sound has stopped, but the rolling thunder still echoes through my mind.

I swear I just heard the same rumblings of motorcycle engines that ran from the bar earlier in the evening. *Are the bikers back?*

*... Oh, shit! And Harietta's at the bar!*

I instinctively jump off my couch and scramble to find my phone. *Looks like I might be having to call up 'Fred' after all.* I put the number on speed dial and stand in the middle of my little rustic living room, listening intently for any more disturbing sounds.

... But there isn't another hint of those roaring engines. *Did I dream them?*

I try to listen for any ruckus echoing from the town below. Billy the Bear will still probably be at the bar, and he has his big old gun. If some goons are coming for revenge, I'll be hearing gunshots before the night is through.

Still, I hear nothing. Silence. Crickets chirping.



There are no windows in this shack, and the last thing I want to do is step outside. So, I just stand a little longer, hoping against hope that I don't hear anything else.

*I was just dreaming...*

Suddenly, my front door bursts open.

I whip around, gripped by fear, and am immediately greeted by the barrel of a shotgun. My hands instinctively raise in the air; my limbs go numb from shock, and my phone slowly slips from my suddenly sweaty grip, plunging helplessly to the rickety floorboards below.

Everything's happened so fast that I don't even know if I was able to press the speed dial button for 'Fred' or not. The entirety of my concentration is focused on the steely black hole staring me down from the doorway.

*Not again...*

A giant biker is holding the weapon. It's too dark to see what color his bandana is, but it hardly matters now. Slowly, two skinner men walk out from behind him. They don't have the biker look. Their beards are patchy and their faces are gaunt. They don't wear bandanas or cowboy hats. Instead, they have baseball caps pulled on backwards. They somehow look completely foreign, yet oddly familiar.

"That's her. I fucking swear it," one of them says. I swear his accent sounds familiar, too. He talks more like someone from back home than a southwestern outlaw...

"Are you sure?" The big husky biker growls.

"That's Billie fucking Koralev. Grab her!"



## MAXIM

I haven't donned a bullet proof vest in a long time, but I welcome the heaviness of the Kevlar as I strap it on; it reminds me of simpler times. *If only I weren't wearing it for such a cowardly reason...*

The mayor's mandated that every guest at his celebration event wear some form of protection. The white-collar businessman is still shaken up about the 'robbery' that took place at his last party in the countryside. I can't blame him, I guess, but it'll be an odd sight to see all of this city's elite dressed up like SWAT.

I can only hope that none of this draws any negative attention to me. My past is a poorly kept secret, but anyone looking for anything to fault me with nowadays is going to come up empty handed. I'm clean as a whistle, whether I like it or not.

I fix my tie in my bathroom mirror, trying desperately not to think about how I'll be attending this event alone. I can't remember, did Billie like these kinds of things or not? I hate that I'm not sure. It makes me furious to think that her memory is slowly fading from my straining mind. We haven't even been apart that long, but it feels like a lifetime ago that we shared our burning passion. The memory burns a hole in my heart that won't be fixed until I can find her again. *How I wish she was on my arm right now...*

I haven't been back to my penthouse suite since I returned from Russia. I knew the memory of what I shared here with

Billie would be too painful to revisit. I couldn't sleep in my bed without thinking of what we did there together. I couldn't order a meal from my personal chef without thinking about how we ate together.

Still, I decided to suck it up today. I could have easily had Vasily or anyone else come pick up my favorite old bullet proof vest from my closet here, but I decided it was about time I stopped acting like a pussy. I'm already neutered enough in this new world of legitimate business meetings and dinner parties.

Honestly, now that I'm actually legitimate, I can hardly understand what all the fuss was about in the first place. All these rules and regulations make life so much more boring. I haven't even had a good fight in god knows how long...

My bullet proof vest is bittersweet in that sense. It's seen some intense action—it's also been missing during some important moments (cough, my wedding, cough)—and now it's reminding me of what I've truly left behind.

The only reason I even wanted to go legitimate in the first place was to have a normal life, and not even for me, but for my family; for Georgy, and for my father's legacy.

If it weren't for them, I might have thrown all this to the wind.

*Well, if it wasn't for them, and Billie...*

What my relationship with Billie has made painfully clear to me is the exact reason *why* my father was pushing for this move before he died. It wasn't because he thought it was more 'fun' to be legitimate, but rather because he realized the importance of stability in a relationship. He wanted Georgy and I to be able to experience the creation of our own families, and that was going to be impossible under the stresses of the underworld.

Billie has made me realize that as thrilling as the danger of our love could be, it wasn't sustainable.

We're paying the price for my carelessness now.

I just wish I could solve my problems like I used to, with a little bit of grit and violence and blood—you know, fun—but I've made my decision, and I have to stick to it, for the sake of those I love. Life with Billie might even be worth it... *It will be worth it, if I can ever get to her again.*

*At least Georgy's benefitting from all of this right now... even if he's not home yet.*

With the news that the FBI was behind Billie's kidnapping, Vasily and I have decided that we don't have to worry about the Esposito clan anymore. Still, Georgy wasn't quite done with his little vacation yet. He's currently off country-hopping with Anna, not because he's in hiding anymore, but because he's in love.

*The lucky bastard.* I'm happy for him, I really am, but I'm also sad for myself. Pathetic, right? It makes me feel like such a pussy to wallow in all this self-pity. That's part of the reason I keep forcing myself to go to events like this celebration at city hall. It keeps my mind off the darkness and the hopelessness and forces me to stay angry. I *should* be looking for Billie, not drinking with some snobby socialites... but I can't be on the ground anymore. That's a job for the private investigators and lawmakers who I now have legal connections with. My relationship with the mayor has opened up so many new doors for me, I just have to learn how to use them in place of my old ways.

I've even gotten Georgy an internship with a powerful senator, if my little brother ever decides to come home...

Maybe I'll even find Billie before then, and we can be one big happy family...

But I'm starting to lose hope.

I walk out of my bathroom and through my bedroom with my head down. I thought I was tough enough to confront these memories again, but I can't even bear to look at my bed. I miss Billie so much; not just her body either, but her mind and her laughter and her courageous innocence. She became my light in all this darkness, and I'm almost blind without her; the only thing keeping me going on the straight and narrow is her light

at the end of the tunnel—I can only hope it hasn't been extinguished yet...

*I'll find you...*

I rush into my elevator, eager to leave the memory filled penthouse behind. The doors shut just as my phone buzzes with a call. It's Vasily.

“Any updates?” I won't stop greeting him like that until Billie's safe and sound and back in my arms.

“Yes.”

The word catches in my throat and I swear my heart stops beating for a second. *Did he just say yes!?*

“... You have an update on Billie?” I ask, hardly daring to believe it. A star of hope has suddenly burst up inside of my chest, and I don't know if I could handle it being extinguished so quickly.

“Yes...” Vasily seems hesitant to continue, even though he's the one who fucking called me.

“Spit it out!” I demand.

“We think that someone from the old Esposito crew may have her after all...”

The elevator doors ding open on the ground floor, but I don't budge. I'm still processing what I just heard. *I thought we'd ruled those motherfuckers out of this?*

“What... How... Anna said... Georgy told us...” I feel like a fool, stumbling over myself like this, but I'm not sure what else to do. I'm in shock. Does that mean Billie's been a hostage to some mafia goons all this time? What the hell are they doing to her? An uncontrollable rage suddenly replaces my shock. *I should have made sure I wiped out all of those cockroaches from day one.* “Where is she!?” I demand. Before the elevator doors can clang back shut, I rip them open and step out into my building's lobby, making a beeline for the car waiting for me out front. I don't know where I'm going now, but it's definitely not city hall.

“They didn't say, but they want to set up a meeting.”

“Where!?” *Those fucking bastards.*

“They didn’t say that either.”

*I’ll fucking kill them all.*

“Well, then why the fuck did they finally call!?”

I give my driver a signal to get the fuck out of the way as I forego getting in the backseat of the sleek black car and instead hop into the driver’s seat. I’m not going anywhere yet, though. Not until I know where Billie is.

“They want to make sure you’ll meet their demands before they set up an exchange meeting. I guess they’re scared.”

*Good. They fucking should be. If they touched one fucking hair on her body...*

“What are their demands?” I growl. *I’ll give them whatever they want, then I’ll slaughter them.*

“They want immunity. I guess, they’ve been hiding out since we won the war, and they just want to come back to their home state without having to worry about retribution.”

“Did you tell them that I wasn’t planning on going after them anymore anyways!?” *The fucking idiots.*

“I tried to, but they weren’t having it. You have a reputation, Max... It’s going to take a lot more than a few months in the overworld to change that.”

Suddenly, another worrying thought crosses my mind. “Does this mean Anna’s been lying to us? Have you told Georgy? Is he in trouble?”

Vasily quickly talks me off that roof. “It doesn’t mean that at all,” he assures me. “To me, it sounds like the Esposito fuckers somehow stumbled upon Billie’s witness protection location, and one of them just so happened to recognize her. They’ve probably been hiding out in some tent in the middle of the desert somewhere, and they recognized the whole thing as an opportunity to come home.”

I stew in that line of thought for a while. The last thing I want—besides any harm to come to Billie—is for Georgy to

have been betrayed. “Have we learned the names of the two FBI agents that worked with Anna to extract Billie from the palace yet?”

“Not yet. But do you want me to keep trying to set up another meeting with those two agents you talked to off the record before you went to Russia? They knew where Billie was before Igor took her, they probably have an idea now, right?”

I’ve been trying to get in touch with those two dickwads ever since we returned from Russia, but it’s proving to be nearly impossible. They’re obviously the biggest suspects in our search for Billie, but there’s zero chance they’re going to give her up, especially after one of my own men tracked her down and nearly killed her the last time. I’ve had Vasily send messages swearing up and down that I don’t want to harm her, but we haven’t gotten a response. Still, I’m slowly working my way into circles that can give me influence into the FBI’s dealings. You can buy anything with enough money—or, at least, almost anything.

“Have they responded to any of our previous requests yet?” I ask.

“No...”

“Then what’s the point? Until we can directly connect them to Anna and the palace, we can’t use any of my new connections to weed them out. We need a meeting, but that’s not going to happen until they slip up and finally meet with Anna to give her the American citizen ship they promised.”

“And we’re going to count on them coming through with that promise?”

“We don’t have much of a choice on that end. For now, we need to set up a meeting with the only people who seem eager to see us. Those Esposito fuckers.”

I can hear Vasily fidgeting with his computer on the other end of the line. *He better be setting up this fucking exchange...*

“Did they say where they might want to meet?” I ask gripping my steering wheel like I’m already racing down the



highway instead of idling out front of a building. I just want to spring into action. I'm so close to Billie I can taste her.

“No. I'll call them back now. Come to the office and I'll have everything set up by the time you get here.”

That's all the excuse I need to put the car in drive and peel out on to the street like a madman. Fuck speed limits, fuck being a law-abiding citizen. I'm on a fucking mission, and everything else can go to hell.



## MAXIM

**L**ike hell I'm not going myself.

“Max, I'm serious. You need to stay above all of this grimy shit. If you come to the meeting, you could risk everything. These characters are too shady to risk your legitimacy on.” Vasily's pleadings fall on deaf ears.

“Billie's worth the risk.” I've made it clear that this isn't something I'm willing to argue about, but it hasn't stopped my *Sovietnik* from begging me to stay in the city while he takes some troops down to a meeting place with the Esposito stragglers out by the Mexican border.

After the war ended, most of our bratva soldiers were reassigned to construction projects throughout the city. We pay them well, but even then, most of these guys are natural killers. They've been getting bored of their new 'regular' lives—this whole hostage exchange is a perfect opportunity to let them blow off some steam. I'll be damned if I'm going to miss out on it.

Vasily starts to speak, but I stop him with the palm of my hand. Enough is enough. We've talked this through, now it's time for action. “I'm going. Final word.”

We arrive at my private jet to a line of giddy soldiers waiting on the tarmac. They all look happy as fuck. Good. I'm out for blood. Once I get Billie, I'm going to rip apart everyone involved in her kidnapping. I march past the loyal men like a ball of fire. Let them feel my heat and take a little

bit of my rage for themselves. We're walking into a slaughter, after all...

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... The flight there only takes about three hours, but it might as well have been a lifetime. By the time the jet lands and I walk out under the searing southern sun, I'm barely a man anymore. The old bratva beast in me has re-emerged and it's ready for a fight.

Our drive to the meet-up location is even longer than our flight in. We take five trucks, four of which diverge from our group along the way, in order to set up in strategic spots around the exchange. As stupid as I think these Esposito fuckers are, I'm not taking any chances. I'll rain down hellfire on them before I let them aim a gun at me or Billie.

With our motorcade broken up, there's only four of us left in my truck. Me, Vasily, and two bodyguards. We don't want to intimidate Billie's kidnappers enough that they run away, but they need to know that we're not fucking around. I'm sure they'll be surprised that I bothered to show up myself; I can only hope that it puts the fear of god in them. As much as I want every last one of them dead and in the ground, I will not tolerate any shots being fired until Billie is safely out of the way.

"This is it," Vasily says, checking the map on his phone as we pull up to a stretch of desert hidden in a valley of hills. The land is rocky and barren and completely devoid of life, but there are plenty of perfect stakeout spots in the surrounding mountains. I can only hope my men find them before anyone else does.

It looks like we're the first to arrive. I check my phone. We're early.

I take the free time to stuff a Glock under my belt. I make it obvious that I'm carrying, so that if they ask for my weapon, I have something to give them. What they won't see is the pistol I have up my sleeve, or the switchblade in my boot.

I stew in my anger while we wait for the other side to arrive. I swear they're running late on purpose. Are they trying to antagonize me?

... Finally, after far too long, I spot a trail of dust in the distance. It almost looks like a sandstorm, it's so big.

*So, they brought an army...*

The closer they get, the more obvious what I'm facing down becomes. There are only two cars in the gang, but they're flanked by about two-dozen motorcycles.

*Fuck if I care.*

I step out of my truck and go to meet them. "You guys stay here," I order my own men.

Vasily starts to argue, before thinking better of it. Now is no time to be at each other's throats. We'll need to work completely in sync to get this done properly...

... The cavalcade of bikers stops some 50 yards away from me. I watch them with keen interest, trying to parse out where Billie is, while I wait for them to make their move. I don't budge as they roar their engines like idiots. *You think you can intimidate me, you fools? The last thing in this world I'm afraid of is some punk bike-gang...*

Suddenly, a car door opens and a thin raggedy man walks out. He's wearing a leather jacket and dress pants, as well as a baseball cap turned backwards. He hardly looks like he belongs among the group of burly outlaws. The second he speaks, though, I recognize why.

*He's from the Esposito family.* I'd recognize that accent anywhere. Dust settles all around us as he limps in my direction. I hold still, but I so badly want to race at him and punch him deep into the ground. My fists ache to bleed against his face. I want to split him in two and feed him to the coyotes.

*Talk, you motherfucker...*

"... Maxim Koralev?" asks the man, clearly surprised. He obviously wasn't expecting me to come myself.

“Who are you?” I ask, trying to hold back a growl. This bastard needs to think I’m not about to kill him. He needs to feel safe and in charge until the moment he gives Billie back to me.

“That doesn’t matter. Not yet, at least. I used to be a part of the Esposito family, before you wiped them out. I’ve been hiding out in this wasteland for months now and I want to come home. I want your word that no trouble will befall me when I do.”

“Where’s Billie?” I’m already tired of waiting. I just want to see her again.

“Do I have your word?” The rat’s voice breaks from nerves, but there’s a sliminess behind his eyes that I just can’t stand. *I swear to god, if he’s hurt her...*

I take a strong and confident step forward. “You have my word.”

“Then give me your weapon,” he gestures for me to come closer. It takes all of my will power not to roll my eyes. This fucking amateur. He must have been some low-level loan shark or something. No wonder he survived the war, no one probably thought enough of him to put a bullet through his head. Well, now he’s got my attention, and I’m going to rectify all of that.

Without hesitating, I twist my Glock out from under my belt and toss it towards him. It kicks up dust and stops just short of the jittery man. He picks the weapons up and unlocks the safety. I tense up...

*He wouldn’t dare.*

I can see him carefully considering his next action. *The fuckup doesn’t even have a plan...* Before he can do something stupid, though, he seems to decide better of it. “Bring her out!” he yells back to the cavalcade behind him.

*This is it.* My heart stops. Time almost stands still. I’m frozen in place as another car door opens and another thin man walks out. This guy is pulling something on his arm. *No, not something... someone.*

*Billie.*

“Max!” her eyes light up like exploding stars at the sight of me.

“Billie,” I whisper back, hardly able to get the words out. I can hardly believe it. She’s here. I have her...

*Not yet.*

I shake my head and force myself out of my lovestruck daze. The thin man is holding her tightly around the arm. I want to kill him more than anyone. *How dare he think he deserves to touch her...*

“Here!” I boom, gesturing for the men to bring my love back to me. They share a glance of hesitation between each other. I don’t like the look of that.

“We want something else, too,” squeals the thin man who’s holding Billie. “Other than just your word.”

Anger threatens to seethe out of my eyeballs as I tighten at the suggestion. *I’m so close...* “What?” I grumble.

“Money.”

“How much?”

“Uh, a million.” The idiot’s uncertainty almost makes me laugh. This time, I can’t help but roll my eyes. For a second, my anger fades and I feel back in control. These losers have no idea what they’re doing; it’s a wonder how they managed to string along a bunch of bikers to go along with their stupid ‘plan’... unless of course, they promised compensation, compensation that they won’t get unless I give it to them. They obviously haven’t thought this through, and if I’m not careful, it’s going to lead to chaos.

“Fine. A million dollars. Now give me what I came here for.” My anger’s back with a vengeance and it’s getting harder and harder to conceal my absolute fury at having to beg for my own fiancée. I’m just about ready to erupt.

“Money first!”

*I swear to god...*

“We didn’t bring any money because you didn’t fucking ask for any!” I explode, taking a slew of strong steps forward. The thin man with the turned back baseball cap points my own Glock at me; I hardly pay him any mind. “Give me Billie, NOW!” My command echoes through the desert valley.

A few burly bikers get off their motorcycles and unsheathe machetes from their jackets. They could care less about Billie; they just want to get paid.

*I’ll pay them...*

*In blood.*

“You can transfer it to my account,” says the thin man holding Billie.

“*Our* account!” adds his idiotic accomplice. It’s long past clear why these two weren’t killed in the war, they’re of no use to anyone; fools that were probably instantly forgotten about once the shooting started.

I won’t make the same mistake twice. I’m going to put them in the ground myself. *Just a little bit longer...*

I peel my eyes off of Billie for a split-second—just long enough to look back at Vasily and gesture for him to get out of the truck—then my attention is fully back on my girl. She looks frightened, but not overly so. There’s a defiance in her eyes that makes me proud. She’s been through worse—not that it makes it any easier to see her in another man’s hands.

Vasily’s been listening to this entire exchange from the passenger seat of the truck we arrived in. He walks up beside me, phone in hand and asks the two lowlifes for their account info. They barely even know that.

Finally, though, they step forward, with Billie in tow; out from under the protection of their machete wielding biker gang.

I instinctively step out to meet them.

Vasily and I stand downwind, and Billie’s scent wafts into my nostrils. The closer she comes, the less I can control myself. It’s dangerous. I feel a powerful urge to throw caution



to the wind and lunge for my girl. We're stuck in a desperate stand-off as Vasily hovers his hand over the transfer button on his phone. "Girl first," he tells the idiots standing before us.

"Throw down your weapon, too," the thin man with my Glock says nervously.

"I'm an accountant, I don't have a weapon," Vasily lies. He's got a pocket pistol on him, but I doubt he has anything else. There's a tension in the air that we both recognize. Violence is afoot, we just have to hope we can protect Billie before it reaches her.

The dumbasses seem to buy Vasily's lie. Finally, the man with my Glock turns and nods to his accomplice. After a moment of hesitation, the man accepts the request and unlocks Billie from his arm. He shoves her forward and I have to lunge out to save her from hitting the dirt.

I nearly sink through the ground at the touch of her soft skin. *I missed her warmth so much...* Her fingers dig into my arm for support and I melt. It takes every last ounce of strength in me just to stay focused and pull her back from across enemy lines.

"Max," she whispers into my ear as I hold her.

"I love you so much," I tell her. She collapses into my chest and I wrap my arms around her searing body. I'm never letting her go again. Sure, she's dirty and reckless and she's put me in jail more than anyone else on this planet, but she's mine, and I'm never going to let anything get in the way of us ever again.

"I love you, too," she starts to cry. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry."

"Hey!" The man who just shoved Billie towards me seems to have been struck by a thought. Having thoughts must be new to him, because he looks completely dumbstruck by whatever slimy idea has crawled into his head. "How do we know we've actually gotten the money!? We don't have cell phones on us!"

“Go find a computer,” Vasily dismisses them, turning around and heading back to the truck.

The two dumbbells don't seem to like that. “Hey, we promised these guys money,” he says, pointing back at the wall of bikers. “You can't just leave without providing us with proof!”

“This transaction's over!” Vasily yells back without turning around.

Just before *I* can turn around and lead Billie away from all this shit, though, the thin man with my Glock starts to wave the weapon in my direction. “It's not over until I say it's over.” His voice cracks under the pressure. If Billie wasn't in my arms, I'd let him take his shot at me while I bullrushed him. This motherfucker wouldn't be able to handle me.

But I'm not letting Billie go. Not ever again. So, for the first time in my life, instead of facing a threat head on, I turn my back to it. “Let's go home,” I whisper into Billie's ear. She rests her head against my shoulder and I'm overcome by a strong wave of nostalgia. This is all I want. She's all I need.

The two Esposito idiots are yelling behind us, but I've completely tuned them out. It even sounds like the bikers are getting involved in the yelling match, but I only have eyes and ears for the love of my life. Everything and everyone else can go straight to hell.

I support Billie's warm weight as we leave the nightmare behind us.

... But the nightmare doesn't seem to want to let us go.

We've barely made it back to my truck when the shooting starts.



## BILLIE

**N**o. *Not again.*

The familiar sound of bullets raining down all around me buckles my knees. Luckily, I have Max to prop me back up. His warm body covers me completely as we huddle behind the trunk of his truck. *Please don't go cold again... I won't survive if you go cold again...*

I flinch under his weight as the sound of popping tires cuts through the pitter-patter of gunshots. Our ride out of here collapses into the earth, completely useless. “Fuck,” Max grumbles. He holds me so tight that I wonder if we might sink into one another, but the longer we ignore the world for our embrace, the more it all falls apart.

“Vasily! Pass some Kevlar!” Max shouts from our little hideout in the back. I peek out from under his arm and see Vasily crouched behind a quickly deteriorating passenger door. On the orders of his boss, he crawls into the backseat and pulls out a heavy looking black vest. Two other men I've never seen before fire into the approaching crowd of bikers.

“Here,” Vasily says, tossing the vest at us before turning back around and taking aim at the enemy with his own pistol.

Max kisses my forehead before finally releasing me from his hulking grip. No matter how big he loomed in my mind during all the time we spent apart, it doesn't compare to how big and muscular he actually is. *I'd forgotten what a beast he was. My beast...* “Put this on,” he whispers, nearly nibbling on my ear. I try to help him strap the heavy vest on my trembling

body, but I have no idea what I'm doing—it doesn't matter, Max is in complete control. Before I know it, I'm covered again, but this time not by his warmth. "Don't take it off," he orders, resting his hand on the thick material. Even through it all, I can feel his touch. He's so hot that not even the sun compares. "I love you," he says, after a moment of hesitation. His lips fall on mine and I melt. The understated passion of his kiss quells my restless spirit. *Everything's going to be alright...*

Before I can tell him that I love him back, he's already turned his back to me. I watch in awe as he pulls out a gun from his jacket sleeve and steps out into the line of fire. *My hero. Please don't go cold...*

Suddenly, the back window on the truck shatters and a storm of glass shards pours down over me. I cover myself with the ill-fitted vest, thankful that it's two-sizes too big. Bullets whip up dust on either side of me as I try desperately to wait out the chaos. The longer I wait, though, the louder it all seems to become.

*... I didn't really miss this, right?*

I don't have an answer, but I'm already sick of waiting. I tuck my arms inside of my bulletproof vest and instead use it like a shield, hiding behind the Kevlar as I slowly shuffle out to get a better look at what's going down. I'm being stupid, I know, but if there's anything I can do to help, then I want to be able to act. I may be a damsel in distress, but I don't have to be completely useless.

When I peak around the corner of the truck, I spot Max crouched behind the now completely detached passenger door. The truck might as well be a piece of junk by now, it's so riddled with bullet holes, but it's making for a serviceable shield.

Max has an even bigger gun out than the one he pulled from his sleeve just a moment ago and he's using it like a skilled expert. The only sounds that seem to be cutting through the roar of gunshots is the screams of pain from the biker gang as they're hit by my expert marksman. If I didn't know any

better, I'd say Max was enjoying himself. I know that's not the case, though, but only because I'm here. If it were only his life at risk, I'm sure he'd be in heaven, sending bad guys to hell like this.

I marvel as he unloads on the stinking bikers who've held me hostage in their dirty desert camp for the past two days. These fuckers are no gentlemen, and the only reason I'm not bruised and bloodied is because the Esposito fuckers kept a tight grip on their shotguns—they knew that any mark on me would be repaid tenfold by Max. So, I was guarded by the fuckups like their lives depended on it, all the while bikers paced and stroked their junk in front of me. Most of these sickos probably haven't been with a woman in god knows how long, at least not with consent—so, I guess I should be thankful that Max's reputation is strong enough to make my kidnappers more fearful of him when he was a hundred miles away than of the bikers when they were right there.

It's like they thought Max might be invincible, and I don't blame them. Even now, surrounded by a hail of bullets, he looks like a god, with his back muscles rippling under his tight dress shirt, which is dirty with dust and ripped from rescuing me. *The fucking hunk...*

Suddenly, though, my bad boy hero is thrown off his feet. He upends the dust in front of me as he slides over the earth, away from the safety of his car door shield. I hold my breath as he grunts and tries to get up, but before he can manage, another burst of force propels him backwards.

His grunt of pain sends a chill down my spine. The second I see the red glisten of blood dripping down his lips, I panic. *No! Not again!*

I barely even think, I just lunge for him, crawling through the dust like a madwoman until I get close enough to throw my Kevlar-shielded body over his. "Max!" *Please don't go cold again...*

He's not cold, though. In fact, he's steaming. Before I can even take a single bullet to protect him, he's picked me up and

tossed me back behind the cover of the truck. I feel like a ragdoll under his power. Where is he getting the strength?

I marvel up at the steaming bratva boss. His burly chest heaves as he rips off what's remaining of his dress shirt. The tattered garment falls to the ground, revealing that Max is wearing his own Kevlar vest. It looks a lot less heavy on his massive body than it felt on mine, though. Against his thick biceps and broad chest, it almost looks like a regular vest. He struggles momentarily to rip it off, too, but when he does, the full glory of his chiseled body knocks me back to the ground.

The bullets have left bruises on his pale skin, but they haven't pierced his body. He cradles his wounds and I instinctively rush to help him. "Max..." I whisper, gently placing my hand against a throbbing bruise under his heaving chest. He's struggling to catch his breath but when I touch him and whisper his name, a calm seems to come over him.

"I'm sorry if I ever scared you," he says. I look him in the eyes and the battlefield seems to drift away into oblivion. Only the two of us exist. Those grey-green eyes of his sparkle like a magnificent glacial mountain lake. "I would never hurt you."

"I know," I cry. "I know." There's nothing else to say. I dig my head into his chest and my beast winces at the pain, but when I try to pull back away, he pulls me in even tighter. His heart beat is slow and determined. I missed the way it breathes new life into me. Max's hard, hot skin forces me to believe we'll be alright; he'll make sure of it.

Suddenly, though, a new roar overtakes the blasts of gunshots ringing through the valley and snaps us from our embrace.

I look around, confused. It almost sounds like the roar of a motorcycle engine... but even louder... and it's coming from the sky.

Max and I both look up at the same time. We don't have time to see anything, because Vasily is immediately at our sides, screaming for help as he desperately tries to pull open the busted truck trunk. "Get the bikes! You *can't* be found here!" he yells at Max. My love reluctantly lets me go as he

risers to help his advisor. Together, they manage to pry open the warped steel of the tattered trunk.

My gaze wonders through the shattered glass of the truck windows and onto the horizon. There in the distance, quickly approaching through the clear blue sky, is a fucking helicopter. Dark and black and ominous.

“It’s the fucking FBI!” Vasily shouts, tossing a motorbike from the trunk onto the ground beside me. I flinch as the steel bounces off the earth. *The FBI... I guess my call to ‘Fred’ went through, after all.*

Max jumps from the trunk and immediately picks up the dusty bike. “Get on!” he orders, kicking at the ignition until the engine hums alive. I jump on the seat behind him, wrapping my arms around his shirtless, steaming torso. Before I know it, my head is flung backwards and we’re off, racing towards the cover of the hills just off in the distance. *The FBI can’t find Max in the middle of a shootout... if they do, they’ll lock him away for good, and it’ll all be my fault... again.*

“FASTER!” I shout, tightening my grip around his chiseled body. I look back to see the bikers starting to scatter at the sight of the approaching helicopter. Most of them go east or west, but some of them turn right back around and head the way they came. A select few, though, come after us.

*Fuck.*

They’re the least of our worries, though. It’s the FBI that can’t catch up. We need to reach the mountains before the helicopter reaches us. If they get even one good photo of Max fleeing the firefight, then he’s fucked. I can’t be the cause of his third incarceration, but there’s nothing I can do right now but hold onto his hunky body for dear life as we race towards the shade of the mountain cliffs.

I close my eyes and hope with all my might that my saviour comes through once again. His back muscles are clenched and his skin is damp with sweat. I’m lost in the contours and texture of his amazing body...



Suddenly, a chill hits my skin. *What the fuck was that!?* I open my eyes and look around.

A huge wave of relief washes over me. *We're in the mountains! We made it!* I look back to see the pursuing helicopter turn up and around at the end of the valley. It appears to go after another target: the fleeing bikers who foolishly chose to go in another direction.

I don't have much time to revel in our escape; we're not out of the woods yet. Just as soon as the roar of the helicopter fades in the distance, it's replaced by the rumbling of our motorcycle pursuers. Their deep guttural engines echo through the canyon. I turn around to see them still chasing us down. Their bikes are faster than ours, but I have faith in Max. He can hear them, too. I lower my grip from just below his chest to around his hard abs. They tighten as he leans forward and tries to will the road bike forward. "How many are there!?" he shouts through the gusts of wind lashing against our intertwined bodies.

I look back around; I spot three big burly bikers in hot pursuit. They look pissed off. I mean, I get it. They were probably promised a bunch of money, and now their meal ticket is being whisked away to freedom, and the people who promised them a big pay day are dead in the dirt.

Still, fuck them. Fuck them right to hell.

"There's three of them!" I shout back up to Max. He nods, making a quick turn on his bike. We burst through a little crack in the mountain. As we ride through our new path, the cliff faces that surround us start to close in. Just before Max's shoulders are about to scrape against the red rock, he slows down to a stop.

"Max..." I start, before being stopped by his rough grip around my waist. He picks me up off the motorbike and carries me behind a nearby boulder.

"Stay here!" he orders harshly, before planting his glistening blood red lips against mine. His kiss is filled with a dangerous passion. I buckle under the power of his love. I couldn't move if I wanted to. He pulls away, taking a moment

to appreciate the sparkle in my eyes, then he bends down, rips out a switchblade tied around his ankle, gives me one more quick kiss and disappears on the other side of the boulder.

The world is silent for a moment as I revel in the intoxicating heat of his fiery love.

That quiet is quickly broken by the rumbling engines of the last thing standing between Max and I and everlasting peace.

*Gut them like fish, my love...*



## MAXIM

**G**od, I missed this.  
*Not half as much as Billie, of course... but still a lot.*

The feeling of cracking another man's cheekbone under the raw strength of my fist never gets old. It's almost more rewarding when the bastard you're beating down is a heavy-set biker with a bad beard. Being able to cut through his fat and his facial hair with one fell swoop pumps enough adrenaline through my veins to fight off an entire army—and that's without including the boost I just got from Billie's kiss.

I can still taste her on my lips as I duck to avoid the swinging machete of an overweight biker douche. I deliver a few hard punches to his gut before spinning around to his backside. Before he can turn around to greet me, I have my switchblade out and around his neck.

He collapses in a bloody huff before his friends can process what's happening. They're outmatched. These guys are nothing compared to what I'm used to. Igor alone would eat these motherfuckers for breakfast, and I sent that bastard to hell in a hand basket.

If they ever wanted to get out of this canyon alive, they shouldn't have given me the chance to kiss Billie first. Now, I feel invincible.

I pick up the fallen biker's machete and immediately chuck it at his bull rushing friend. The blade nicks him in the neck and my fist follows close behind, catching the dipshit right

between the eyes. I can almost see the light leave him as he's propelled backwards. His big body hits the canyon ground with a huff, and a few nearby rocks are dislodged from their cliff face in response.

Without giving him any time to recover, I bend down and finish him off with my switchblade.

The knife glistens red with blood.

*Two down; one to go.*

This is my last hurrah. After this, it's all straight and narrow for me. I've got my girl; I've got my empire; I've got my family. There's only one last pig standing in the way of it all.

And he suddenly looks awfully scared.

If it took him this long to realize how overmatched he truly is, then he must be dumber than those Esposito fucks who convinced him to come out here in the first place. Strength in numbers my ass. The real strength is in love.

I savor my last ever kill. He's rigid and tense and I'm as loose as ever. *One more...*

The heavy biker yells and makes his final charge, but he's slow and sloppy. I step aside, plunging my switchblade deep into his neck, before he can even take a real swing at me.

He instantly collapses in a pool of his own blood.

*Done. I'm fucking out. I wash my hands of this world.* My knife falls to the dusty, bloody earth, and I go to my girl.

She's been good. I know how feisty Billie can be, but she's stayed hidden this entire time. I find her right where I left her, huddled behind the big red boulder. The taste of her lips is starting to fade from my mouth; I don't like that. So, I immediately greet her with a kiss.

Billie doesn't seem to mind my frankness. In fact, after a moment of letting me bend her to my will, she takes over, shoving her tongue down my throat and pushing me back against the boulder. And just like that, we're back; and I'm hard as a rock.

A whirlwind of delirious passion throws us together.

“I missed you so fucking much,” I growl, tearing at my pants. The fight has already left me nearly naked, and my tattered jeans unbuckle quickly enough. Billie’s wearing a raggedy, dirt-stained stretched out t-shirt that looks like it used to be white. It finds the canyon floor just before we do. Our dirty clothes are the only sheets we need. I enter her with all the force of our withheld passion.

“Max!” she cries out, tightening around my throbbing manhood and making me feel like the king of the world.

“Billie,” I groan back, thrusting so deep inside of her that I feel like I might get lost and never come out. *Good*. I can live with that. We’re one now, forever and always. This is my girl and when her legs are wrapped around my waist, I finally feel like the man I’ve always wanted to be.

*Hers.*

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Water still falls from the rainforest showerhead in my bathroom as I dry myself off. Next to me, a naked Billie does the same. No matter how many times we fuck, I still can’t help but feel a rush of lust every time I lay my eyes on her perfect body. She’s got curves in all the right places, and enough cushion to take the full force of my passion. It hardly matters that we just had our fun in the shower, I already want to go at it again. But we have somewhere to be.

It’s a good thing I’d love her even without her rocking body.

I wrap my arms around her and give her ear a little teasing nibble, then I take a step back and slap her ass, before strutting out of the bathroom.

“Hey! You can’t just tease me like that!” she shouts after me.

“What are you going to do about—” before I can finish my playful taunt, Billie has raced from the bathroom and jumped

into my arms. I let the force of her body push me back onto our bed as her lips close in around mine. *Fuck. I'll never get enough of this.*

We roll around on top of the covers before both of our phone alarms go off at the same time. We're already running late... but I don't have the willpower to break away from our embrace. It's a good thing Billie's as tough as she is. "We can't miss this thing," she says, pressing her warm hand against my bare chest and pushing back. Her eyes sparkle with desire, but I can see the gears turning in her head. She's right. We can't miss this.

"Fine," I smile, pushing her off of me. She bounces off the mattress, giggling, and I saunter over to my closet, still hard. I have to keep my gaze off of Billie as I get dressed, otherwise my erection would never go down, and I wouldn't be able to fit into my pants. It's the only downside to our relationship: constant tight pants. It's a good thing I can afford to replace them.

I put on a new suit and stuff a special package into my back pocket while Billie goes back into the bathroom to turn off the shower and put on some makeup. Then I call up my driver and tell him we'll be down in a minute. Billie's kept her buzzcut look, and it's making going out with her all the easier. She's ready to leave in no time flat.

"Looking good, babe," I let her know as she struts out of her closet, draped in a sexy red dress that threatens to rip my brand-new pants apart.

"I could say the same thing about you," she smiles mischievously. She knows what she does to me, and she loves it. It's a good thing I do to.

I take her hand and lead her down the steps of our bedroom, through the living room and into the elevator of our penthouse suite. It's only been two weeks or so since Billie and I came back into each other's lives, but it already feels like everything is *ours*. *Is this what creating your own family feels like?*

"All ready?"

“Ready.” That goddamn smile of hers knocks me off my feet harder than any gunshot ever could. My ribs are still a little sore from our battle in the desert, but Billie’s been sucking up her own bruises so well that I feel like a giant pussy if I so much as wince in pain. Tonight’s the first night we’re going out as a couple since we returned together—we’ve been mostly just trying to recover and support each other, but tonight’s occasion is too important to pass up, so we’ve iced our wounds and put on our best faces.

Tonight’s about family; about success and moving on up. More specifically, it’s about Georgy and his internship with the United States Senator, Morris McClintic. The senator’s throwing a bash at my art gallery on the boardwalk, and all of his senator friends are going to be there, as well as a bevy of other powerful, well-connected, legitimate people.

We’re about to enter a whole new world, and there isn’t anyone I’d rather share the experience with. I stare down at Billie as the elevator descends from our top-floor haven. She’s so fucking incredible. Being with her now finally makes me feel like all the shit I’ve been through over the past few years was worth it. Being legitimate means that we can finally settle down and stop hiding. I’ve had enough thrills. Now, it’s time for love.

The elevator doors ding open and we practically skip to the sleek black limo waiting out front for us. The weather is warm and easy and the sun is just about to set. Billie’s smooth dark skin is washed in golden light. I’m the luckiest man on earth.

I get a text from Vasily on our drive over to the party. For the past two weeks, he’s been in constant contact with the feds, trying to work out a plan that ensures Billie’s safety, as well as my own. It’s funny, for as incorruptible as I pictured the FBI to be, they sure do just want to have someone to pin all the blame on. Well, Vasily had the perfect suggestion: make Angelo Esposito the fall man for everything. Dead men don’t deny allegations, after all.

We’re still unsure on how well that plans going to work—some FBI agents, including those two motherfuckers, Sanderson and Pandero, don’t like the idea of me getting away



with my past crimes. But they're hardly the biggest guns that I have access to anymore, and all of their objections can be overruled by certain senators that will be at tonight's party.

I think that's why they've been so expedient in finally getting Anna to America—so that they can say, *Look, we're the good guys. We promised this girl citizenship, and she's getting it!*

*Good guys my ass.*

I had to pull a thousand favors out of my butt, and Georgy even had to ask his senator for help, just to get Sanderson and Pandero to budge in the first place.

And least we're finally starting to see some results. Anna's not quite an official citizen just yet, but she'll be at the party tonight, on Georgy's arm.

I can't wait to see them both. I've talked to Anna over video chat since my return with Billie from the mountains. She was so apologetic about how her decision to help the FBI led to Billie being put in danger. But it was easy to forgive her. I can tell she's special, especially to Georgy, and what they've found together reminds me of what Billie and I have. It makes me so happy. Not only does my future look bright, but so does theirs. *This is what it's all been about...*

Professional photographers and cameramen line the red carpet outside the gala. This is the second time Billie and I have been in a spot like this together, but now, we don't have to fake our smiles. I want the world to see the girl on my arm. I want them all to know how happy she makes me. This shit is legitimate, through and through.

With Billie by my side, I hardly even mind the stuffiness inside the gallery. Old money socialites and men who've never thrown a single punch in their entire lives talk big games, but every single boring conversation and unrelatable anecdote rolls right off my shoulders. I can't take my eyes off of Billie. Her polite smile is infectious, her curvy body intoxicating. I'd be lying if I didn't say it bugged me a bit to see every man's eyes take at least a little trip over her red dress. A younger me might have taken it as enough of an insult to get into a fight

over, but I'm a changed man. I have what I want, and I've already fought off the world just to keep her by my side.

Still, we're not quite finished just yet. There's still something bugging me, and it's only exacerbated by something the mayor says when we exchange greetings.

"It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Koralev."

*Mrs. Koralev.*

Billie giggles. "I'm not Mrs. Koralev... yet."

That does it. I can't wait any longer. I politely excuse the two of us, taking my 'fake' fiancée's hand and leading her away from the crowd.

It's time I do something I should have done a long time ago.



## BILLIE

I don't know where he's taking me, but I'd follow him off the edge of the earth, I pretty much already have.

Max's rugged hand tugs me past the bar on the ground floor of his luxury art gallery until we're going down a familiar path.

I can already smell the sea salt in the air and hear the crashing waves against the underground dock. *He's taking me to where we first made love. Well, where we first **fucked**. The love came later.*

Slowly, the chatter of the crowd upstairs fades away, and we're left alone with each other. It doesn't take us long to get to a familiar spot, but instead of stopping at the wall that once propped me up while Max tried to knock me down, we keep going. Around the corner, we find a little dock. The wood partition looks freshly renovated. *What does Max have planned?*

"Remember this place?" he asks, as we lean on the partition between us and the lapping ocean. The underground dock cuts through granite stone in a tunnel that leads out into the sea. On the horizon, we can see stars twinkling over the calm ocean. It's dark down here, but I'm used to the darkness by now. I can see everything I want to see.

"Of course," I smile, looking over at Max. "Or, rather, I remember the wall just around the corner."

Max chuckles and shifts on his feet. I roll my eyes. That's his go to move when I'm making his pants get tight. He's

remembering our hot and steamy fuck. Well, so am I. The memory of the intense frustrated passion makes me shiver in delight. My dress obviously doesn't get any tighter, but my panties definitely do get a little wetter...

I bite my lip. I can only hope that Max has brought me down here for some kind of sexy re-enactment. I push closer against him and he leans on me. The heat from his body is perfectly countered by the cool breeze coming from the ocean. I'm in heaven.

Max shifts on his feet again. "Well, the wall just around the corner was where we learned something new about each other. Something so important that it changed the way we saw one another forever. It was the beginning of all of this," he gestures between the two of us and I rest my head on his huge shoulder. "And I'm glad it happened. I think it's only appropriate that we take the next step here."

*Next step?*

A few months ago, Max's mysterious words would have sent a shiver down my spine, but I know him better now. I know our love better. I've never felt safer than when I'm by his side, even when we're completely alone. All the darkness in his past just seems like necessary evil. We're here now, and that's all that matters.

"What's the next step?" I ask, filled with curiosity.

Max hesitates for a second, it's enough to sow a small seed of doubt in my belly. *We've already been through it all, right? It should be smooth sailing from here on out...*

"Confessions," the burly bratva boss says. His grey-green eyes are flat but determined.

*Confessions.* The word instinctively makes me worried. I have so much to hide... or do I? "What do you mean?" I ask innocently, but I already know the answer. If we're really going to make this work, we need to tell each other everything, and we both know that we still have our secrets.

"I want to be completely honest with you," Max says. "You don't know everything about me, or about the

arrangement that brought us together in the first place. I want to make a life together, but I don't want to hide anything from you anymore. I want to share everything."

My gut tightens ever so slightly at the gesture. I know where this is going. "... So do I," I say, unsure if it's completely the truth. Some things are better left unsaid, but if Max wants to air all of our dirty laundry, then that's what I'll do.

His hand finds mine and the warmth of his touch puts me at ease. The way he caresses my fingers makes me sure that our love can survive anything... even the truth. "I lied to you about why we needed to get married," Max starts. Ocean waves lap peaceful just below our feet. I already knew that, but hearing him say it somehow makes me feel better. "It had nothing to do with my father's last will and testament." I squeeze Max's fingers to let him know that it's alright. I forgive him. "Just before you got into contact with me, I made a big mistake. Angelo Esposito had a son... and I killed him. It was by accident, but that hardly mattered. He was a junky and me and my crew were trying to clean up this boardwalk so that we could make it into what it is today—but my accident put all this at risk. Angelo wanted revenge... or else we were going to get war. I knew the only way he'd be satisfied was if he killed someone that I loved in retribution. I only cared about Georgy, though. And there was no way I was going to give him up. So, I decided to make Angelo think I loved someone else, then when the time came, I'd offer them up to him on a silver platter..."

"... Me," I whisper. Even though I already roughly knew the plan, hearing it all laid out for me like that makes me realize just how close I came to death. "... At the mayor's party..."

"... That's when I decided I couldn't go through with it. There was nothing fake about the love I was starting to feel for you..."

I suddenly realize my hand has gone limp under Max's grip. I quickly tighten back up, resolved to show him that it's all okay. I don't care how we got here, I only care that we're

here. “I love you Max,” I assure him. “And nothing’s going to change that.”

His grip tightens around my hand. I can practically feel the weight lift off his shoulders. “I love you, too,” he says softly. I feel the gently kiss of his lips against my forehead. A sigh escapes me. Now, it’s my turn to confess.

“I...” the words catch in my throat. This is going to be harder than I thought. “I was sent to you by the FBI... from the very start.” It feels like all the weight that was lifted off of Max’s shoulders has fallen onto mine. My hulking partner doesn’t let me suffer for long, though. His free hand quickly finds my chin. I fall into his palm, assured that everything’s going to be alright. There’s nothing I can say that will break the bond we’ve forged. “I got caught fudging some numbers for my start-up... They said it was fraud. They were right, I guess. I still don’t know why I did it. Things weren’t going so bad. It just felt like everyone else was doing so much better. The FBI caught me and brought me in. They said the only way to save myself and my business was to go after you. I thought you murdered my father...”

Max wraps his big strong arms around me. His sturdy body makes me realize I’m shaking. I never thought I’d tell him this—and I’d figured that if he ever found out, it’d be the death of me. “I think you know the rest...” I whisper. He holds the back of my head and keeps me pinned against his chest. I can hear his heartbeat; it’s slow and steady and calm. He’s forgiven me; I can feel it.

*Oh god, I love him so much.*

“I’m sorry,” I sniffle.

“Don’t be sorry. If you hadn’t done what you’d did, we’d never be here. We’d never be together. I’m glad you fudged the numbers to your start-up. I’m glad you agreed to try and bring me down. I’m glad you agreed to fake marry me. Because if you hadn’t, we’d never be here now. Together. Happy. Are you happy?”

“I’m so happy,” I say, with tears welling up in my eyes. We’ve begun to sway back and forth in each other’s arms, like

two slow-dancers at the edge of the ocean. I listen to the waves sync up with Max's pulse and I calm down. This is perfect. We're perfect.

Before I can drift off in his arms, though, Max softly pulls away. I reach out for him, already missing his touch, but he avoids it...

Because he's getting down on one knee.

The shock that explodes through my heart nearly sends me over the dock and into the ocean. *Max...*

He's pulled out a little plush black box from his back pocket. I stare, frozen still, as he opens it up.

The diamonds inside sparkle a thousand times brighter than the stars twinkling over the sea.

"Will you make me even happier?" Max smiles up at me.

My heart is racing like crazy. *Oh my god.*

"I just couldn't wait anymore," he chuckles, his grey-green eyes shimmering almost as brightly as the engagement ring. "Will you marry me... for real?"

"Yes!" The word comes out like an avalanche. "Yes! Yes! A thousand times yes."

Max's grin nearly falls off of his face, it's so big. He takes my trembling hand and slips the diamond ring on my finger. It's heavier than I even expected, and I laugh as I lose my balance and fall towards my kneeling lover. He quickly catches me, standing up and dipping me over for a big kiss.

His lips fall over mine and I feel complete. All the stress of my past life washes away to make room for our bright future together. Every single spot of darkness that has brought us here starts to fade from my mind, overcome by a shining light that enters me through the mouth of my one true love. His kiss fills me with hope and excitement and satisfaction.

I could care less about our pasts. In fact, I'm glad for all the fake shit that brought us together, because it all led to this. To real love. To real happiness.



To us.

## EPILOGUE

Billie

“I appreciate you taking it easy on me,” I joke, though there’s a hint of truth to my appreciation.

Anna giggles. She looks unfathomably gorgeous in her soft pink bridesmaid dress, but I can tell that she’s purposely toned herself down to keep the spotlight on me. She didn’t have to do that... but I do kind of appreciate it. The girl’s *hot*, after all. She just needed a few American meals to beef her up. “I didn’t,” she says, throwing my white veil up to get a better look at me. “I tried to look as good as you, but it’s impossible. You’re so beautiful!”

I playfully swat at her. Suddenly, our little moment is interrupted by two gleeful screeches coming from the doorway.

Jackie and Callie prance in, looking awfully hot themselves in matching bridesmaid outfits. “You look amazing!” Jackie yells, softly tugging at my long elegant frills.

“Like a princess,” Callie agrees.

The four of us all share hugs. My two high-school friends have been in town for the past week in preparation for my wedding. They’ve been introduced to Anna, and we’ve all been getting along famously. Anna’s even trying to convince people to start calling her Annie, so that she can ‘join’ our stupid little pet nickname from high-school. We told her it’s alright, she’s already in; we’re the ‘**Four-Es**’ now. But still, she’s telling Georgy her American name is to be Annie, not

Anna. It makes me laugh every time she brings it up. That girl is so goddamn sweet.

“Hey, it’s time!” Georgy’s voice comes from the doorway. The four of us all look over to him and burst out in laughter when we see how hard he’s trying not to look.

“You’re not the groom, silly!” Anna laughs. “You’re allowed to look at the bride!”

“Are you sure?” Georgy asks, seriously concerned. “I don’t want to risk any bad luck. I’m playing it safe. Come on, Anna... uh, I mean Annie. Let’s go down.” He keeps his eyes closed as he gestures for his girl to come to him. She does, after a shared sarcastic eyeroll with the girls. “See you down there!” he yells as Anna drags him away. “Good luck!”

“Thank you!” I yell back, suppressing my amused giggle. Georgy means well. Hell, we’ve come a long way since I overheard him in the palace bar all those nights ago. I can’t tell you how much he’s apologized to me since then. He’s confessed that the whole plan to offer me up to Angelo Esposito was his idea in the first place, and for a while, he wouldn’t stop berating his own idiocy.

But we’ve hung out enough by now that it’s become more of a joke than something that comes between us. We’ve even gotten to the point where Georgy’s starting to jokingly take credit for getting Max and I together in the first place. I’m sure he’ll include some sly reference to it in his toast to us tonight after the ceremony—I’ll laugh right along with everyone else, because the truth is, none of this would have been possible without his harebrained scheme.

“Damn, you know I like Annie, but how dare she take that hunk off the market,” Jackie teases when the couple has disappeared. “Are you sure Max doesn’t have any more brothers?”

I laugh. “Well, there’s always Vasily...”

Jackie seems to consider it. “Hmm. Maybe I’ll ask him for a dance tonight.”

“He *is* pretty cute,” Callie giggles.

Jackie swats at her. “You stay away, Mrs. Whitaker. Go find Jaylen. Us single ladies need to talk.”

“Billie’s not single!” she teases. “She’s just not married... yet.”

The two women check their phones at the same time. “Georgy was right. It’s time,” Jackie says, pulling my veil back down over my eyes for me. “Let’s get going.”

I follow my lifelong girlfriends down through the halls of the sprawling mansion that I now call home. Well, I’m *starting* to call it home. I’m still trying to get used to the idea that I live in such an insane place. I told Max that we should have just gotten a modest home somewhere in the city, but he wasn’t having any of it. He said we deserve some peace and quiet, after all we’ve been through. I couldn’t really argue with him there, but I’m still trying to get used to the opulence of it all.

The estate Max bought for us to start our new life in is like nothing I’ve ever even seen before. It puts his skyrise penthouse suite to shame, and it even has an edge over the mayor’s sprawling country side property. I’m not comparing, though. I’m just glad to have a roof over my head—though, I’d be just as happy out in the wild, as long as Max was by my side.

I follow Jackie and Callie outside, and we step out into the garden full of guests who all stand up at the sight of me. I instinctively blush at the attention, but once I see who’s waiting for me at the end of the aisle, all my nerves calm and my heart pulls me the rest of the way.

Max stands like my savior under a familiar-looking arbor. It’s the only thing we kept over from our ‘fake’ wedding. It’s an old family heirloom from Russia—Max’s late parents were married under the same elegant bower.

As much as I want to forget our dark and chaotic past, I appreciate what the arbor represents: family.

Max and I aren’t just walking towards a brighter future for ourselves now, we’re also creating one for our friends and family. We don’t want to hoard our love. We want to share it.

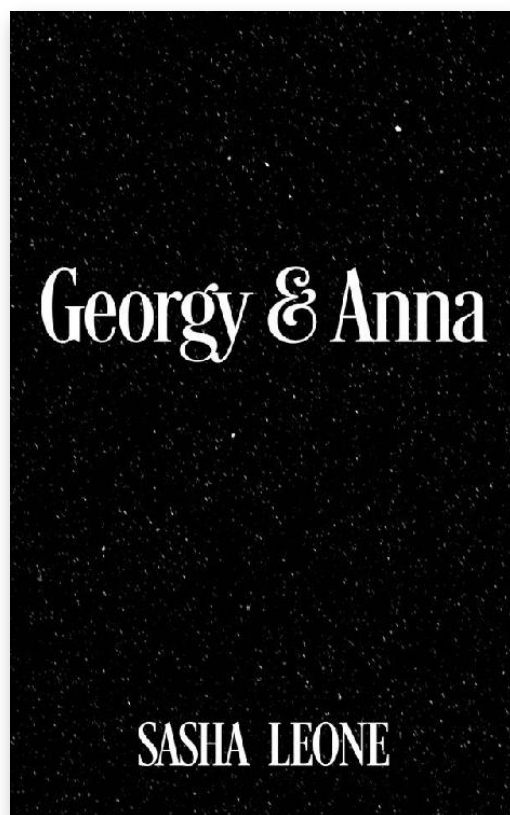
That's why we've already decided to have kids. Max wants five. I told him we'll give *one* a try first, and then we'll see how I recover from that.

Looking at him now, though, in his charcoal grey suit, standing tall and proud with a big goofy grin on his face, makes me want to give him whatever he wants. It hardly matters how many kids we end up having, because I know that spending the rest of our lives together will be all that I really need to hold onto the one thing that truly matters: happiness.

**THE END**

[Want to read all about how Georgy and Anna fall in love?](#)

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