



control me

• CORRUPTED ROYALS •

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MICHELLE HEARD

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Dedication

Don't let them steal your peace and power.

Give your enemies the middle finger and rise out of the ashes a queen.

Songlist

Click here - [Spotify](#)

Quiet – MILCK

Wild Hearts Can't Be Broken – P!nk

Slip Away – UNSECRET, Ruelle

Vendetta – UNSECRET, Krigarè

Be A Hero – Euphoria, Bolshiee

Rescue – Lauren Daigle

Easy On Me – Adele

Without You – Ursine Vulpine, Annaca

Leaves from the Vine – AtinPiano (*The Wedding Song*)

Synopsis

I wanted to be a painter. But that's just a dream because a mafia princess doesn't get to choose her future.
Still, I never let it get me down. I always try to make the best of everything.

Until I'm forced to go for brutal training, and I meet Nikolai Vetrov.
Forbidden and way too attractive, the man turns out to be my worst nightmare incarnated.

He's cold and ruthless, and I'm pretty sure there's no heart to be found in his chest, unlike mine that won't stop beating overtime at the mere sight of him.

Just because I flirted with him, he's dead set on making my life as miserable as possible.

And as if the hell I've been thrown into isn't enough, the worst thing possible happens to me. It strips me of my light and drops me into a darkness so suffocating there's no way for me to escape

There's a lot I can endure and overcome, but the trauma and Nikolai Vetrov are two things I can't handle. One of them is bound to be the end of me.

Unless a miracle happens, and let's face it, I'm well past the point of believing in miracles.

Control Me

Mafia / Organized Crime / Suspense Romance
STANDALONE in the CORRUPTED ROYALS
Book 1

Authors Note:

For first-time readers of this series:
There are scenes with Aurora and Misha that are glossed over because you can read their story in Destroy Me.

There is NO love triangle in this book, and it is NOT a reverse harem.

The relationship between Abbie and Alek is pure friendship.

This book contains subject matter that may be sensitive for some readers.

There is triggering content related to:

Extreme graphic violence

A rape scene that's handled respectfully and with care.

PTSD

18+ only

This book deals with a heavily sensitive subject that's treated with care and respect, but the character also goes through a healing journey.

Please read responsibly.

Family Tree

Nikolai Vetrov - 39



Family Business: Bratva / Blood Diamond Smugglers

Father: Damien Vetrov

Mother: Winter Hemsley

Deceased Wife – Anja Levin

Brother-In-Law – Maxim Levin

Godfather: Carson Koslov

Uncle: Demitri Vetrov

Cousin: Viktor Vetrov

Abigail Sartori - 21



Family Business: Mafia

Father: Emilio Sartori

Mother: Greta Sartori

Best friend: Aurora D'Angelo

“Trauma is a fact of life. It does not, however, have to be a life sentence. Not only can trauma be healed, but with appropriate guidance and support, it can be transformative.”

— **Peter A. Levine**

Chapter 1

Nikolai

Nikolai Vetrov; 39. Abigail Sartori; 21.

My eyes land on two women coming out of a suite, and knowing who every single person at St. Monarch's is, I immediately recognize them.

Abigail Sartori and Aurora D'Angelo. The two socialites who are starting their training tomorrow.

Unlike most of the attendees, the two women's smiles are carefree, as if they're just here to enjoy the resort and not to attend grueling training sessions.

From tomorrow I have to train the two in combat, and I get a feeling they've never thrown a punch in their lives.

I let out a sigh because the last thing I have time for are two spoiled mafia princesses who think the world revolves around them, which is the vibe I'm getting.

When I pass them in the hallway, Abigail chuckles seductively, "If all the guards look like that, my ovaries are going to explode."

She thinks I'm a guard because I'm dressed in the same combat uniform as St. Monarch's guards instead of my usual tailored suit.

Little does she know I control the blood diamond market, and I'm the firstborn of the best fighter St. Monarch's has ever seen. And to make matters worse for the little mafia princess, my cousin is the head of the bratva and her family's enemy.

Suppressing a chuckle, I shake my head.

Wait until you find out who I am, little girl.

Just then, I hear Abigail playfully call out her suite number, "Room one O' three."

I don't have the patience for this shit.

I'm only helping with the training until my godfather, Uncle Carson, can find a suitable replacement for the combat instructor position, seeing as the previous one died of a heart attack.

I now understand why Mr. Yeoh died. Training people who can't fight to

save their lives call for a fuck-ton of patience which is the last thing I have.

With me, you either sink or swim. I don't have time to coddle the spoiled royals of our world.

Stepping into my suite, I grab my phone and check the missed calls and messages as I leave the room again. There are a couple of work-related messages and emails, but I skip them and open a text from my brother-in-law and best friend, Maxim.

Maxim: What the fuck? I don't babysit pampered brats. Get someone else for the job.

Heading back toward the studio where I give combat lessons, I chuckle as I type out my reply.

Nikolai: Just this once. You're the only one who can keep her alive. Call it a favor. It will open a door for me to get into France.

Tucking the device into the pocket of my black cargo pants, I head down the staircase while I think about the protection detail Camille DuBois' father requested.

Maurice DuBois is straddling a thin line between the criminal underworld and running for Prime Minister. It's essential to keep his daughter alive because with him in my pocket France will be mine.

Maxim is the only person I trust to keep Camille alive. He's the best hitman, and he'll be able to protect her from anyone who might come after her.

He's also my oldest friend, who became my brother-in-law when I did him a favor by marrying his terminally ill sister. I might not have loved Anja, but I cared for her as a friend. She loved me, though, and it was the only wish she had – to become my wife.

It was no sacrifice on my part to make her dream come true during her last weeks. I did everything in my power to make her believe I loved her. I treated her like a queen, but Anja deserved so much more than her short life gave her.

Only Maxim and I know the truth, though. The rest of the world believes she was the love of my life.

Making Anja happy was one of the few good things I've done in my life, and it solidified an unbreakable bond between Maxim and me.

Christ, has it already been fifteen years since she passed away? Time flies.

If it weren't for Anja, I never would've been married. I'm too fucking

busy taking over the family business from my parents. My sister, Inna, married young and has two children who can carry on our family's legacy, so it's not something I'm worried about.

Honestly, I've never met a woman who piqued my interest enough to give up my bachelor's status. I enjoy being a lone wolf and don't want to change a single thing in my life.

Turning into a hallway, I notice Abigail and Aurora walking ahead of me before I enter the studio where the training takes place.

Seconds later, I'm not surprised when I hear whispering outside the door and soft footsteps coming into the room.

Turning around, I watch the two women with annoyance building in my chest. Aurora keeps a safe distance, whereas Abigail comes closer with too much curiosity in her soft brown eyes.

Christ, just what I need. Another socialite who thinks she's the one who will be able to make me bend the knee to love and marriage.

Little do they know I have zero intention of giving up my freedom for a woman.

My gaze flicks over the length of her, taking in her youthful curves and beautiful features. I'm not going to pretend I don't notice how stunning the woman is, but that's where it ends.

"Are you a guard?" she asks while giving me a seductive look that would have most men falling at her feet. Then she waves a hand over her perfect frame. "Because this body needs some guarding."

Jesus. Christ.

What the actual fuck?

Honestly, I'm partly caught off guard because she's so direct and partly dying a little from how cringeworthy this is.

"Seriously?" Aurora hisses, clearly embarrassed by her friend.

My eyes narrow on Abigail as I take a step closer until there are only a couple of inches between us. Locking eyes with her, I see the infatuation dilating her pupils.

I've dealt with this many times in my life – women taking an interest in me, but nine out of ten times, I have zero interest in reciprocating. The few who make it to my bed are only there for a couple of fucks. I'm always upfront about this.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I don't even try to hide my irritation as I mutter, "Miss Sartori, I hope you'll show the same enthusiasm in my class."

I watch as shock flutters over her face. “What class?”

The corner of my mouth lifts in a smirk as I say, “I’m Nikolai Vetrov.” Her eyes widen at hearing my name. “Your combat instructor for the next four years.”

I’m exaggerating by saying four years, but she doesn’t need to know I’m only temporarily filling the position.

A variety of emotions flit over her gorgeous features, everything from uncertainty to fear.

I take another step closer to the little girl I’ve managed to stun speechless. “I’m going to make you sweat, and trust me when I say you’ll hate every second of it.”

Abigail is still shocked out of her mind, but Aurora recovers enough to stammer, “We apologize for the intrusion.”

Aurora grabs hold of a stunned Abigail’s hand and drags her out of the room.

I’m just about to savor the moment of victory when I hear Abigail sigh, “I’m in love.”

Shaking my head, I mutter, “God help me.”

Putting aside the fact that her father is enemies with both the bratva and Italian mafia, the girl is twenty-one and too young for my liking. An eighteen-year age gap is pushing the limits for me.

I head to the back of the room, where gym equipment is spread out, and start with my warm-ups. My next class is a group of fourth-year attendees who can actually fight, which is good because it’s fun sparring with them.

While I’m jogging on the treadmill, my thoughts turn to work. There’s a meeting with prospective diamond sellers in Congo I’m worried about. I hate meeting with new sellers. Most of the time, it doesn’t end well for one of the parties.

With Inna being a mother, I wish I could make her stay at home and let me handle the dangerous meetings, but I know that won’t easily happen. My sister is just as involved in the family business as I am. With her being my second in charge, there’s no way I can keep her away from the dangers of our world.

It’s one of the reasons the mafia princesses and socialites get on my nerves. My sister is as badass as my mother, and it’s set the bar high for any romantic interests that might come into my life.

Yeah, I’ll never marry. My dream woman is just that – a dream.

Abigail Sartori's face pops into my mind. The woman has the softest brown eyes I've ever seen. It's as if every emotion she feels trembles in her irises.

And her body. *Fuck, her body.* She's not skinny but has healthy curves that will make any man's hands itch to touch.

Then there's her straightforward bravado. I have to give her credit for that. She's definitely not just sitting on the sidelines while waiting for whatever marriage her parents will arrange for her.

Slamming the stop button on the treadmill, I step off as I shake my head hard to get the unwelcome thoughts out of my mind.

Just then, the fourth-year attendees start to arrive, and I instantly notice the grim expressions on the three bratva trainees' faces.

Misha looks like he could murder someone, and Alek gives me the impression he just killed some poor fucker. Armani, the level-headed one between the three, lets out a sigh, shaking his head at his friends.

The two yakuza men and the Albanian sex trafficker enter the room. Knowing how volatile the group is, I'm relieved to see Misha and his friends didn't kill one of the yakuza soldiers.

They probably ran into the mafia princesses.

Locking eyes with the bratva enforcers, I say, "I take it you saw Sartori and D'Angelo?"

Misha nods, the expression on his face darkening.

Abigail and Aurora's fathers were responsible for a bombing two years ago when they tried to kill Misha and his friends. Since then, things have been gravely strained between the bratva and the women's fathers.

"Stay away from those women," I warn them. My cousin will lose his shit if his three men try to take out the enemy's daughters on St. Monarch's grounds. "Focus on your training."

"Yes, sir," Armani answers.

Knowing Alek is the most unpredictable one, I say, "Alek, you're with me." I pair up the rest of the men, then order, "Fight until there's a knock-out."

Chapter 2

Abbie

I spent last night at Aurora's suite because she needed comfort after the crazy first day at St. Monarch's. While she gets ready, I head back to my own suite to do the same.

I've known Aurora all my life. We attended a boarding school in Austria where we shared a room, so she's more than my best friend. She's my sister, my soulmate, the yin to my yang.

Yesterday she came face to face with Misha Petrov, who seems to be the love of her life. Yeah, color me surprised. My best friend, soul-sister, and twinsie has been in love for two years.

Twenty-four months, and I never knew!

After the volatile encounter, she spilled the beans about her feelings for the guy. It stings a little that she never told me he was her first kiss, but she's always been on the shy side, unlike me, who has no filter.

But I mean, come on. Out of all the men in the world, my friend had to fall for a bratva enforcer?

Honestly, I'm worried there might not be a happy ending for her first love.

Walking into my suite, I still have to unpack and grab the nearest bag that holds all my painting supplies. My parents like to refer to my love of painting as a 'time-wasting hobby,' but it's my passion. I wish they'd understand that.

I don't want to take over the family business, but my father doesn't want to hear anything about what I want.

Instead, he's sent me to this place – St. Monarch's, a castle that's been converted into a five-star resort and training center for elite criminals and mafia families. As long as you have enough money to afford St. Monarch's, you're welcome.

I'm looking forward to all the pampering but not the training.

At least I get to see Aurora every day.

Two years ago, we snuck out of my house to go to a nightclub. It's where she met Misha, and it was apparently love at first sight. Little did I know

there would be a bombing. My father lost his shit, and I was practically locked up for the past two years. Not because he loves me but because he doesn't want his enemies to get the upper hand by killing his only child.

Even if I don't like the idea of training to take over the family business, I'm super happy to be at St. Monarch's with Aurora. At least I don't have to watch my mother drink herself to death while my father greedily looks for any way to make money. Honestly, I'm surprised he hasn't sold me off to the highest bidder.

I'm just worried about my friend, seeing as Misha was as cold as ice toward her. Part of me wants to encourage her to go after the man she wants, but the other part wants to protect her from the potential heartache.

It's not my place to tell Aurora what to do, though. I can only give her advice and support whatever decision she makes.

Hmm...where should I set up my easel?

I glance around the luxurious suite and decide the massive floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room area would be best. During the day, it will be easy to carry everything out on the balcony, where I'll have a perfect view of the gardens.

Clearing the decanter filled with whiskey and matching crystal glasses from the glass liquor table, I arrange all my brushes and oil paints on it. I set up my easel with a blank canvas, a smile spreading over my face as excitement rushes through my chest to capture the beauty of St. Monarch's gardens on canvas.

This place is truly exquisite, the grounds looking like something from a fairytale. We didn't have much time to explore yesterday because we ran into the bratva enforcers who want us dead.

I'm well aware of the fact that our families have enemies all over the world, but I wasn't prepared for such a hostile welcome.

I'm not going to lie. Yesterday was information overload for me. The encounter with the bratva enforcers. Discovering my friend is secretly in love with one of them. Meeting Nikolai Vetrov.

Nikolai Vetrov.

Yum.

The man is six feet-something, hot as hell, and just so freaking manly he has my ovaries dancing the rumba at the mere sight of him.

Walking back to the bedroom, I pull another bag closer and unpack some of my clothes.

Nikolai Vetrov. The blood diamond king and cousin to the head of the bratva. Jesus, he's as powerful as they come.

I wonder why he's teaching combat training here when he has a massive diamond empire to run.

I hang a dress in the closet, then turn to grab my favorite leather jacket.

If I knew Nikolai Vetrov looked like that, I would've put myself in his path much sooner. The man has the broadest shoulders that look like they can carry the weight of the world without any effort.

His black hair is peppered with silver on the sides, which I'm a sucker for. I've never liked *boys* my own age and always go weak in the knees for alpha men with big-dick energy who know exactly what they want from life and stop at nothing to get it.

Nikolai Vetrov fits that description to a T. Think Johnny Depp. Ian Somerhalder. Or even better...Keanu Reeves.

To me, age is just a number.

Running out of time, I grab the black cargo pants and t-shirt I was told to wear for training and head to the ensuite bathroom.

Nikolai keeps filling my thoughts while I hurry through my morning routine. Last night we had dinner with Director Koslov, who's in charge of St. Monarch's, and I was seated next to Nikolai.

I tried flirting with the man again, but he just shut me down with icy indifference. It's a pity. I'm not looking for a once-in-a-lifetime romance. Just an earth-shattering orgasm will do. *That's not too much to ask for, right?*

I let out a chuckle as I step into the ugly as fuck boots. I'm like white on rice when it comes to the latest fashions, and this uniform is killing my vibe.

Once I'm dressed, I tie my hair in a ponytail before scowling at my reflection in the mirror. The combat uniform doesn't flatter my body.

Ugh.

Still, I'm looking forward to training because of the eye candy that's Nikolai Vetrov.

Sure, I'm worried about making a total ass of myself in front of the man, but maybe if I play up the damsel in distress act, he'll be open to giving me private lessons. The key word being 'private.'

Yeah, I'm fully aware of the fact that the man is one of my family's enemies, but I'm totally open to a steamy hate-fuck session.

Some might call me a slut, but I like to think of myself as sexually confident. The last thing I'm going to do is wait for a man to grow a set of

balls and approach me. If I see something I like, I go after it.
And I *like* Nikolai Vetrov.

Chapter 3

Nikolai

Busy with a training session for the first-year attendees, I'm annoyed as fuck when Abigail and Aurora sneak into the studio fifteen minutes late.

If it's one thing I hate, it's people who can't be bothered to be on time. I'm OCD when it comes to that shit.

I keep my attention on Caspian, Seijo, and the Almeida twins, who've been training here for the past three months.

"We're in trouble," I hear Abigail whisper, laughter dancing in her voice.

Trouble is the understatement of the fucking year.

The two women move closer and do a dismal job of taking a fighting stance.

Abigail lets out a burst of laughter, and it has my temper shooting through the roof.

With anger rippling through my muscles, I stalk to where the girls stand. Not prepared to take their shit, I snap, "First, you disrespect me by being late, then you're disruptive in class."

Aurora's eyes widen, and she has enough common sense to look apologetic. "I'm sorry."

"It was just five minutes," Abigail dares to fucking sass me. "And I wasn't aware we were not allowed to laugh."

Our eyes lock, and for a moment, I'm struck by all the emotions flashing in her soft brown irises. Amusement, desire, and a feisty attitude stare back at me.

I nod, accepting the silent dare she's blatantly throwing at my feet.

You're picking a fight with the wrong man, little girl.

The only way to make these two mafia princesses understand is the hard way. They're here to learn how to keep themselves alive, and it's time they realize it.

"It seems I first have to train you in the seriousness of combat," I say. I wave a hand at Seijo then point to Aurora. "The two of you will fight."

Abigail gives me a horrified look. "It's unfair for a man to fight a

woman.”

Not in our world.

Letting out a dark chuckle, I point at the sparring mat. “There’s no such thing as fairness in our world, Miss Sartori.” I glance between Aurora and Seijo. “Fight or leave my class.”

Seijo Shinoda is a yakuza soldier who can fight pretty well. He’s going to hurt Aurora, which is a fucking pity, but it’s the only way to get Abigail under control, or she’ll make my life a living hell with all her flirting and careless behavior.

“Why Aurora? Why not me?” Abigail asks, her beautiful features tight with the worry that’s finally starting to sink in.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” I mutter with a smirk.

I have to be cruel to be kind, and honestly, unless someone is related to me or one of the few people I call friend, I have zero compassion.

With my arms crossed over my chest, I nod at Seijo and Aurora so the fight will start.

My attention is split between the sparring mat and Abigail, so I can see her reaction because if she doesn’t learn her lesson today, she never will.

Aurora is so far out of her comfort zone, and she has no clue what to do as Seijo attacks. With a kick to the side of her head, he drops her ass to the floor.

“Stop this!” Abigail shouts, shock and panic tightening her features even more.

I ignore her and watch as Seijo keeps attacking. He gets Aurora on her back before he starts punching the shit out of her.

My muscles tighten, and I have to forcefully keep myself from ripping Seijo of Aurora. I find no joy in watching a woman get beaten.

Christ, I can’t believe D’Angelo and Sartori sent their daughters here without any prior training.

Abigail and Aurora must learn how cruel our world is, or they won’t live for long. My sister could kick a grown man’s ass at the age of ten.

I shake my head, unable to understand why the two women’s parents raised them to be so vulnerable.

“Jesus,” Abigail sobs, and when she darts forward, my arm shoots out to stop her. I grab hold of her, yanking her to my side, my grip merciless as I keep her from intervening.

Abigail tries to rip free from me, her eyes wildly flying between her

friend and me. "Please!" she begs, her face crumbling.

"Enough!" I snap at Seijo.

I point at Aurora lying on the floor in a world of pain. With rage roaring through my veins, I lock eyes with Abigail. "You did this to your friend. If you could fight, you'd be able to protect her. If she could fight, she wouldn't have had her ass handed to her. Next time you walk into my studio, you better take the lessons seriously, or one of you will be carried out on a stretcher." My tone is brutal as I bite out, "Do. You. Understand. Me?"

Abigail's skin is deathly pale, and there's none of her careless attitude as she nods, "I understand."

"This is not a playground for a socialite," I mutter as I let go of her arm. "This is where you learn the difference between staying alive to fight another day or dying."

She nods again, and with caution and horror darkening her eyes, she hurries to her friend's side.

Abigail helps Aurora to her feet before asking, "May we be excused from class?"

"Yes." I snap and glance away from the women before explaining my actions. "I knew it would hurt you more to watch Aurora being beaten. By using the person you love most, I taught you a lesson you'll never forget. Do you now understand why I didn't let you fight?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." As Abigail and Aurora leave the room, I turn my attention to the remaining four attendees and order, "Get back to the lesson!"

My uncle better find a replacement quickly before I kill someone. I'm not cut out for this shit.

Guilt tries to creep into my chest because I allowed Aurora to get beaten up, but I squash it quickly. What I did today can save the women's lives. Hopefully, they'll take their training seriously from now on.

Either they toughen up, or they won't live long enough to see their twenty-fifth birthdays when they leave the protection of St. Monarch's.

Paula manages to flip her brother on his ass, and I give her a nod of approval. "Good. Do it again."

Focusing on the woman, who's doing her best to learn combat fighting, I step closer to give her some pointers.

When the class comes to an end, I head to Uncle Carson's office. The guards see me coming and quickly open the door.

My uncle takes one look at me, then lets out a chuckle. “I’m working on it.”

“Not fast enough,” I grumble, but there’s no menace in my tone. “Sartori and D’Angelo have zero fighting skills.”

Uncle Carson stands up from behind his desk and lets out a sigh. “That’s why they’re here.”

“They’re going to hold the other four back.” I shake my head. “The women need intensive one-on-one training. Stat.”

Uncle Carson looks at me, amusement all over his face. He loves the fact that the women are annoying the fuck out of me. “Pair two of the fourth-year attendees with them so you can keep focusing on the other four.”

“Sir,” one of the guards says to get our attention. “There’s an altercation in the armory. The bratva and the yakuza.”

“Just what I fucking need,” I mutter as I stalk to the door. Leaving the office, I call out, “Get the replacement before I kill all the attendees.”

Chapter 4

Abbie

After cleaning up Aurora's face and spending the entire afternoon groveling because I put her in a position where she got hurt, I return to my own suite to deal with the emotions raging in my chest.

Grabbing my phone from where it was lying next to the bed, I dial my father's number.

"Yes, Abbie," he answers impatiently.

I'm used to his abrupt tone that rolls off me like water off a duck's back.

"Aurora got beaten up badly today," I inform him, my voice tight from the anger. "They just threw us in the deep end with training. It's insane!"

I hear my father let out a deep breath, then he mutters, "That's why you're at St. Monarch's. You can't protect yourself and know nothing about the mafia. It's time you learn."

Goosebumps spread over my body. "Did you know?"

"What?"

"That the training would be violent." I fist my free hand at my side as I walk to the massive windows and stare at the garden below as darkness starts to fall. "Did you know we'd be put in positions where we'd get hurt?"

I hear a chair creak, and it sounds like he's standing up. "It's time for you to grow up. You have to train hard, Abbie. I can't have a weakling take over the business. Don't let me down."

I close my eyes and nod. Unable to say another word to my father, I lower the device from my ear and end the call.

He knew. He sent me here with no training or warning about how brutal everything would be.

I'm not surprised, though.

Still, it hurts.

Opening my eyes, I lift my chin while sucking in a deep breath of air.

Even though I grew up living the life of a princess, I knew my father was a criminal and that everything I was given was bought with bloodstained money.

But I never thought I'd have to get involved in the business. At worst, I expected to be pawned off in an arranged marriage. That's until my father told me he expected me to take over the business, which was the end of the discussion.

But fighting...actual hand-to-hand combat against men? How am I supposed to do that? Throwing punches? Kicking?

Jesus.

I turn away from the window and glance around the luxurious suite that's bathed in fine art and modern furniture.

This is not the vacation I thought Aurora and I would enjoy.

Our parents sent us into the heart of the enemy with no protection. The only thing we have counting in our favor is that there's no killing allowed on St. Monarch's grounds.

I nod as the realization hits.

Aurora and I are on our own here. We have to learn how to protect ourselves. We have no choice.

Instead of taking a bath and drowning my sorrows in comfort food, I walk to the door and yank it open. The sound of it slamming shut behind me echoes down the hallway as I head toward the grand staircase.

With every step, my anger doubles. My father threw me to the wolves, Nikolai sees me as a spoiled socialite, and the bratva is breathing down our necks.

In front of me is the dining hall, where most of the guests are enjoying dinner. Not in the mood to eat, I turn right into another hallway and head toward the armory.

Fine. If I'm thrown into the bowels of the criminal world, I'm going to learn everything as fast as I can.

I'll become so freaking badass that I can beat any of the men here.

I'm going to show Nikolai Vetrov he messed with the wrong girl.

Stalking into the armory, I head straight for the display case of weapons. I look at the wide variety of guns, and for a moment, I feel lost because I don't know which one to pick.

"Have you booked a training session?" a man asks. I'd guess him to be in his late fifties, and he has a professional air around him as if he's selling tailored suits instead of teaching people how to kill.

I shake my head. "I didn't have time. I only arrived yesterday."

"I'm Instructor Grigory," he introduces himself.

“Abbie Sartori.” I point at a gun that doesn’t look too heavy. “Can I use the shooting range?”

“I expect you to make an appointment for private lessons.”

My eyes snap to his and lifting my chin, I say, “I’m not asking for a lesson. Just give me a loaded gun, and I’ll figure it out myself.”

“Give Miss Sartori a Heckler and Koch, Grigory,” Nikolai’s voice suddenly sounds up behind me.

Not thinking, I quickly move to the side, so my back isn’t to him. The moment our eyes lock, the anger in my chest flares to inferno level.

Bastard.

Because of him, it looks like Aurora ran face-first into a brick wall.

Instructor Grigory removes a gun from the display case and puts a full clip into it. When he holds the weapon out to me, I almost hesitate. I take it from him, surprised by how heavy it is.

Ignoring Nikolai, I walk to where the shooting range is, and moving down the lane where the stalls are, I glance at the targets.

Shit, they’re far.

I pick a stall in the middle and glance down at the counter that’s nothing more than a slab of steel with two buttons. A set of earmuffs hangs on a hook against the side panel.

I feel Nikolai before I hear his soft footsteps and glare over my shoulder. “Can I help you, Mr. Vetrov?”

He crosses his arms over his chest and shrugs. “No.”

Our eyes lock for a second, but his dark brown ones are too intense to look into for long, so I let out a huff as I turn my attention back to the weapon in my hand.

How the hell does this thing work?

Raising my arms, I hold the gun like I’ve seen my bodyguards do, but nothing happens when I pull the trigger.

“Take the safety off,” Nikolai mutters, amusement lacing his words.

The asshole is loving this.

Clenching my jaw, I inspect the gun, and finding a tiny latch, I flick it to the side. I point the barrel at the target, and this time when I pull the trigger, the bang is so loud I let out a startled shriek. The weapon jerks hard in my hands, and I drop it on the steel counter as I stagger a step back.

Jesus. This is harder than it looks.

A muscled arm reaches past me to take hold of the earmuffs, and for a

moment, Nikolai's solid chest presses against my back. My stomach freefalls before it soars to the highest heavens from the close proximity.

My head turns fast, and as Nikolai pulls back, our eyes meet. There's a smirk curving his lips, then the earmuffs are shoved against my chest.

"Put them on," he instructs with a tone that tells me he's used to handing out orders and never hearing the word 'no.'

I take the earmuffs from him, and pulling them over my ears, I step forward and pick up the gun again.

This time I know to expect the recoil, and when I pull the trigger, I clench my jaw so I don't shriek like a banshee.

I swear the man is testing my last nerve because he pulls the one earmuff away and says, "The goal is to hit the target."

You can't kill a Vetrov, and certainly not on St Monarch's grounds.

But there is another way I can retaliate.

Setting the gun down on the counter, I take the earmuffs off. When I turn around, I smile my most seductive smile. I lift a hand, and trailing my finger down his chest, I say, "It's clear I have no idea how to handle a gun, but I'm a master at handling *weapons*." There's so much innuendo in my voice he has to understand what I'm referring to.

Right before I reach his belt, Nikolai's hand slaps over mine. His touch is biting as he pulls my finger away before he lets go with a shove.

He lowers his head until I can feel the danger emanating from him, then he growls, "Careful, little girl."

Little girl, my left tit.

I take a step forward, and lifting my chin higher, I look him dead in the eyes as I say, "I have daddy issues. You calling me little girl only makes me want to call you *daddy*." I lift onto my tiptoes and let my breath fan over his jaw before I whisper, "Preferably while you're fucking me."

Slam. Dunk.

I swear his nostrils flare, and the color of his eyes threatens to turn pitch black.

Nikolai stares at me for a solid minute, and I'm not sure whether he's thinking about fucking me or considering all the ways he could kill me.

Needing to win at least one fight after he handed my ass to me this morning, I pat his chest. "Good talk." Moving around him, I walk away with every muscle in my body on guard. I wouldn't put it past the man to attack me, and I know it's stupid to push his buttons, but I can't help it.

After all, a woman has to use whatever weapon she has in her arsenal,
and seduction is mine.

Chapter 5

Nikolai

Daddy.

Jesus Christ.

The altercation with Abigail robbed me of a night's sleep. I've never been that turned on in my entire life, and no woman on the face of this planet has ever annoyed me as much as Abigail Sartori.

Her seductive taunting had me jerking off four times, but none of the orgasms satisfied me.

Stalking into my uncle's office like a bear with a sore tooth, I slump down in his chair and try to lose myself in work.

I check all the shipments are scheduled to arrive on time and the diamonds that are ready to be sold have all been authenticated by a high-end jeweler who's deep in my pocket.

When I'm done taking care of my own business, I turn my attention to St. Monarch's contracts.

There's a new request for an open contract to assassinate some fucker in Guatemala. I send the request out to every assassin registered with St. Monarch's before checking the currently active contracts.

My cousin has open contracts on the D'Angelo and Sartori families, which means anyone with a gun is looking to cash in by killing Aurora or Abigail.

It fucking sucks that the daughters have to pay for their fathers' crimes, but that's how our world works.

Just then, an encrypted message comes through on the system.

Contract 010603: Terminated.

I check the account holder and first verify the proof of death before I authorize the payment to be made to the assassin's banking account.

"How are things in here?" Uncle Carson asks as he comes into his office.

"Renaldo Vero has been eliminated. I've verified the kill and authorized the payment." Getting up from the chair, I add, "There's a new contract. I've sent it out already."

“Thanks, son.”

Uncle Carson and Aunt Hailey never had children of their own. I’ve always been close with them, and they treat me like I’m their blood.

Meeting my beloved uncle’s eyes, I say, “I’m going home this coming weekend.”

He lets out a chuckle, and placing his hand on my shoulder, he mutters, “As long as you’re back by Monday morning.”

“You really have to find another instructor. I can’t do this indefinitely.”

Another chuckle escapes him as he walks to his desk. “I’ll have a replacement in the next two months.”

I nod, and when I start to walk toward the door, he adds, “Misha Petrov will assist you during training. Let him handle Aurora D’Angelo.”

My eyebrow raises as I glance at my uncle. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

He nods, then a grin tugs at the corner of his mouth. “I have a feeling there’s something between Misha and Aurora, and that’s why he attacked the yakuza yesterday. I’d like to test the theory.”

“Yeah, he beat the shit out of Seijo.” Nodding, I ask, “And Abigail? What do we do about her?”

My uncle’s grin turns into a full-blown smirk. “Surely you can handle her?”

Fuck. Uncle Carson always has one eye on all the live security camera feeds. Did he see Abigail flirting with me last night?

“The odds are good that I’ll strangle the girl,” I mutter.

A burst of laughter escapes him. “As long as you don’t kill her on St. Monarch’s grounds.”

Christ, help me.

He locks eyes with me, then his expression turns serious. “When are you going to settle down?”

“Not you, too. My mother nags me enough about the matter,” I mutter while shaking my head. “I’m happy alone. I don’t need a woman to fuck up my life.”

“As long as you’re happy, son,” he says, the fatherly love he feels for me showing on his face.

“I am,” I assure him before I walk out of the office.

I hate that people think you must be in a relationship to be happy. Having another person in my space twenty-four-seven will drive me insane. I have my family, friends, and a successful diamond empire. There’s nothing

lacking in my life.

Heading toward the studio, my phone buzzes. When I check the device, I see a text from Maxim and quickly open it.

Maxim: Fine. I'll babysit the girl.

Nikolai: I owe you. I'm going home this coming weekend. Join me so we can catch up and discuss the contract.

Maxim: I'll be there Saturday morning.

Stepping into the room, I see the Almeida twins and Caspian are already warming up. Abigail and Aurora are standing to the side with unsure expressions on their faces.

Misha joins us a couple of seconds later, an apprehensive look in his eyes.

Getting to work, I say, "Mr. Shinoda won't be joining us for a couple of days." I lock eyes with Misha. "*Someone* beat the shit out of him, so he's indisposed."

Gesturing at Aurora, I mutter, "Miss D'Angelo, you're paired with Mr. Petrov. Miss Almeida, you're with Mr. Almeida. Just keep practicing what you've already been taught. Miss Sartori, you're with me."

"Ah, sir?" Aurora looks like she's about to puke.

"Yes, Miss D'Angelo." I lock eyes with her and notice fear flitting over her face.

Nervously she rambles, "I'm not questioning you. I just want to know why I have to fight Mr. Petrov. He's had two years of training, whereas I've had...none."

Forcing myself to be patient with the girl, I answer, "That's why he's paired with you. Mr. Petrov is the best in his class. You and Miss Sartori need to be on par with the other attendees before we can proceed with the lessons, or you'll both end up bloody and half-dead every day."

Aurora accepts her fate and follows Misha to the back of the studio, where exercise equipment and weights are set up.

"Should I continue with training?" Caspian asks me.

I nod. "You and Paula can swap places in thirty minutes so you can spar with Duarte." With all the attendees taken care of, I turn my attention to Abigail.

The corner of her mouth starts to lift in a seductive smirk that has my blood growing hotter.

Time to teach her another lesson.

Not saying a word, I walk to an open sparring mat, and when I turn

around, I watch with annoyance as Abigail saunters closer as if she has all the time in the world.

Sucking in a deep breath, I let it out slowly. The moment she steps onto the mat, I dart forward. I duck, and my right shoulder slams into her stomach while I grab hold of her arm. In a matter of a second, I flip her over and she falls onto her back with a startled shriek.

I circle her, a bored expression on my face. “Your lack of training is pathetic.”

Abigail scowls at me as she climbs to her feet. “You can take that up with my father.” Her eyes flash with a mixture of anger and desire. “Hence the *daddy* issues.”

Christ, here we go again.

Her body is tense, and she’s on guard while she watches me like a hawk. “By the way, I prefer spankings to being tossed around.”

Lunging at her, I swipe her feet from under her, and the instant her ass hits the floor, I straddle her hips. Grabbing hold of her wrists, I force her arms above her head and lock them to the mat with one of my hands.

Abigail lets out a breathless chuckle. “Much better.” Her eyes dance with a daring light. “You look good on top of me.”

“Christ!” I mutter as my anger spirals out of control. Leaning down until we’re face to face, I fucking hope to God this woman sees I’m dead serious as I growl, “In my eyes, you’re a fucking child.”

Yeah, that’s not what my hand and dick thought last night while I climaxed at the memory of her seductive face and taunting words.

Shoving the thought away, I say, “I wouldn’t fuck you if my life depended on it.”

Pushing away from the woman, I climb to my feet and bark, “Up!”

Just as she gets up, I swipe her feet from beneath her again, then order, “Up!”

I keep dropping her ass to the floor, and only when rage burns in her eyes do I pin her to the mat again, sneering, “You’re fucking weak.”

Her body strains beneath mine, the friction of her soft curves taunting every hard inch of me.

“No, you’re just an asshole,” she snaps at me. Her stubborn gaze locks with mine, and she pushes against me again. “Stop trying to show me how good you are and teach me how to protect myself.”

The corner of my mouth curves up. “Free yourself from this position, and

I'll consider it."

Abigail struggles for a couple of minutes before crying angrily, "Jesus!"

I let out a dark chuckle before capturing her eyes. "You're such an easy fucking target. With the hit out on your family, you won't last long."

"Fuck you," she growls. When her body bucks up again, I climb off of her.

The second she's on her feet, I step closer to her. Abigail lifts her chin, pure rage burning in her eyes while she rubs her wrists. The grip I had on her left red marks.

"Do you know what happens to a mafia princess if she's captured?" The scowl on her face darkens as I hiss, "You'll be passed from soldier to soldier, and only once being raped becomes a way of life to you, and they've killed your will to live, will they end your miserable existence." I close the distance between us until I can feel her angry breaths on my jaw. "The bratva has many soldiers. You'll be lucky if you see the same face twice. Can you handle that kind of wear and tear, little girl? Do you think you'll be able to flirt your way out of the certain torture that awaits you?"

I can see how every word from my mouth delivers a blow to Abigail until she stares at me with a horror-struck expression. Still, she fights back by grinding the words through a clenched jaw, "Then do your fucking job and teach me how to protect myself instead of being a dickhead."

I take a step back and stare at the feisty woman in front of me. "The flirting and sass stop. You'll do everything I tell you. One wrong move, and you're on your own. Got it?"

Her eyes narrow on me as she mutters, "Yes, sir."

We stare at each other for a while longer, then I shake my head and walk away to check on the other attendees. "On the treadmill, Abigail. Full sprint. Pretend you're running from the bratva."

"I'll freaking pretend I'm running from you," she mutters under her breath as she walks to the back of the room.

Chapter 6

Abbie

The past five days have been nothing but pure torture. In every class, I get my ass handed to me. If it's not by Nikolai in combat training, it's by the bratva in kidnapping prevention. The bastards left me tied to a chair, and if it weren't for Aurora coming to free me, I would've wet myself.

The only thing that seems to be working in my favor is the shooting lessons. I can now hit the target, which I picture is Nikolai Vetrov.

Do I still flirt with him? *Hell yes.*

Does it still piss him off? *Much to my joy, yes.*

All the flirting comes at a price, though. Every day the training gets more brutal to the point where my body constantly aches from all the exercise.

Instead of a filthy fantasy come true, the forbidden and way too attractive blood diamond king has turned out to be my worst nightmare incarnated in the combat class. He's cold and ruthless, and no amount of flirting will make him give in and fuck me.

I'm pretty sure there's no heart to be found in his chest, unlike mine that won't stop beating overtime at the mere sight of him.

It sucks, and I'm growing bored of the stupid game I started.

Sitting in Aurora's suite while I wait for her to come back from wherever she went, my thoughts keep hopping from the soul-sucking training to Nikolai.

It's weird. Usually, I wouldn't bother with a man who doesn't show me any interest, but with Nikolai, it's like catnip to me. The more I piss him off, the more my desire for him grows. I swear I'm horny twenty-four-seven because of the man.

Maybe it's because I can't have him. The heart always wants what it can't get. Right?

The door opens, and I hear Misha bark, "Aurora, what the fuck happened?"

I dart to my feet, and as I take a step, my friend sneers, "Go laugh with your friends about how you got to fuck Aurora D'Angelo. It will always be

the biggest accomplishment of your pathetic life.”

What. The. Hell?

My eyebrows fly up, and I process the information at the speed of light. Aurora slept with Misha?

When? What the hell did I miss? Last I heard, they were still enemies, and Aurora was doing her best to get over him.

Aurora hurries into the suite and slams the door shut. When she turns around and locks eyes with me, I ask, “What did you just say?”

“Ugh,” she mutters as she kicks off her sneakers. Walking to me, she wraps her arms around me. “Just hold me. You can judge me later.”

Hugging my friend, I can’t keep myself from asking, “Did you sleep with Misha? When?”

“Yes,” she groans. “Today.”

My eyebrows fly up again. “While I was tied up?”

She nods. “I’m sorry.”

Yeah, I don’t know how to feel about this. “For sleeping with Misha or leaving me tied to a chair with a full bladder?”

“Both.” Her voice is thick with tears, making me hold her tighter.

Someone bangs hard on the door, and knowing who it is, I pull away from Aurora and say, “Stay here. I’ll deal with the fucker.”

Yanking the door open, I glare at Misha. “Fuck off, Petrov.”

Just as I go to close the door, his hand slams against it, and he shoves me out of the way. I stagger back as the bastard storms into the room and demands, “I deserve to know what happened.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know,” I snap at him.

Misha gives me a look of warning. “If you want to live to see another day, you’ll shut up.”

I’m about to go to town on the asshole when Aurora darts between us. She gives me a determined look. “I’ll deal with him. Give us a minute.”

Glaring at Misha, I mutter, “I’ll be in the bedroom. Yell if you need help kicking his ass.”

Walking to the other room, I shut the door before pressing my ear against the wood so I can hear everything they say. Of course, it’s so I can run out and help Aurora if things get out of control between her and Misha.

They argue, but it quickly changes, and when I hear how they feel about each other, I get all caught up in my feels because my friend loves a man she can’t have.

It's freaking sad, and I can't help but shed tears on her behalf.

When they're saying their goodbyes, I move to the bed and slump down on the mattress.

Damn, things really suck right now.

A moment later, Aurora opens the bedroom door.

"My God," I sniffle. "That was so romantic and sad. It makes Romeo and Juliet's story look like a walk in the park."

"Yeah." Aurora slumps down beside me. "Do you think my dad—"

"He'll kill both of you." I shake my head hard because there's no way her father will allow her to be with Misha. "He hates the bratva."

She lets out a hopeless sigh. "You're right."

"I need comfort food after today. It's been rough." Standing up, I look at Aurora. "Let's order something and go to the waterfall."

We haven't had much time together, but whenever we could, we explored St. Monarch's gardens. We found a beautiful waterfall at the back of the property I plan on painting once I'm no longer in a world of pain from all the exercise.

"I just want to change into something warmer." Aurora quickly grabs a jacket, then says, "Let's go."

When she opens the front door, she asks, "What are you in the mood for?"

I step into the hallway and catch myself in time from bumping into Nikolai.

His eyes snap to my face, and the next second I'm grabbed by the shoulder while concern tightens his features.

Oh, this is new.

His voice cuts through the air as he demands, "Why did you cry?"

I stare at him for a couple of seconds as the realization hits that the great Nikolai Vetrov is actually worried about me. Not able to stop myself from smiling, I answer, "I watched a sad story." There's a moment's pause before I add, "Nice to know you care."

As if touching me burns him, Nikolai rips his hand away from my shoulder, and with a shake of his head, he stalks toward his suite.

Grinning from ear to ear, I look at Aurora. "Am I wrong? He cares, right?"

She shuts the door to her suite and lets out a sigh. "One sad story at a time. There's no way your father will let you date Nikolai."

True. But my father doesn't have to know.

Yeah, keep dreaming. Your father will kill you himself before he allows you to be in a relationship with a Vetrov.

Besides, just because Nikolai showed a glimmer of concern doesn't mean shit.

“Ugh,” I huff as we walk toward the stairs. “For that man’s abs, I’ll leave my family.”

Aurora gives me a shocked look. “Really?”

I chuckle at her reaction. “Not really, but let me have my fantasy.”

Yeah, that's all it will ever be. Just a far-fetched fantasy.

Refusing to let my problems get me down, I focus on the glorious weekend of rest and zero training I get to enjoy for the next two days.

Chapter 7

Nikolai

After flying to my family's island off the coast of Finland, I walk toward my parents' house to greet them.

The island is protected with state-of-the-art security, and the four houses are surrounded by woods. Besides my parents and grandparents, Inna, her husband, and their children also live here. My house is right on the edge of the woods and the farthest from the main house.

Whoever tries to attack the island is on a suicide mission. The perimeters have never been breached.

I only make it to the steps before I hear Grandma yell, "Winter, Nikolai is home!"

A smile spreads over my face, and stepping through the front door, it's to see my mother come flying down the stairs.

Happiness shines from her as she captures me in a hug. "Ahh, my baby. I've missed you."

I press a kiss to her flaming red hair. "I missed you too."

Christ, I've traveled the world, but there's no place like home. It's the only place I can let my guard down.

"Is Nikolai here?" my father calls from upstairs.

"Yes, get your ass down here," Mom shouts. Her eyes flit over every inch of my body before she smiles up at me. "Are you only here for the weekend?"

I nod and glance at the stairs as my father comes down them. Even though my mother is Irish with fair skin, red hair, and green eyes, I'm the spitting image of my father. Inna got Mom's eyes.

I take my father's hand, and as we shake, I give him a hug. "St. Monarch's will drive me insane. I needed some time with my family," I say before Grandma comes out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron.

I hug the woman who helped raise me, then ask, "Where's Grandpa?"

"He's doing his rounds with the guards," Grandma answers.

I let out a chuckle. "He'll never stop working."

“You’re in time for dinner,” Mom says as she hooks her arm through mine.

Even though my parents are ruthless criminals, I’ve never known a day where my sister and I weren’t unconditionally loved.

I hit the jackpot with my family.

“How are things at St. Monarch’s?” Dad asks. “Whenever I call Carson, he’s busy with something.”

I let out a sigh as I shake my head. “With Sartori and D’Angelo sending their daughters for training, it’s stirred things up. The three bratva enforcers are constantly fighting with the yakuza trainees. I’m so fucking glad I never had children.”

Mom lets out a burst of laughter. “You’ll sing a different song once you’re holding your firstborn in your arms.”

She still has hope that I’ll marry and have kids. Avoiding the subject, I say, “Uncle Carson says he’ll find a replacement in the next two months. Then I’ll be able to focus on the business.”

We all take a seat at the dining table, and not long after, Grandpa comes into the dining room.

A wide smile curves his lips. “The lost son has returned.”

“Lost my ass,” I mutter playfully as I rise to my feet to hug the man who might not be blood-related but is like a grandfather to me.

Cillian and Dana practically raised my mother, and I grew up thinking of them as my grandparents.

Grandma brings the food to the table, and after we’ve all helped ourselves, Dad asks, “Have you spoken to the new dealer in Congo?”

“Yes.” I wipe the corners of my mouth. “There’s a meeting set for two months from now.”

Dad’s eyes narrow on me. “But?”

I shrug. “My gut tells me there’s something off about the deal. Tshimaga is too forthcoming for my liking.”

Dad nods before he says, “Then we’ll all go. If anything goes wrong, the rebels won’t know what hit them.”

“Yes,” Mom agrees as she gives Dad’s hand a squeeze. “They won’t stand a chance against all of us.”

We eat in silence for a moment before Dad asks, “Are you at least enjoying being an instructor at St. Monarch’s?”

Not hesitating, I shake my head. “I don’t have the patience for it. The

attendees are driving me insane. The only reason I'm doing it is for Uncle Carson."

"Oh no," Mom coos. "It's a shame."

Dad frowns at me. "How are the attendees driving you insane?"

I cut through the steak on my plate. "Abigail and Aurora have zero fighting experience." I glance at my parents. "They weren't raised the same as Inna and me. It's pathetic."

"Oh." Mom tilts her head, her eyes locking on my face. "Why does it bother you?"

I shrug. "I just hate training them. It's tedious." A smile curves my lips as I say, "Luckily, I'll be done with them in two months, and they'll be someone else's problem."

After dinner, I enjoy a tumbler of whiskey with Dad, and as if Mom's nagging isn't enough, he asks, "Still no woman out there that's caught your eye?"

Abigail's face flashes through my mind, and frowning at the unwelcome thought, I shake my head. "I'm happy with my bachelor status."

Dad nods, his eyes searching mine. "There's something bothering you. Out with it."

I shrug as I set the empty tumbler down on the side table. "I'm just worried about the deal with Tshimaga."

"No, it's something else," Dad argues, his eyes sharpening even more on me.

Knowing he'll keep pushing until I give in, I admit, "Abigail Sartori annoys the living fuck out of me. Half the time, I'm tempted to carry out the hit on her life myself."

Dad's eyebrows fly into his hairline. "Is that so?"

I immediately shake my head. "Hell to the fuck no." A smile starts to curve his lips which has me muttering, "The woman is nothing more than a thorn in my side."

Dad nods, but I can see he doesn't believe me.

"She's the enemy," I remind him.

"So was your mother." He waves a hand at the doorway. "And look where we are now."

Like a fucking idiot, I blink at my father. "There's no way. The girl is eighteen years younger than me. I don't rob cradles."

Dad lifts the tumbler to his lips and takes a sip before saying, "As long as

both parties are consenting adults, age doesn't matter."

"Did you hear the part where I said she annoys the fuck out of me?" I ask, quickly growing impatient with the subject we're discussing.

"I heard it." Dad lets out a chuckle. "Loud and clear."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Still, you don't believe me."

Slowly he shakes his head. "You can't bullshit a bullshitter. First, they crawl beneath your skin, and before you know it, your entire fucking world revolves around them."

Taking my dad's tumbler from him, I down the rest of his drink. "There's no way on this godforsaken planet that my world will ever revolve around Abigail Sartori."

Dad nods, and when he pours whiskey into the empty glass, I say, "I'm going to head to bed. Maxim is coming tomorrow." As he takes a sip, I add, "Don't tell Mom about any of this. I'll never hear the end of it."

Dad's chuckle follows me out of the sitting room. Walking out of the main house, I head in the direction of mine.

The late evening air is cold, especially with the breeze coming from the lake around the island. A chill creeps up my spine, and it has nothing to do with the chill in the air.

This afternoon I almost lost my shit when I saw Abigail had been crying. I was ready to rip someone's throat out.

I was so fucking caught off guard by the intense protectiveness I felt toward the insufferable woman I couldn't even tell her to go to hell when she taunted me.

I don't fucking care about her.

Then why the fuck did I react so strongly to a couple of tears?

And the questions from Dad?

Am I missing something?

I open my front door and don't even bother turning on the lights as I walk to my bedroom.

Yes, Abigail is beautiful, and sometimes her sass is amusing, but that's where it ends.

You've jerked off more than you care to admit since she set foot in St. Monarch's.

Fine, I admit there's some kind of attraction, and her flirting with me every chance she gets doesn't help, but I don't plan on acting on it. The woman is fucking sexy, and any man with eyes in his head would find her

desirable.

Stripping out of my clothes, I walk into the ensuite bathroom and turn on the faucets for the shower. I don't wait for the water to warm before stepping beneath the spray, letting the drops hit my face.

Abigail Sartori is just a little girl who's looking for entertainment while she's at St. Monarch's.

Daddy.

I hear her purr the word, and before I can banish the memory, I grow rock hard.

Never in my life did I think it would be a turn-on hearing a sexy woman call me Daddy.

Not just any woman. It's the way Abigail says it. Her voice is always filled with promises of filthy sex and intense orgasms.

Fuck, she's not just under my skin but running wild in my head.

Grabbing the body wash, I squirt some into my hand and begin to clean myself.

When my fingers close around my erection, memories of Abigail's body straining beneath mine bombard me. I hear her voice as if she's whispering in my ear, and before I know it, I'm shooting my load in the shower.

Christ. This has to stop.

Chapter 8

Abbie

A lot has happened in a short amount of time. I'm still trying to wrap my mind around it.

Aurora and Misha are a thing. Like an actual couple.

With Misha belonging to the bratva and Aurora's father still their enemy, I don't see how this will work.

Walking to the dining hall with my friend, I bite my bottom lip to keep the words in. She's so freaking happy, and the last thing I want to do is pop her bubble.

We're having dinner with Misha and his friends, which means I have to sit at a table with three bratva enforcers who probably won't hesitate to kill me once we set foot off St. Monarch's grounds.

Yay me.

When we reach the table, my eyes skim over the three men. They're all attractive in their own way, and I'm sure girls fall over their feet to spend a night with them.

Just not this girl. My spine is stiff as Alek, the insane one, reaches for the chair next to his, yanking it back while muttering, "Sit your ass down, woman. I'm starving."

You're doing this for Aurora.

"Be still my beating heart," I mutter as I slump down in the chair. I watch as Misha kisses Aurora on the forehead, and the moment is so sweet I briefly forget about the lunatic next to me.

I pick up a menu, and while scanning over the selection of food, I wave a server closer.

"What would you like to order, Madam?" the server asks.

I tap my pointer finger on my bottom lip as I say, "I want calamari with lemon butter, the fifty-hour-cooked beef short rib, and thhhhe..."

"*Iisus Khristos,*" Alek mutters next to me. "Just bring her the whole fucking menu."

Shooting the jerk a scowl, I say, "Shut up." I turn my attention back to the

server and smile at him. “And I’ll have a serving of fries.” Just as the server looks at Alek, I add, “Oh, and a Sprite Zero, please.”

“Seriously?” Alek stares at me. “Diet soda won’t help shit when you eat so much.”

Excuse me?

My temper flares sky-high as I glare at the man who clearly has a death wish. “Are you calling me fat?”

His eyes drift over me, then the corner of his mouth lifts in a dark smirk. “No.”

Yeah, that’s what I thought.

“I like Sprite Zero,” I explain, then look at Aurora. “What are you having?”

“Your leftovers,” she chuckles.

Everyone places their orders, then Aurora and Misha forget about the world around them and start whispering to each other.

They look good together.

It takes a while before they notice Alek, Armani, and me staring at them.

Searching for a safe topic of conversation, I say, “Aurora and I are going to the nearby town on Saturday.”

“You’re what?” Misha asks, giving me an incredulous look.

Okay, maybe that wasn’t a safe topic. My bad.

Aurora smiles at Misha. “Oh yes, I forgot to tell you. We’re going shopping.”

Alek raises his eyebrows and chuckles. “And I’m told to behave when you’re about to lose your shit.”

“Why?” Aurora’s eyes dart to Misha’s face. “The hits have been canceled.”

They have?

I glance between Misha and Aurora, wondering whether the hits were canceled because he’s dating her.

I didn’t know Misha had that kind of power in the bratva.

But damn, yayyy.

It will be awesome to move around without worrying someone will blow your brains out.

Armani decides to join the conversation by saying, “That doesn’t mean it’s safe for you to leave the grounds.”

If the hits are canceled, there’s really no reason why we can’t leave St.

Monarch's for a couple of hours. I glance around the table as I say, "Yes, but no one besides the three of you will know about our little escape act."

Misha takes a deep breath, then says, "The three of us will go with you."

Ugh. I was hoping to have Aurora to myself. I hardly get to spend time with her since she started hooking up with Misha.

"The fuck?" Alek asks, looking stunned out of his mind.

Armani groans, and rolling his eyes, he mutters, "I don't do shopping trips with socialites."

For once, I totally agree with them and add my two cents. "Yeah, I'm not so sure about that."

Misha locks eyes with Aurora. "Either we go with, or you're not setting foot off the grounds."

Aurora turns her attention to me. "It's okay, Abbie. They can carry all the bags."

Ha. I'd love to see Alek carry the bags. Grinning, I agree, "Oh, right, I didn't think about that."

"The fuck?" Alek repeats, not looking happy at all.

Poking the beast, I pat Alek's thigh. "It's okay, crazy man. It will give you some training for when you find a woman insane enough to date you."

Alek looks at my hand as if it's a lump of shit before his eyes flick to my face. "Remove it if you want to keep it."

I pull my hand away, and grabbing a napkin from the table, I pretend to wipe my palm while giving Alek a disgusted look.

Ugh, I'm so over this dinner.

Aurora doesn't notice the tense moment between Alek and me, and says, "Before I forget, we won't be here the weekend of the sixteenth. It's my mom's birthday."

"Where will you be?" Misha asks. "For how long?"

Aww, he's already a protective caveman when it comes to Aurora.

"At the Sartori vacation home here in Switzerland. It will just be for the Saturday and Sunday."

"Then you're coming back?" He asks, his expression telling me he wants to lock Aurora in his suite.

I think I'd freaking swoon if Nikolai had to be like that with me. My ovaries won't survive it.

I glance over my shoulder, and seeing the man who's got my panties in a twist, I lose track of the conversation until Alek says, "About this Saturday,

I'm not carrying anyone's bags."

"Such a gentleman," I mutter absentmindedly. "You'll make me swoon if you carry on like that."

When I look at Alek, his expression is almost lifeless. A sense of fear ripples down my spine.

"Just in case there's a misunderstanding, I don't give a fuck about you. I'm going for Misha."

As the server arrives with some of the food, Armani stands up and gestures for Alek to switch seats with him.

Thank God for small mercies. I might not trust Armani as far as I can throw him, but at least he doesn't look as unhinged as Alek.

When the server sets my plate of calamari down in front of me, Armani steals a piece.

Trying to be civil with at least one of Misha's friends, I smile at Armani. "Help yourself."

I don't know what happens, but the next second, Aurora whispers, "Armani's not her type. Relax."

Laughter explodes from me as I shake my head. "Yeah, he's a little too young for me."

Alek leans forward to glance at me. "Armani's older than you, woman."

Jesus, help me with this man.

"First, stop calling me *woman*. I have a name. Second, he's too young by at least ten years," I snap at Alek. To bring my point across, I gesture to where Nikolai is sitting. "That's the kind of man I'm interested in."

Misha glances at me. "I thought you hated him."

"Nah, it's a love-hate relationship." I pop a piece of calamari into my mouth and eat, even though I'd much rather be anywhere else than at this table.

"Does Nikolai know he's in a relationship with you?" Alek asks, his tone biting.

Asshole. Seriously, the guy is giving me the creeps.

Misha lets out a sigh, and it has Alek shrugging, "I'm just asking a question."

"I didn't say we're dating," I mutter before stabbing my fork into another piece of calamari.

"Interesting fact," Armani says. "Did you know Nikolai was married?"

Every thought in my brain comes to a sudden stop as I gasp, "What?"

“His wife died days after they got married. She had a heart problem. Word is he hasn’t looked at another woman since.”

Holy shit.

My mouth is hanging open as I stare at Armani.

“Oh wow, that’s so tragic,” Aurora murmurs.

“Yeah, unless he’s here, he’s at home with his family,” Alek adds. “The man doesn’t let anyone in. I can understand why.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I look at Nikolai where he’s sitting alone at a table. My heart twists in my chest, and suddenly I see him in a whole new light. I’ve been giving the man hell, and he’s mourning the loss of his wife.

Damn, don’t I feel like shit now.

Needing to talk about something else, I ask, “What time are we leaving on Saturday?”

“Ten?” Aurora looks at Misha to check that it’s okay with him.

“Ten works,” He replies.

My appetite is totally gone from learning Nikolai was married and lost his wife.

I’ll definitely have to ease up on him and rather focus solely on my training.

My heart squeezes at the thought, not happy with giving up on Nikolai so easily.

He belongs to another woman, even if she’s no longer with us. Forcing things with him will just be shameful and stupid.

Chapter 9

Nikolai

Things with Abigail have been weird the past few days. She has not flirted with me once and actually pays attention in combat training.

I should be relieved, but the sudden change has me worrying about the woman.

Needing some fresh air, I head out to the gardens and pull my phone from my pocket. Dialing Maxim's number, I listen as the line connects.

"Miss me already?" my friend asks with a chuckle.

"Hell no." Grinning, I ask, "You haven't changed your mind about protecting Camilla DuBois?"

"You won't let me," he mutters. "I just landed in Paris. Relax. The girl won't get killed on my watch."

I glance to my right and frown when I see Abigail sitting in front of an easel. I don't know why I'm surprised to see that she's painting.

It's probably because I never thought there's more to her than just the flirting.

"Let me know if you need anything," I tell Maxim.

We end the call, and I slowly walk closer. Coming up behind Abigail, I'm in for another shock when I get a view of the piece she's working on.

Time falls away as I watch her create a painting that's nothing short of a masterpiece. Every stroke of the paintbrush brings the picture to life until her version of the canopy of trees running along a pathway looks more real than the actual view.

Suddenly her hand freezes mid-air, and she glances over her shoulder. "Oh. Hey."

"You paint?" I ask like a dumbass. "You're good."

"Is that an actual compliment from the great Nikolai Vetrov?" she teases me.

"Yes, and it's not something I give often." I step closer and take in the work of art. "Did you study?"

"Painting?" she asks as she wipes her hands off on an old rag.

“Yes.”

Abigail shakes her head. “No. It’s just something I love doing.”

She stands up and takes a deep breath as she looks at her work, then she clears her throat and turns her eyes to me. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Frowning, I shake my head. “What loss?”

Abigail stares at me for a moment. “Your wife.”

Oh. Right.

Abigail found out I was married. That must be the reason she suddenly stopped flirting with me.

“So you do have your limits,” I chuckle. “You don’t do widowers.”

A frown forms on her forehead. “Seriously. I pay my respects, and you choose to insult me?” Turning her back to me, she starts to gather her paint supplies.

Fuck.

“It was fifteen years ago.” I don’t know why I’m telling her about my personal life.

She shoves the paintbrushes into a holder, then glances at me. “It’s tragic. No one should lose the love of their life at such a young age. I’m really sorry.”

I can see she means the words, and because this is the first real conversation we’re having, I admit, “Anja wasn’t the love of my life.”

Abigail’s eyes search mine, then she frowns. “Was it an arranged marriage?”

I shake my head. “It was Anja’s dying wish. She loved me.”

Abigail’s lips part, and a look of wonder washes over her features. “You married her just to make her dream come true?”

Why the hell am I telling her this?

Reluctantly I nod.

The corner of her mouth lifts, then she mutters, “Wow, and here I thought you didn’t have a heart.”

She continues to pack her things, and when she shrugs the bag over her shoulder and takes hold of the easel and canvas, she grins at me. “Is this your way of telling me you like when I flirt with you?”

I can’t keep the corner of my mouth from curving up. “Don’t push your luck, little girl.”

She starts to walk, and when she passes by me, her voice is low and seductive as she purrs, “Yes, *Daddy.*”

I close my eyes as the impact of the sinful whisper hits.

While I harden at the speed of light and my muscles tense, so I don't grab the woman and fuck her senseless, Abigail pauses to ask, "Do you give private lessons?"

I clear my throat before I answer, "No." Turning to face her, I'm fully aware if she looks down, she'll see my hard-on. "Why are you asking?"

"Some of the guys here are giving me the creeps. I just want to be able to defend myself."

My eyes narrow on her beautiful face. "Which guys?"

She shakes her head and starts to walk again. "Don't worry about it."

It only takes me a couple of steps to catch up to her, and when I take the easel from her, I say, "I have an hour before dinner."

Abigail glances up at me, and this time a breathtaking smile curves her lips. "Thank you, Mr. Vetrov. I appreciate you making time to train me."

I prefer 'Daddy.'

God, I'm not right in the head, and it's this vixen's fault.

Not saying another fucking word, I carry the easel to Abigail's suite and follow her into the room.

The scent of her perfume hangs in the air, and I notice two other paintings standing near the windows.

As I set the easel down, I ask, "Do you only paint nature scenes?"

"No. I paint whatever I feel like."

"We need to discuss payment for the private lessons."

A mischievous grin spreads over her face as she places the canvas on the easel. "Oooh, I like where this is going."

"I want a painting."

Surprise flutters over her face. "Oh."

I tilt my head as I lock eyes with her. "I want you to paint one specifically for me. A work of art no one else will have access to."

"Wow, don't ask for the impossible," she sasses me.

"You have two months."

"Why only two months?" she asks as she walks toward me.

"I'm only helping out at St. Monarch's until then."

Her eyes flit to my face as we leave her suite, then she mutters, "I'll have to up my flirting game."

Letting out a chuckle, I shake my head. "God, help me."

For the first time since I met Abigail, I'm not overcome with the desire to

strangle her.

When we walk into the studio, I say, "Get your ass on the sparring mat."

"Yes, sir," she murmurs, her voice filled with seduction.

She takes a fighting stance, mischief dancing in her eyes.

As I circle her slowly, I wonder what the fuck I'm doing. Abigail stopped flirting with me, and I practically begged her to start again.

For weeks she's been driving me insane, and when she stopped, it pissed me off to no end.

Before I can make sense of my emotions and thoughts, I dart forward. I swipe her feet from under her, and the moment she hits the floor, I'm on top of her.

This time when I grab hold of her wrists, she ducks toward me and uses the strength she's managed to gain over the past weeks to push me to the side. I give her the win so it will encourage her.

When I roll off of her, the woman straddles me. Her lashes lowering as she says, "I like this position."

Twisting my body, I throw her off while I mutter, "I'm sure you do."

We wrestle for a moment, but knowing she has to up her game if she wants to fight off a man, I pin her to the mat.

"I'm stronger than you. How do you get me off you?"

She bites her bottom lip, then taunts me, "Who says I want to get you off me?"

Glaring at Abigail, I shake my head. "Stop with the flirting for one second and focus on the training. You've been captured, and there's a man on top of you. What do you do?"

She brings her knee up against my back, then twists her body hard. I tighten my hold on her arms, forcing her back.

"Jesus," she mutters. "You're like a mountain. I can't get you off."

"Fight harder, Abigail!" I bark.

She strains against my hold, and as I think she's giving up again, she turns her head and sinks her teeth into my forearm.

A smile spreads over my face as I let go of her wrist. She doesn't hesitate and delivers a punch to the side of my neck. The blow stings, and again I give her the win as I climb to my feet.

"Good." I wait for her to stand up, then say, "Never wait to attack."

My words aren't even cold when Abigail darts forward. Her foot slams into my ankles, and she drops me to my ass.

Throwing her arms in the air, she lets out a happy shriek which is cut short when I sweep her feet from under her. The second she hits the mat, she turns onto her side and pushes her upper body from the floor.

I'm on top of her before she can make another move, pushing her front down onto the mat.

Christ, she feels good beneath me.

Focus on training!

"This time, you can't use your teeth." I pin her arms on either side of her head. "What do you do?"

"Nothing. I'm fucked in this position," she mutters as she tries to blow strands of hair, which have come loose from the ponytail, out of her face.

I lean down on her until my mouth is by her ear. "Really? You're not even going to try?"

She slams her head back, her skull hitting my jaw. Again I release her and climb to my feet. "Very good. You're learning."

She pushes herself into a kneeling position and grins up at me. "Two compliments in one day."

"Three," I correct her as I gesture for her to stand up and follow me to the dummy we use for training. "Watch closely," I instruct before I perform a kick to the dummy's head.

"You're going to have to do that again," Abigail says.

Her eyes follow my movements as I demonstrate the kick one more time. When I stand back, she gives it a try but only manages to hit the torso.

We spend close to thirty minutes working on the kick before Abigail manages to slam her foot into the dummy's head.

"Yes!" she shrieks, and the next second she's throwing her arms around my neck. "I did it!"

I grab hold of her hips, but Abigail pulls away from me before I can reciprocate the hug.

Christ, I wanted to hug her.

Our eyes lock right as the realization hits me.

I want to do a hell of a lot more than hug her. I want to strip this woman naked, handcuff her to my bed, and fuck her until she's unable to breathe.

Nope, we're not going there. Before I can do something stupid like pin her to the mat and fuck her raw, I mutter, "Training is over."

I walk out of the studio and keep going until I reach my suite so I can sort through my thoughts and emotions because, during the course of the day,

Abigail became more than just a tempting force to be dealt with.

I actually want to fuck the woman who's been driving me insane with her carefree attitude, sass, and flirting.

Today I saw a different side to Abigail, and she's impressed me.

For the first time in my life, I feel a flicker of fear because I actually want to spend time with her. I want to get to know Abigail and find out what other talents she keeps hidden from the world.

Chapter 10

Abbie

Yesterday it felt like I was making progress with Nikolai, then I made the mistake of hugging him. The man left the studio as if hellhounds were nipping at his ankles.

It sucks.

It's getting to the point where I'm embarrassing myself. The man has given me nothing to work with, and continuously flirting with him is just stupid.

At first, it was fun, just a little game, but somewhere during the past weeks, it became something more. I'm growing feelings for Nikolai, which I plan on squashing today.

Standing in the foyer of St. Monarch's, I watch as the three bratva enforcers arm themselves with their guns.

Yeah, I'm not so sure about leaving the premises with them. Misha might be into Aurora, but that doesn't mean they won't try to kill me.

Maybe we shouldn't go out today.

Aurora glances at me, then asks, "Everything okay?"

"I just realized we're leaving the safety of St. Monarch's with three bratva and mafia soldiers. I'll shit myself if they turn on us." I meet my friend's eyes. "How sure are you about Misha?"

"Like life-and-death sure. He won't hurt us," she tries to reassure me.

"Yeah, but I might," Alek chuckles before he walks out of the doors.

Bastard.

"Don't listen to the fucker," Misha says as he takes hold of Aurora's hand. "Just stick close to me."

"Got it," I chuckle before hooking my arm through Aurora's free one.

With apprehension curling around my spine, we step out of the castle and climb into an armored SUV. Misha sits at the back with Aurora and me, while Alek takes the passenger side and Armani slides in behind the steering wheel.

"Ready?" Armani asks.

Nope. Not by a long shot, but if Aurora trusts Misha, then I'll just have to do the same.

Misha grips Aurora's thigh as he mutters, "Yeah, let's do this."

As Armani steers the SUV through the massive iron gates, I mutter, "If my father saw me now, he'd kill me himself."

Aurora chuckles. "That makes two of us."

Yeah, her father is just as strict as mine. The man is going to shit himself when he finds out his daughter is dating Misha Petrov.

My eyes keep darting between the gorgeous scenery passing us by and the back of Alek's head.

Jesus, don't let this be the biggest mistake of my life.

Stop worrying. The hits on you and Aurora have been canceled.

When we reach the heart of Geneva, Armani finds a parking space close to *Louis Vuitton*. Seeing one of my favorite stores lifts some of the apprehension to make space for excitement.

When I reach for the car door handle, Misha snaps, "Wait. You only get out when I give the signal."

"What's the signal?" Aurora asks.

"We'll fucking wave like cheerleaders," Alek mutters before he climbs out of the SUV.

Yeah, this is not the fun shopping trip I envisioned when I mentioned it to Aurora. If it were just the two of us sneaking out, no one would've known.

The instant Misha gestures for us to get out of the SUV, we walk toward him. When we enter the store, I separate from the group and head for the handbags. "Sweet Jesus, I'm in heaven."

"Let's not make a day of this," Aurora says behind me. "The guys are tense."

Yeah, so am I.

Wanting to set Aurora at ease, I smile as I ask, "Can I have thirty minutes to enjoy in Louis?" *Before I have to get back into an SUV with Alek.*

"Thirty minutes," she agrees with a chuckle.

Aurora heads back to Misha, and try as I might, I can't focus on the stunning collection of handbags. It feels like something is crawling over my skin, and I keep glancing around for any sign of danger.

Knowing Aurora will worry if I don't buy something, I grab a couple of items and take them to the counter. After handing my purchases to the cashier, I glance over the store until my eyes land on my best friend, who's

walking toward me.

“Did you find anything?” She asks when she reaches me.

Faking excitement, I say, “Yes! Two handbags and the cutest pair of pants.”

When I show her the items, she grins. “Ooh, I like the black one.” She picks it up to admire it. “Gosh, the leather is so soft.”

“Can we have another bag like this one?” I ask the cashier before smiling at Aurora. “Matching bags.”

Damn, I miss spending time with my friend.

My stomach rumbles as I pay for my purchases, and as we walk toward the exit where the guys are waiting, I ask, “Do you think they’ll mind stopping at a drive-thru? I’m dying for a burger.”

“I’m sure they won’t mind.”

When we reach Misha, I ask, “Can we stop at Burger King? I’m buying for everyone.”

“Then we can *definitely* make a quick stop,” Armani chuckles.

While Misha seems dangerous, he’s good for Aurora. Alek, though, is cold and edgy. But Armani is at least pleasant and friendly. It’s actually weird seeing the bratva and Italian mafia work together.

Then again, the head of the Italian mafia married Viktor Vetrov’s sister. Hence an alliance was formed. I’ve heard Luca Cotroni and Viktor are like brothers, so if you go up against one, you have to face both.

We leave the store and walk toward the SUV. We only make it a couple of yards before Alek shouts, “Down!”

Armani grabs hold of me and shoves me down behind the nearest parked vehicle. “Stay down.”

Horrifying shock vibrates through every cell in my body. Time slows, and it feels like I’m having an out-of-body experience as I watch Armani yank his gun from where it was tucked into the waistband of his pants.

Glass shatters behind us, and the realization hits like a ton of bricks – someone just tried to assassinate Aurora and me.

Anxiously my eyes search for my friend, and seeing her next to Misha, I feel a sliver of relief.

“We have to get out of here,” Misha shouts.

“Just stay covered,” Alek yells to all of us, then he breaks out into a sprint, and dropping to his side, he slides toward the SUV while firing his weapon.

Jesus, he's actually helping to protect Aurora and me.

A spray of bullets slams into the parked vehicles, making glass shatter everywhere. People on the sidewalk scream and run for cover.

Armani takes shots as well while shouting at me, "Run for the SUV!"

Oh, God.

My breaths race over my dry lips as I look at the distance between me and the SUV. I can easily be killed.

Jesus.

Shit.

"Move!" Armani roars.

Darting to my feet, I run as fast as I can. Every step, every second, the anticipation of a bullet hitting me grows. My skin prickles, and my vision tunnels on the black SUV.

I see Aurora dive into the back of the SUV, and when I reach the open door, she grabs hold of my hand and yanks me inside.

I fall over my friend, and when her arms wrap around me, I can only gasp as the shock of what just happened hits.

"I've got you," Aurora coos while Misha, Alek, and Armani pile into the vehicle.

While everybody checks that no one's been hit, my mind reels from the attack.

I thought we were safe. I thought the hits were canceled.

I could've died today.

Only when we reach St. Monarch's do I ask, "What the hell just happened?"

"Someone tried to blow your brains out, sweetheart," Alek mutters from the passenger seat.

No. Fucking. Shit.

Aurora pulls me into a hug. "You're okay. It's all that matters."

When Armani stops the SUV in front of St. Monarch's castle, Alek shoves his door open, snapping, "Next time you want to spend your daddy's money, think twice. You're such an easy fucking target."

"Me?" I gasp.

Then it sinks in – the hit on me wasn't canceled.

Was it only canceled for Aurora?

Why the fuck didn't they tell me?

Jesus, I really could've died today.

Chapter 11

Nikolai

I'm sitting in Uncle Carson's office, reviewing all the open contracts, when a call comes through on his cellphone.

I don't take note of what's being said until I hear him ask, "Who stopped the hit on Abigail Sartori?"

My head snaps up, my eyes locking on my uncle.

"Christ," he mutters. "I'll deal with it."

The instant he ends the call, I ask, "What happened?"

"Abigail left the grounds with Aurora and the bratva trainees. Someone tried to eliminate Miss Sartori, but Misha and his friends stopped it. Viktor is going to lose his shit."

I stare at my uncle as his words sink deep into my gut. "What?" I mutter like an idiot. "Wait." I stand up from the chair, a dark frown forming on my forehead. "Abigail left St. Monarch's? Why?"

Why the fuck would she do something so goddamn stupid?

"Where is she?" I bark.

"The SUV just pulled up to the castle, sir," the head of the guards informs me from where he's standing by the door.

"Nikolai?" Uncle Carson gives me a worried look.

Without another word, I stalk out of the office. When I step into the foyer, and my eyes lock on Abigail's pale face, I fucking lose my shit.

There's no way for me to keep my voice calm as I shout, "What the fuck were you thinking leaving the grounds?"

I grab hold of the infuriating woman and first make sure she hasn't been shot before I lay into her. "You know there's a fucking hit out on your life! Are you fucking insane or just plain stupid?"

"Excuse me?" she snaps as she yanks her arm free from my hold. "Who the hell do you think you are, talking to me like that?"

Christ Almighty.

The urge to strangle her is overwhelming, and I fist my hands at my sides so I don't give in to the need to force her into submission.

Abigail lifts her chin in defiance as she meets my eyes, and at this moment, she's never looked more beautiful.

I fucking worry because you've crawled so deep beneath my fucking skin I can't get you out!

Instead of telling her the truth, I growl, "You're one of my students. It gives me the right to fucking worry."

She stares at me for a moment, then her gaze narrows on me as she fucking taunts me, "Yeah, keep lying to yourself."

Lifting up on her tiptoes, her breath fans over my jaw and ear, then she whispers, "It's only a matter of time before I'm assassinated. My dying wish is to be with you, so stop lying to us both, be a man, and take what you want."

I'm about to burst a fucking vein from anger as she pats her hand on my chest before walking toward the stairs.

God, help me before I kill this woman myself.

With rage burning in my veins, I watch her sexy ass sway as she climbs the stairs before I stalk back to my uncle's office.

He's already on a video call with Viktor.

I glance at the screen that shows my cousin sitting at his desk as he says, "I'll be there tomorrow morning to deal with my men." He tips his chin at me. "Hey, Nikolai."

"Wish we were talking under better circumstances." I lock eyes with Viktor. "Cancel the hit on Abigail Sartori."

My cousin's eyebrows raise, then he shakes his head as he glances between my uncle and me. "What the fuck do you put in the food at St. Monarch's? This is the second request in less than a week concerning those women."

Uncle Carson shrugs and waves a hand through the air. "Fuck if I know."

Viktor turns his eyes back to me. "Why?"

Why?

I don't fucking have an answer, so I say, "Call it a favor."

"That's not an answer, cousin," he mutters, an impatient look flashing in his eyes.

Letting out a sigh, I reluctantly admit, "The woman fucking annoys me, but I don't want her dead. I'm only asking for the hit on her. I don't give a shit what you do with the rest of the Sartoris."

Suddenly a wide smile splits over Viktor's face. "Now I understand." My

cousin stares at me for a while, then nods. “Cancel the hit on Abigail Sartori,” he gives the order to Uncle Carson.

Intense relief washes through my entire body, and I let out a harsh breath. “Thank you, Viktor.”

“Hey, what is family for if *not* to kill your cousin’s love interest,” he says jokingly.

“Love interest, my ass,” I mutter. “If anyone’s going to kill Abigail, it will be me.”

His eyebrows rise again, then he chuckles, “Have fun with that.” Letting out a sigh, he adds, “I’ll be there first thing tomorrow to deal with my enforcers. Make sure they don’t leave St. Monarch’s.”

“Will do,” Uncle Carson replies.

The encrypted video call ends, then my uncle lifts an eyebrow at me. “So you and Abigail?”

I let out a sigh, then mutter, “The girl doesn’t deserve to die because her father is a fucking idiot.”

“Right.”

Talking about the girl. I have a bone to pick with her.

Just as I leave the office, I see Misha coming down the hallway. The man is in a fuck-ton of trouble for stopping the hit on Abigail, but he’ll be okay. Viktor isn’t an unreasonable man.

I take the stairs up, and turning down the hallway, I see Abigail and Aurora come out of a suite. Abigail heads my way while Aurora walks to the suite next door.

As Abigail swipes her keycard, I hear her sniff before she enters the room. The door is busy closing when I place my hand against the wood, forcing it back open.

Abigail doesn’t hear me come in, and while I let the door shut softly behind me, I watch as she wraps her arms around her waist.

“Jesus,” she whispers. “That was a close call.”

When I stalk toward her, she turns around, and the moment her eyes land on me, they widen with surprise. She quickly wipes tears from her face, and seeing her cry delivers a blow to my heart.

My hand darts out, and grabbing hold of her jaw, I lean down until our breaths warm the small space between our faces.

“You’re insufferable,” I growl.

“I know.”

“You fucking drive me insane.”

She takes a step forward, pressing her body against mine. “Good.”

“Christ,” I mutter, my eyes burning into hers. My grip tightens on her jaw while too much tension builds between us. “You have a death wish.”

“I do.” She lifts her chin, her lashes lowering with seduction. “It’s you.”

She pushes against my hold on her jaw until her lips brush against mine. We don’t break eye contact as her teeth tug at my bottom lip.

Her voice is a hoarse whisper as she asks, “Are you going to punish me, *Daddy?*”

My heart hammers against my ribs, and watching her eyes dilate with desire, I give in to the fucking push and pull between us. I’m rock hard, and there’s only one thing that will satisfy me – to fucking dominate Abigail’s sass.

Lifting my other hand to the back of her head, I grab her hair and yank her back, so her throat is exposed. I move my hand from her jaw to where her pulse is racing.

“Is that what you want, *Malyshka?*” My eyes keep hers prisoner as I call her ‘little girl’ in Russian. “For me to give you the spanking you deserve.”

Need tightens her features, and it drives me fucking wild seeing her like this.

“Please,” she purrs.

Chapter 12

Abbie

Being thrown from one intense moment to another has my heart racing wildly.

I've spent weeks flirting with this man, and now that he's standing in my suite, the moment is surreal.

Nikolai's features are cut from stone, his dark eyes holding a world of danger I might not be ready for.

I've never wanted anything as much as I want Nikolai Vetrov. He's intense, brutal, hot as hell, and as manly as they come.

I want him to do filthy things to me. The need is so freaking overpowering I'm ready to beg for him to fuck me.

He keeps staring at me, and I struggle to keep eye contact. I'm not going to lie, he intimidates me, and I know, with him, I'm constantly playing with a fire that can burn me to a crisp.

But I want him. So fucking badly.

Just as I start worrying that he'll reject me and storm out of my suite, he lowers his head until I can almost taste him on my tongue.

"Please," I beg. Tomorrow I'll worry about the pride I'm sacrificing. Right now, I'll do anything he wants. "Fuck me, *Daddy*."

I watch as his eyes darken at hearing the word. I've picked up it's a turn-on for him.

Letting out a needy groan, my eyes flick between his mouth and his almost black irises.

"Christ," he growls. His features grow harder, and I expect him to shove me away from him, but instead, his grip on my hair tightens until it's painful.

With his eyes burning into mine, his breaths speed up, and when his mouth brushes against mine, a moan escapes me.

Jesus. This is so freaking intense I'm going to lose my mind.

The man teases me with another brush of his lips against mine before watching for my reaction.

I'm about to become a puddle of arousal at his feet when his mouth slams

into mine. An embarrassingly loud moan from me is smothered as his tongue sweeps over mine.

Finally. Jesus, finally.

I lift my hands to his chest, my fingers digging into his shirt as I push up on my tiptoes to get as close to him as possible.

He tastes like power and danger, the combination totally intoxicating.

Nikolai pulls his mouth away from mine, and our eyes connect again. Seeing the desire etched on his face, my core floods with heat.

“You’re too young and careless,” he mutters.

My teeth tug at my bottom lip. “You’re old and grumpy.”

His breath teases my cheek as he feathers kisses down to my jaw. “This will never work.”

God, I just need him to stop talking and fuck me already. “I don’t care.”

“There’s an eighteen-year age gap between us.”

Pushing my hands up between us, I frame his jaw. “It’s perfect.” I try to pull him closer as I groan, “I’m going to die if you don’t fuck me.”

“This will be a one-time thing,” he warns me.

I’m too far gone to take the warning to heart, my ovaries in total control of my body.

This time his mouth claims mine in a wild kiss. God, it’s filthy and so freaking passionate I’m unable to think of anything but Nikolai.

His hands grip my ass, and I’m lifted against his muscled body. I quickly lock my legs around him as he blindly carries me to the bedroom while I feast on the taste of his lips and tongue.

The kiss is broken as he shoves me down on the bed. He grips my silk blouse and rips it over my head.

Nikolai grabs hold of my wrists and forces my arms above my head, where he ties them together with my blouse.

Yes. Give me rough and filthy.

“Don’t you fucking dare move your arms,” he orders as his hands slide down my sides.

“Yes, *Daddy*,” I say with all the obedience I can muster.

Nikolai shakes his head, a sexy-as-hell smirk tugging at his mouth. “Christ, you’re trying to kill me.”

He pulls the zipper of my pants down and strips me of the fabric, leaving me only in my bra and g-string. Suddenly he grabs hold of my hips, and I’m flipped onto my stomach.

A satisfied rumble comes from Nikolai. “Fuck, your ass is perfect for spanking.”

Heat flushes to my core, and my skin itches for his palm.

The smack to my right ass cheek is so hard a cry bursts from me. My skin stings, bringing every nerve ending in my body to life.

“Harder,” I moan. “Show me how much I’ve annoyed you the past couple of weeks.”

I feel Nikolai move, and when I glance over my shoulder, I watch as he rips the belt out of the loops of his cargo pants.

Holy shit that is hot.

Instead of using the belt on my ass, he crawls back over me and orders, “Open your mouth.”

Okayyy?

I part my lips, and he places the leather between my teeth. “Bite down.”

I do as I’m told while he fastens the belt behind my head, effectively gagging me.

New kink unlocked. I like where this is going.

“For weeks, you’ve been taunting me,” he grumbles right before his palm connects with my ass cheek.

The belt muffles my moan as I push my ass into the air. Another slap from Nikolai has me gripping the covers, a tremble rocking through my body.

Suddenly he bites my shoulder blade, making goosebumps spread over my skin. His hands land on my waist, his touch rough and greedy as he moves them down to take my g-string off. He pushes my bra up until the lace is around my biceps before he peppers kisses down my spine.

This is so much better than I could ever imagine.

I’m flipped onto my back, my body on full display for Nikolai. Slowly his eyes burn over every inch of me, then he murmurs, “So fucking perfect.”

I watch as he yanks his shirt over his head and finally get to see the sculptured abs I’ve felt during our sparring sessions.

God, he’s a work of art.

There’s an impressive tattoo covering his chest. On his left peck is the head of a roaring tiger, and on his right, a dragon.

I wonder if it was just a random tattoo or whether it has meaning.

When he pushes his cargo pants down, and his impressive erection jumps free, I let out a needy moan because I know he’s going to split me in two with his size and girth.

I open my legs wide in invitation for him and mumble around the belt, “I’m on birth control, so you don’t have to worry.”

“Good.” He places a knee on the bed, and grabbing hold of my legs, he yanks me to the edge.

Instead of slamming into me, Nikolai presses a kiss between my breasts before he draws my nipple into his mouth with a low groan rumbling from his chest. A second later, the man goes to work on my nipple, his teeth nipping and tugging until I’m swiveling my hips for much-needed friction.

“God, this is torture,” I complain, my words muffled by the belt.

“Serves you well for taunting a god,” he chuckles darkly.

Gripping hold of my hips, Nikolai lifts my ass off the bed. I feel his big cock at my soaked entrance, and almost delirious with need, I hold my breath in anticipation.

He slams so hard into me that the air wooshes from my lungs. I bite the belt as a cry is forced from my chest.

Jesus. I’ve never felt so full before.

With a satisfied growl, he mutters, “Christ, this is worth every day of hell you gave me.”

He pulls out and plunges back inside me. Again his body stills as if he’s savoring the feel of me wrapped around his cock.

My eyes are locked on the man I’m obsessed with, drinking in the sight of his muscles and golden skin.

I can’t believe Nikolai Vetrov is buried so deep inside me that I feel him in my stomach.

I’ve been waiting so long, hoping and praying Nikolai would give in, that on the third thrust my body tenses and a long overdue orgasm rips through me.

The man pulls entirely out of me, then a slap lands between my legs, forcing ripples of pleasure to scatter through me.

“Did I give you permission to come?” he barks.

I shake my head, a whimper creeping past the leather in my mouth.

“You come when I say so,” he demands, the dominance pouring off him, making my abdomen clench hard.

“Yes, *Daddy*,” I whimper obediently.

My words have the desired effect on him as he starts to hammer into me. Every thrust has his muscles straining as if it’s taking all his strength not to fuck me too hard.

“Harder,” I moan around the belt.

Again he pulls out of me. He shoves an arm beneath me and moves me up the bed, then wrapping a hand around the back of my neck, I’m yanked up against his chest and seated on his lap so I’m straddling him. With him in a kneeling position, I’m face-to-face with him.

He pulls the belt away from my mouth, and as his lips forcefully claim mine, he slams back inside me.

His thrusts turn torturously slow and deep, and with my eyes locked on the man of my dreams, I’m totally overwhelmed by how hot and intense this moment is.

Nikolai breaks the kiss, and pressing his forehead to mine, he keeps filling me with ruthless thrusts. Each one jerks my body, making me feel a mixture of pain and pleasure.

I manage to lift my tied hands over his head, resting them at the back of his neck.

I’m achy and needy, moans and whimpers spilling from my mouth to his, and he drinks each one like a man dying of thirst.

Like he can’t get enough of me.

“Such a good little girl,” he praises me. “You take me so well.”

My body tightens with another impending orgasm, and I struggle to keep it from overwhelming me. “Nikolai,” I beg, my voice strained with desperation.

He shakes his head. “That’s not what I want to hear. Beg me, *Malyshka*.”

I have no idea what the Russian word means, but I love it.

Giving Nikolai what he wants, I say, “Please let me come on your huge cock, *Daddy*.”

I’m thrown onto my back, and with his arms braced on either side of my shoulders, Nikolai fucks me raw.

“Come, *Malyshka*!” he finally gives the order.

I swear my body spontaneously combusts, and it feels like I go up in flames as a powerful orgasm tears through me.

Much to my embarrassment, I sound like a freaking porn star trying to win whatever award porn stars receive for the best scream.

Unable to breathe as the pleasure hits me in electric waves, Nikolai prolongs my climax by taking me harder than ever.

I’m so overwhelmed that a tear spirals over my temple.

Nikolai slumps down on top of me, his cock jerking inside me as he lets

out a primal grunt.

Jesus. I've never been fucked so hard in my life.

He presses a kiss to the sensitive skin beneath my ear, and while the last of my pleasure is still ebbing away, he pulls out of me.

Stunned, I watch as he grabs his clothes and walks to the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him.

I take it he's not a cuddler.

I use my teeth to unfasten my blouse from around my wrists, then remove Nikolai's belt from my neck.

As I sit up, the bathroom door opens, and Nikolai emerges. Fully dressed, his eyes lock on my face. It looks like he's about to kill someone.

Seriously?

"This was a one-time thing." He stalks closer and grabs the belt from my hand. "No more taunting me, and don't fucking call me daddy again."

"Yes, sir," I mutter, my eyes narrowing on him. "Thanks for the fuck." I gesture in the direction of the living room. "You can let yourself out."

He stares at me for a moment before he walks away.

I hold it together until I hear the door shut. Grabbing the covers, I pull them over me.

"Asshole," I hiss as tears threaten to fall. "He didn't have to be so freaking harsh."

What did you expect of the blood diamond king, Abbie?

Chapter 13

Nikolai

Stalking into my suite, I lock my fingers behind my neck and suck in desperate breaths of air.

Fucking Abigail was unlike anything I've ever experienced. I'm still fucking hard.

I close my eyes, trying to calm the chaotic emotions swirling in my chest.

I'm angry that I gave in and fucking upset because I know once will never be enough.

Christ, her cries and moans were erotic as fuck, and she fit me like a glove.

But that's not what has me spiraling.

Letting out a growl, I open my eyes and walk to the liquor tray to pour myself a tumbler of whiskey. As I swallow the burning liquid, I refuse to inspect the emotions the woman has evoked in me.

No. You don't have time for a woman, never mind one like Abigail Sartori. She's a fucking handful on her best day. You'll kill each other.

"Fuck," I mutter, and unable to process the fact that I actually care for the woman, I throw the glass across the room. It shatters against the wall just as my phone starts to ring.

Yanking the device from my pocket, I stare at Maxim's name flashing on the screen.

My breaths are harsh as I growl, "Yes?"

There's a moment's silence before he asks, "Everything okay?"

I don't even bother lying to my best friend. "No."

"Want to talk about it?"

I rub my hand over my face as I shake my head, but then I admit, "I fucked one of the attendees."

"And?"

I shake my head again. "She's a fucking thorn in my side."

Maxim lets out a chuckle. "And you decided fucking her would be the best course of action? Why?"

“Christ, it’s hard to explain,” I grumble as I slump down on a sofa. “She’s full of sass and strives to drive me insane.”

“Yeah, I still don’t understand why you decided to fuck her and why it’s a problem.”

I take a couple of deep breaths, and closing my eyes, I admit, “I care about her.”

“Oh.” More silence follows my words, then finally, Maxim asks, “How much do you care about her?”

“Too much. I fucking asked Viktor to cancel the hit he had out on her.”

“Hold on,” my friend almost chokes. “Last time I checked, there were two active hits. Which one are we talking about?”

“Abigail Sartori.”

Abigail fucking Sartori.

Christ.

I fucked her.

“You fucked Sartori’s daughter?” Maxim lets out a bark of laughter. “Jesus, now this story is getting good.”

“Fuck off,” I mutter.

My friend gets his laughter under control, then asks, “Again, why is this a problem?”

“Because I love my life the way it is, and I don’t need a woman destroying my routine.”

“Did you ever stop to think that just maybe a woman will add to the quality of your life?”

“Yeah, so tell me, why aren’t you married yet?” I sneer.

“Because I haven’t met the one.”

“Right.” I let out a sigh. “Abigail is a fucking handful. We’ll end up killing each other.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. No one has ever pissed me off as much as she does.”

“Why does she piss you off?”

“She fucking flirts like it’s a paying job and doesn’t take anything seriously.”

“Hey, opposites attract. With you being anal about your routine and where everything has to be, her ruffling things up might be a good change.”

I fall back against the sofa and let out a groan. “There’s an eighteen-year age gap between us. I’m old enough to be her father.”

“But you’re not her father,” Maxim states the obvious. “Age doesn’t fucking matter as long as both parties consent to the relationship.”

“You’re not fucking helping,” I bark.

“I’m not going to tell you what you want to hear, Nikolai. I think if you care about the woman, then you should give a relationship a try. The worst that can happen is you fuck her for a while and realize she’s not the one for you.”

Fucking her a couple of times won’t be enough.

It takes a lot out of me to be honest, as I say, “She’s already under my skin. If I let her in, there will be no getting her out.”

“I don’t see why this is a problem.”

“Of course you don’t, because it’s not your perfectly constructed life that will fall to pieces.”

He lets out a sigh, and this time his tone is serious as he says, “Listen to me, Nikolai. You don’t want to wake up one day and realize you’ve let the only woman you could love get away.” Maxim pauses to let his words sink in. “Take time and think things through. If your feelings for the woman keep growing, just go for it. At least the odds are in your favor.”

“How do you figure that?”

“She let you fuck her. It’s an emotional act for women.”

He clearly doesn’t know Abigail.

“Stop worrying and let things happen naturally. You can’t control every-fucking-thing in this world.”

“I’m sure as fuck going to try,” I growl.

“I pity the woman who has to deal with your OCD and control issues,” he taunts me.

“Yeah, like you’ve done for over thirty years.”

“Damn, you’re right. I pity myself.”

“Fuck off,” I chuckle.

“Feeling better?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“Good, now about Camilla DuBois. The woman is fucking infuriating.”

I break down in a fit of laughter, and only once I get it under control do I say, “You just lectured me about love and relationships. Did you miss the entire conversation?”

“I don’t care about the woman.”

“Yet,” I chuckle, enjoying this way too much. “Give it time. Soon she’ll

be under your skin, and before you know what's happening, you're fucking her brains out, and your best friend tells you just to let things happen naturally."

"You're impossible to talk with today. I'll call tomorrow when you're in a better mood."

I'm still laughing when he hangs up. Shaking my head, I drop the device on the coffee table, then I let out a groan as I bury my face in my hands. "Christ, I'm so fucking fucked."

I just had a twenty-minute-long conversation with Maxim, and I'm no closer to an answer.

I grew up in a happy home with parents who adore each other. There's no reason for my apprehensiveness to get involved with a woman.

Maybe I'm just one of those people who isn't meant to be in a relationship. I care about Abigail, and I'd rather stop things now before she falls in love with me like Anja did.

Slowly I pull my hands away from my face as the realization sinks in.

Even though I did my best to make Anja believe that I loved her, it took a hell of a lot out of me. Yes, I did a good thing, but it made me feel like shit. I fucking deceived a dying woman.

I never want to be in a position like that again.

I don't know if what I feel for Abigail has the potential to become love. Getting into a relationship with her and allowing her to fall in love with me would be too much of a risk.

The last thing I want to do is give the woman false hope before breaking her heart.

We fucked, and it was amazing. Let's leave it at that.

Chapter 14

Abbie

Jesus, everything's gone to shit at the speed of light.

Misha and his friends got into trouble for stopping the hit on my life, and Viktor, their boss, shot Alek because someone had to take the bullet that was meant for me.

I'm just thankful he didn't kill Alek. I don't want anyone dying on my behalf.

But damn, what a freaking shit show.

As if that's not enough, since we've had sex, Nikolai hasn't even bothered to look my way whenever we cross paths.

The asshole.

I always try to make the best of everything, but the thing with Nikolai is getting to me. How the hell could he fuck me like that, only to walk away as if it meant nothing?

And Aurora's dealing with her own problems, so we haven't been able to hang out much. She doesn't even know I've slept with Nikolai.

Then again, I'm not sure whether I'm ready to spill that secret yet.

Walking toward the combat studio, I lift my chin and take a deep breath.

It's just another training session. You're a badass bitch who doesn't need a man.

Entering the studio, I force myself not to glance in Nikolai's direction. I make a beeline for the treadmill and program the settings before climbing on. I start a slow jog to warm up before increasing the speed to a steady run.

From the corner of my eye, I see the other attendees arrive. Aurora and Misha head my way so they can train, and she shoots me a smile.

"You're so damn lucky," I mutter as she passes me.

While I have to face Nikolai, she has Misha training her.

"I know," she chuckles.

"Abigail," Nikolai calls out, "care to join us?"

Slamming stop on the treadmill, I get off and walk toward the group.

"Duarte versus Caspian. Abigail versus Paula. Fight until someone

submits,” Nikolai orders.

I walk to a mat and take a fighting stance. I’ve only fought Paula once, and she wiped the floor with me, but that won’t happen today.

I’m so freaking pissed off, and getting to take it out on someone will do me a world of good.

The moment Paula steps onto the mat, I lunge forward. I jump and, twisting my body, I slam the heel of my foot against her head. I manage to land on my feet, only staggering back once before I dart toward my opponent again.

She blocks my first blow, but I catch her off guard with a punch from my left hand. My knuckles protest at the impact, but I ignore the pain as I swipe her feet from under her.

The instant Paula hits the floor, I’m on top of her. She gets in two punches before I manage to wrap my arm around her neck. Using all my strength, I tighten my hold.

“Let go, Abigail!” Nikolai shouts.

I free Paula, and as I climb to my feet, she gags as she struggles to breathe.

Shit, the hold was too tight.

“What the fuck was that?” Nikolai asks.

I shrug as I look at him for the first time. “Just doing what you taught me, sir.”

His expression is cut from granite as he stares at me. “A hundred sit-ups.”

Yeah, fuck you too.

Walking to the back of the studio, I drop to my ass and start with the punishment. Aurora gives me a sympathetic look before focusing on her own training.

I’m stuck in my mind and only snap out of it when Nikolai crouches by my feet. “You’re acting like a child.”

I freeze mid-sit-up and stare at him. “Enlighten me. What have I done to give you that impression?”

“This sulking attitude you have.”

Sulking attitude? The fucking audacity of this man.

I nod, and climbing to my feet, I lock eyes with him while giving him the sweetest smile I can conjure on my face. “I’m not sulking, Mr. Vetrov. This is me being professional.” I step closer to him, my chin held high. “We fucked. It was mindblowing, but that’s the end of the story. There’s no reason

for me to flirt with you any longer.”

Anger burns in his eyes as he growls. “I fucking knew it was a mistake.”

I shrug. “It is what it is.”

Nikolai walks back to the other trainees, and I drop down to my ass to finish the hundred sit-ups.

My freaking abs are on fire by the time the lesson ends, and I’m the first out of the studio.

When I walk into my suite, my phone rings, and seeing the call is from my father, I let out a sigh. “Of course, this day isn’t shitty enough.”

I answer. “Hello, Father.”

“Abbie, I trust the training is going well?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” he mutters. “I’ve arranged for Elio to collect you and Aurora from St. Monarch’s on Saturday morning.”

Shit. The birthday party. I completely forgot.

With the attack the past weekend, I don’t feel it would be safe for me to leave the grounds.

“Do you think it’s wise for me to leave the safety of St. Monarch’s while there’s a hit out on me?”

Because you can’t call a truce with the bratva and mafia.

Oh, by the way, your enemy’s cousin fucked me so good I can still feel him between my legs.

“Don’t be overly dramatic,” he snaps. “Elio will collect you and Aurora. Don’t be late.”

The call ends without a goodbye, and I drop the device on the table.

I shake my head, and needing an outlet for all the anger and disappointment I feel, I grab my painting supplies, a blank canvas, and the easel.

Leaving the suite, I carry everything to the waterfall at the back of the castle.

After I have the canvas resting on the easel, I glance at the beautiful scenery around me while trying my best not to think about the disaster that’s my life.

My eyes rest on smooth rocks and the water trickling over them, and picking up the white tube of paint, I open it and squirt some onto my palette.

I let out a sigh when my mind won’t shut down.

You got good dick, Abbie. Leave it at that.

But...It felt like there was a connection between us.

You knew the man was cold and ruthless when you started flirting with him. Letting him fuck you wasn't going to make him magically fall for you.

Annoyed with myself, I let out a huff as I practically throw the paint onto the canvas.

Okay. Be an adult about this. You're going to forget about Nikolai and focus on your training.

Ugh. Training. I hate my life.

I don't want to be here for the next four years. I don't want to take over my father's illegal empire.

My brushstrokes grow gentler as I admit the truth to myself.

I just want to paint.

But sadly, a mafia princess doesn't get to choose her future.

Chapter 15

Nikolai

In hindsight, I regret walking out on Abigail the instant I was done coming inside her. That was a dick move, even for me.

I can't blame her for being upset.

If only she knew I ran from her like a fucking coward because I didn't have the balls to admit she made me feel something I haven't felt before.

This is why you don't fuck women you'll be forced to see again.

Deciding to man up and apologize to her so the training sessions won't be uncomfortable, I knock on her door. When there's no answer, I head toward the dining hall to check if she's there.

Seeing Aurora sitting at a table with Misha, I approach them and ask, "Have you seen Abigail?"

There's surprise on Aurora's face as she shakes her head. "I last saw her in your studio during training."

Nodding, I leave the dining hall and check the armory and every other room where she might be before heading outside.

It's only when I can't find her that worry creeps into my chest.

She better not have left the grounds. I'll fucking strangle her.

Going back into the castle, I walk to the security room and tell the guard on duty, "Find Abigail Sartori."

"Yes, sir." He pulls her photo up and starts the facial recognition software on all the security footage we have. It takes five minutes before he points at the screen. "She's at the waterfall."

Relieved to see she's okay, I watch as she paints for a couple of seconds before I stalk out of the room.

Following the path beneath a canopy of trees, I hear Abigail mutter, "I'm so over my father controlling my life. I should drain his damn bank account and find myself an island where I can sip margaritas and paint the whole day. Ugh, if only dreams came true."

There's a twinge in my chest because someone like Abigail shouldn't be forced to live a restrictive life.

When I come up behind her and look at the canvas, I see the image hasn't taken shape yet, and it's hard to tell what she's painting.

Not knowing I'm behind her, she continues to mutter, "And Nikolai can go fuck himself sideways with his big dick. Who the hell leaves a woman while she's still freaking riding the glorious waves of pleasure?"

"That's what I've –"

My apology is cut short when Abigail spins around. Letting out a startled shriek, she throws the paintbrush at me. A light shade of blue splatters over my shirt before the brush falls at my feet.

"Jesus, Nikolai! Give me a heart attack next time," she snaps.

Crouching down, I pick up the brush. "I've come to apologize."

She takes the brush from my hand and turns her back to me while she cleans the bristles.

"Abigail."

"I'm listening."

"I'm sorry."

Glancing over her shoulder, her eyes lock with mine. "Why did you run?"
Hell no, I'm not going there.

The lie falls easily over my lips, "I don't want you to grow attached."

She lets out an amused chuckle as she shakes her head. "Your dick might be magical, but it doesn't mean I'm going to fall head over heels for you."

A smirk tugs at my lips. "So we're good?"

"Yes."

She starts to paint again, ignoring me while I watch the image of water gently caressing pebbles take shape.

Fuck, she's talented.

The conversation is long over, but still, I find myself watching Abigail, the movement of her hand and brush soothing.

What is it about this woman that has me gravitating to her? I'm the one who's seeking her out.

Suddenly she says, "If you're going to stand there like a stalker, you might as well keep me company." She continues to paint, her tone soft as she asks, "Why are you helping with the training at St. Monarch's when you have your own business to run?"

"My godfather asked for a favor until he can find a replacement," I explain.

I step closer and catch her scent drifting on a light breeze.

Christ, she smells mouthwateringly good.

“You’re an enigma, Nikolai Vetrov,” she murmurs, sounding like she’s deep in her thoughts. “You give off a vibe that you’re a bastard, but then I find out you can be caring when you want to.”

“Not many people would describe me as caring.” I move closer again until I can feel the energy vibrating from her, calling to me like a siren’s song.

It was only meant to be once, Nikolai. What the fuck are you doing?

Lifting my hand, I wrap strands of her silky brown hair around my finger. Her brush strokes grow slower until she stops.

“What are you doing?”

I lean down and tug at the strands for her to tilt her head back. Pressing a kiss to the side of her neck, I inhale deeply.

“Nikolai,” she whispers, her voice tight with desire. “You said it was only a one-time thing.”

“I did,” I breathe against her skin. “But then you gave me attitude in class.”

“You deserved it,” she groans as her head rolls against my shoulder.

“Hmm...” My teeth sink into the skin beneath her ear, and it draws a needy moan from her.

Christ, the sound she makes is fucking hot.

I press my front to her back, so she’ll feel how fucking hard she’s made me.

“You’re giving me whiplash,” she complains.

“I’m giving myself whiplash,” I chuckle as I slip a hand around her front. Unzipping her pants, I push beneath the fabric until my fingers brush over the manicured strip of curls between her legs. “You’re irresistible.”

Dipping my middle finger into her entrance and finding her wet for me, my lips latch onto her skin. I suck and bite until I’m sure it will leave a mark.

Slowly, I start to alternate between rubbing circles around her opening and flicking her clit.

“Jesus,” she moans as she drops the paintbrush and grabs hold of the easel for support. I push her forward until she’s pressed against the wet painting before rubbing the fuck out of her clit.

Her hips swivel, her ass grinding against my thigh.

With my free hand, I unzip my pants and fist my hard-on. With every stroke I give myself, I finger her harder.

“Nikolai,” she whimpers while gripping the easel so tightly her fingers turn white.

“Come, *Malyska*,” I order as I thrust my finger inside her. Her inner walls grip me tightly as she lets out a cry.

The instant she comes down from her high, I turn her around and order, “On your knees.”

Abigail sinks down to the ground, and not waiting for my instruction, she takes me deep into her mouth.

Fuck.

I’m so worked up by this woman that I don’t give a flying fuck that the guard can see us on the live security feed. At least my back is to the camera.

Abigail goes to town on my cock, and seconds later, she’s swallowing every drop I give her. My eyes burn on her face, the tears spiraling down her cheeks, and her swollen lips.

She might be the one on her knees, but I have a feeling if I give her half a chance, she’ll have me kneeling before her for the rest of my life.

Did I mention I’m fucked?

Clearly, my brain didn’t receive the message.

While she climbs to her feet, I tuck my cock away and pull up the zipper.

Paint coats the front of Abigail’s shirt, and her hair is a wild mess.

Carefree. It’s the only word I can use to fully describe her.

Lifting my hand to her face, I cup her cheek and brush my thumb over her bottom lip. Instead of running like before, I lean down and press a soft kiss to her mouth.

Unable to give her anything more, I turn around and walk toward the path.

“Nikolai,” she calls out. I stop but don’t turn to look at her. “Don’t get stuck in your head because of this. It’s just harmless fun.”

Harmless fun. I wish that were the case for me.

I don’t say anything in reply and continue to walk toward the castle.

What if I’m the one to fall in love with Abigail, and she can’t return my feelings? It would serve me right for deceiving Anja.

Chapter 16

Abbie

I've decided to take it easy on Nikolai. Maybe if I'm patient and I give him time, he might actually consider being in a relationship with me.

But until that happens, I'm keeping my heart under lock and key and enjoying the ride. *Literally.*

My father will lose his shit if Nikolai wants a relationship with me.

The thought makes me chuckle as Aurora and I walk out of the castle.

I give Elio a nod while he and Aurora greet each other. He's her personal bodyguard who always ends up babysitting my ass by default. It's no secret I don't get along with the man. He's too overbearing for my liking.

We climb into the backseat of the armored SUV and wait for the guards to get in.

"Ready?" Elio asks from the driver's seat.

No. I really don't want to leave the grounds after last weekend's attack. I wonder if my father even knows it happened.

"Yes," I mutter.

Aurora looks just as worried as me, and I reach over to give her hand a squeeze. "We have an army with us."

Smiling, she says, "You're right."

She takes out her phone and is probably texting with Misha while I stare out the window.

Nikolai surprised me yesterday. Not only did he apologize, but he instigated the intimate moment between us.

I wasn't lying when I told him he's an enigma. I'm struggling to figure the man out. Since we met, he's been guarded.

Okay, I understand he runs a billion-dollar diamond empire, and his family runs the bratva. You don't live long in our world if you trust random people.

And that's what I am to him. Just a random girl.

Maybe I should ask him to join me for a romantic dinner where we can get to know each other?

I let out a snort.

Something slams into the SUV, startling the ever-living shit out of me.

“Get down behind the seats,” Elio roars.

I quickly slide down between the seats, my eyes darting to Aurora’s ashen face.

When the SUV is hit by another spray of bullets, she screams, “It’s an attack!”

I hope she’s on a call with Misha

Fuck, I knew I should’ve stayed at St. Monarch’s!

When more bullets hit the SUV, I cover my head and let out a desperate cry.

With the hit on Aurora canceled, it’s clear they’re after me.

I don’t want to die.

We’re shot at again as Elio swerves around other cars, trying to lose our attackers.

“Misha,” Aurora whimpers as the SUV swerves again. “I’m scared.”

I look at Aurora’s terrified face and hate that she’s in this nightmare because of me.

They won’t kill her because she belongs to Misha. It’s just me they’re after.

The SUV shudders and lurches as something slams into us, and Aurora screams, “I love you!”

She shoves the device between her breasts, then grabs hold of my hand. Our eyes lock for a moment before there’s a hard slam into the back of the SUV. The vehicle lifts into the air for a second before it swerves badly and flips over.

A blood-curdling scream tears from my chest as horror washes over me. I’m tossed around like a rag doll before everything comes to a sudden stop.

“Jesus,” I groan, pain zipping through my body like bolts of lightning.

The SUV is upside down with us still in it, and I’m lying near Aurora, able to see she’s out cold.

Lifting my head, I shake it to rid my mind of the daze, then terror bleeds through me.

ShitShitShit!

I hear footsteps rushing toward the SUV, then men yelling in a language I don’t know.

Metal screeches as the door is yanked open, and I feel hands grab me.

“NoNoNoNoNooooo!” I scream as I’m pulled out of the vehicle. I claw at the doorframe, but it’s no use. A man flips me over, and for a split second, my eyes lock with his merciless ones before a fist is repeatedly slammed into my face.

The pain is jarring and so intense I drift in and out of consciousness. Blood fills my mouth, and I hear two shots being fired. Unspeakable fear shudders through me before my mind shuts down, and not sure whether I’ve been hit, I lose the battle as I pass out.

Chapter 17

Nikolai

Heading toward the studio, I see Uncle Carson standing outside his office at the end of the hallway.

When he notices me, he calls out, “Nikolai, we have a problem.”

Frowning, I walk closer. “What?” It’s not often I see my uncle worried, and it has me asking again, “What happened?”

“Aurora and Abigail were ambushed on their way to the Sartori’s mansion.”

The words hit fucking hard, tightening every muscle in my body. “The hits were canceled.”

“It wasn’t the bratva. The three yakuza students are responsible. It’s a fucking pissing contest between them and the enforcers.”

Christ.

A wave of intense worry slams into my gut, and I hate the words I have to ask. “Are they alive?”

Please. God, please.

“We think so. Misha was on a call with Aurora when it happened. They’re tracking her phone, and it looks like the women are being taken somewhere.”

I rush into my uncle’s office, and opening his vault, I grab my personal firearms from it. They’re engraved Heckler & Kochs my parents gave me for my twenty-first birthday. There’s a dragon, symbolizing my mother, on the handle of the one weapon. The other has a head of a tiger for my father, the images representing the years they were born in the Chinese horoscope.

Right after receiving the gift from them, I got the tattoo on my chest. The dragon is over my heart to keep my mother close to me, and the tiger is on the right so I can draw strength from my father.

I help myself to ammunition, and when I’m ready, Uncle Carson’s phone starts ringing.

“It’s Viktor,” my uncle says, then he puts my cousin on speakerphone as we walk out of his office, half of his guards following behind us.

“What the fuck?” Viktor asks. “I’m going to kill Misha, Alek, and Armani.”

“This time, it’s the yakuza’s fault,” Uncle Carson stands up for the three bratva enforcers. “We’re on our way to the scene.”

“I have another call coming through from one of the guards I sent with Misha. Hold.” My uncle puts Viktor on hold and takes the other call, also putting it on speaker. “What’s happening?”

“We’re at the train yard. Mr. D’Angelo and Mr. Sartori just arrived,” the guard informs us. “It doesn’t look good.”

“Jesus Christ,” I hiss.

“We’ll be there soon,” Uncle Carson mutters before ending the call and switching to Viktor’s call. “Sartori and D’Angelo heard about the attack. It’s going down at a trainyard.”

“Is Nikolai there?” Viktor asks, his tone tense.

“I’m here.”

“I give you full authority to speak and act on my behalf. If Sartori and D’Angelo won’t yield to the bratva, kill them.”

“Okay.”

I start to jog, just wanting to get to a vehicle. Being in this line of business all my life, I know the two women don’t have long.

I have to get to Abigail.

Everyone climbs into the row of SUVs, and soon we’re speeding out of the gates.

“Are you okay?” Uncle Carson asks.

“Hmm.” *No, I’m not fucking okay.*

“Nikolai,” he mutters. “Talk to me.”

“I just want to get to Abigail and deal with Sartori and D’Angelo.”

“You care about the woman,” he states the obvious.

More than I thought.

Fuck.

When I don’t say anything, Uncle Carson pats my arm.

The convoy of SUVs come to screeching stops at the back of the trainyard where a dozen other vehicles are already parked.

When I climb out and hear nothing but dead silence, my fucking heart cracks right down the middle.

Silence in war is never a good thing.

Chapter 18

Abbie

I wake up with a start, my eyes snapping open.

My body jerks, and it only takes a second for the horrendous realization to sink in.

Someone's on top of me.

My body jerks again as a man thrusts into me.

A boot slams into the side of my head, and I hear vile laughter. Something is said in an Asian language while pain splinters through my skull.

No.

I feel the repulsive movement inside me. I hear the slap of his skin against mine.

It's only then my blurring gaze manages to focus on the sneering face above me. His eyes are soulless, his features unnaturally evil.

God. No.

Stop.

Instantly bile churns in my stomach, and I comprehend the harrowing reality that I'm being raped. My soul cringes away from the depravity, fleeing to save itself from the malevolent darkness closing in.

My jaw clenches so hard I fear I might crack a tooth. A horrified groan escapes me. It sounds like something you'd hear from a dying pig.

Overwhelming despair coats my skin, seeping into me until every inch of me is tainted.

Shock shudders through me, and it's unlike anything I've ever felt before. It's dark and cold, stripping me of my light and dropping me into a darkness so suffocating there's no way for me to escape.

Again I hear the awful sound of skin slapping against skin. My arms fly up, and I begin to hit the rapist as hard as I can, my fists connecting with his neck and face.

"Nooooo," I cry brokenly, distraught sobs wracking through my chest.

The man who's been standing on the sidelines comes closer and grabs my arms, pinning them down above my head. He laughs at my vulnerability, the

sound vile and merciless, while the rapist grunts between harsh breaths.

My body keeps jerking with every thrust, and feeling the rapist's dick slip in and out of me makes something deep inside me shatter.

"No," I manage to whimper through my unspeakable shock, my body twisting and straining to escape the violence. "Stop."

"Blyad'!"

I hear the angry curse, and I know it means 'fuck' in Russian, then gunshots ring through the air.

The man holding my arms lets go, and I hear him fall somewhere by my head. The rapist slumps down on top of me, his dick softening before it slips out.

"No," I whisper, my tone sounding dead. "No." I gasp, trying to get air past the sickening trauma. "No."

Caught in the indescribable horror of what's happening to me, I can't process anything else.

The body is hauled off of me, and Alek's face appears above me. "Come! We have to move."

He grabs hold of my shoulders and yanks me to my feet. Pain engulfs my body, and my head feels as if a thousand needles are trying to pierce my skull.

I struggle to find my balance and sway as my eyes slowly creep over the dirty floor I was violated on. There are two dead bodies. One has his pants around his thighs, his hairy ass on full display.

Alek crouches down in front of me. "Lift your right foot, Abbie." His voice is icy and cruel.

Somehow I manage to place my hand on his shoulder, so I don't fall. Alek pulls my pants up my legs, and I feel him fastening the button. I hear the zipper go up.

"Abbie!" he snaps harshly before he grips my chin, forcing me to look at his face. "I know you're in shock, but we have to move. It's not safe."

I stare into his eyes and blink, unable to focus on anything but the soul-destroying fact that I was raped.

I was raped.

My lips part, and a strangled gasp escapes me.

Alek places his hand on the side of my neck, and for the first time ever, I see emotion on his face. He looks as tortured as I feel.

"I know, Abbie. I know this is fucked up, but you have to pull it together.

We have to get out of here.”

With his gun firmly in his right hand, he wraps his left arm around my shoulders and pushes me toward an exit. It’s only then I realize I’m in some kind of container.

Alek jumps down to the gravel below and gestures for me to come. My body is on automatic pilot as I move. Landing next to him, I sway again from the pain tearing through my body. He quickly wraps his arm around me again, and I walk because I have to. It looks like we’re at a trainyard.

I was raped.

As we climb through an opening between two train carriages, Alek’s arm slams into my stomach. “Wait, let me check if it’s safe,” he whispers before peeking around the carriage.

I can hear voices and only move when Alek pulls me out into the open. “Let’s stay here,” he says, his eyes on a group of men who seem to be discussing something.

Stuck in a nightmarish trance, my eyes lock on Nikolai as he says, “I’m here on behalf of my cousin. You’re outnumbered. Let’s end this war, D’Angelo.”

He looks so angry.

I see the gun he has trained on my father, and I feel nothing.

Nothing but the atrocious horror of what just happened to me.

I can’t focus on anything but the feel of the repulsive man inside me and the way my body jerked with each thrust. The disgust and shame are so thick and dark that everything else is blocked out.

Bile churns in my stomach again, and I feel ice cold. Tremors wrack through my body, and it has Alek holding me tighter to his side where I’ve been cowering.

“I’ve got you. You’re safe,” he murmurs, his words comforting.

Somehow I think to whisper, “Don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t,” he promises.

I can’t believe Alek saved me. Deep down, I thought he’d be one of the first to try and kill me.

Slowly I lift my eyes to his face. “Thank you.”

He shakes his head. There’s intense compassion warring with rage in his eyes.

“Abbie!” I hear Aurora scream. Suddenly, her arms wrap around me, and I lose the safety of Alek as she hugs me. “They told me you were dead!”

The trembling in my body grows drastically, and a groan ripples up my throat. “It hurts, Ra-Ra,” I whisper, my voice not sounding like my own.

It hurts so much.

Aurora pulls away from me, and my eyes lock on Nikolai, who’s stalking toward me. When he reaches me, he sweeps me up into his arms, and the moment I smell him, I crack.

Desperate to feel safe, I throw my arms around his neck while ugly sobs burst from me.

He hurt me so much, Nikolai. I can’t... I can’t.

“I have you, *moya dusha*. I won’t let anyone hurt you again.” His voice rumbles like thunder, and it has me clinging to him for the sake of what’s left of my sanity.

My cries turn hysterical. I’m unable to control anything, and my breaths are so fast no air reaches my lungs.

I’m placed on something before Nikolai’s face is in front of mine.

“Christ,” he growls angrily. “What have they done to your face?”

The words don’t register as I wrap my arms around my middle. Closing my eyes, I check out of reality because I can’t deal with what happened to me.

I’m lifted again, and I think Nikolai positions me on a seat, strapping a safety belt over me. A door slams, and the silence stretches before I hear him climb into the car.

My body breathes because it has to, but mentally, there’s nothing left of me.

The car moves, then I hear Nikolai’s voice. It sounds as if he’s miles away. “Abigail, look at me.”

I can’t.

I’ve lost all sense of time and my surroundings.

I’m still lying on that filthy floor with a monster violating me.

The car stops, and seconds or hours later, I’m lifted into Nikolai’s strong arms, and my head slumps against his shoulder.

“Christ, Abigail!”

There’s only concern in Nikolai’s harsh tone, but I can’t force my eyes open.

My body jolts as he runs, and I hear him shout, “She’s been hurt.”

“Place her on the bed,” I hear another voice. *A man.*

I float onto the mattress, and soon hands take my vitals before probing

my face. I feel the pain, but it's nothing compared to the devastation inside me.

I can't.

In a zombie state, I open my eyes and push the hands away from me. I sit up and throw my legs off the bed.

"Let the doctor look at you," Nikolai says, his voice strained with worry.

I shake my head and climb to my feet.

"Abigail!" Nikolai snaps. "Christ."

"She's in shock." My eyes turn to the speaker, and I hardly take in the man in the white coat.

A doctor?

He reaches for me, and I instantly recoil. "Don't touch me!" The growl from me sounds unnatural.

"Miss Sartori, we need to treat the wounds on your face. You probably have a concussion as well."

"Don't touch me," I whimper. "Don't touch me!" I move back, bumping into the bed.

Feeling cornered, I frantically look around, and seeing the space between Nikolai and the doctor, I dart forward and run for my life.

I make it into a hallway and turn right.

"Abigail!" Nikolai shouts.

Just then, Alek appears at the end of the hallway, and I sprint as fast as I can. "Alek," I breathe, his name barely audible on my lips. "Alek!"

He opens his arms in time for me to slam into his chest, and I start to ramble with pure desperation, "Help me. You have to help me."

"Shh...Abbie. I'll help you." I feel Alek's arms close around me, then he says, "Don't worry. I'll take care of her."

"What the fuck happened to her?" Nikolai demands, his voice thick with concern.

Oh God, if Nikolai stays with me, he'll realize what happened to me, and I don't want him to know. I'll die if he finds out.

"They beat the shit out of her," Alek mutters. "She's in shock. I killed the fuckers, so she probably feels safe with me. Just give her some space."

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

"The doctor needs to check her. She might have a concussion," Nikolai murmurs, his tone softer.

"Abbie," Alek says to get my attention. When he tries to push me away

from him, I start to cry, shaking my head wildly. He lets out a sigh. “I’ll check her face and watch her for the next twenty-four hours. We’ve done this shit during training.”

Sounding closer, Nikolai says, “Abigail.”

I shake my head, just needing time.

“Just give her space,” Alek says again. He moves his arm around my shoulders and leads me back to the infirmary, then he asks the doctor, “Is there a private room Abbie can use?”

“Yes, sir,” the doctor answers. “Through that door.”

“Bring me supplies to clean her wounds with,” Alek orders before he guides me to the room.

When the door shuts behind us, I pull away from Alek. I wrap my arms around my middle and hunch my shoulders.

Every muscle in my body cramps as ugly cries are ripped from my chest. “Thank you,” I sob. “I just...need...”

“I know,” Alek murmurs gently. “I know exactly what you need. You’re safe in this room. I’ll stand guard while you break.”

My eyes connect with Alek, and seeing the torment clear as day, I know he means every word. He’s suffered something severe, and now that I’m losing my mind, I understand why Alek comes off as insane.

There’s a knock at the door, and I scramble to the corner of the room. Alek opens, and when it’s the doctor with the medical supplies, my muscles tighten, my body on high alert to flee any form of danger.

When the door shuts again, and it’s just Alek and me, I sink down into a crouching position with my arms wrapped tightly around my body. I close my eyes and slowly start to rock.

There’s no way I can face my reality. I can’t deal with what happened.

I don’t want to think about it.

I just want to switch off my mind.

Chapter 19

Nikolai

Jesus H. Christ.

Sitting in the office with Uncle Carson, we clean up the fucking mess that's today.

"Five of my men were killed!" Taoka, the leader of the yakuza, shouts from where we have the video feed up on a monitor.

"Not on St. Monarch's ground," my uncle mutters.

Rage burns through me for what was done to Abigail. My tone is deadly as I growl, "*Your men beat my woman into an unrecognizable mess! They can be glad they're dead. I would've fed them to rats for daring to touch what's mine.*"

Yes, I said it. My woman. There's no escaping the fact that Abigail is special to me. I don't know if it's love, but I'm dead fucking sure she's mine.

And right now, there's another fucking man comforting her.

My rage increases tenfold at the thought of Abigail standing in Alek Aslanhov's arms.

Taoka stares at me, and I see a glimmer of fear on his face. I might not be the head of the bratva, but it is well known I'm not as merciful as my cousin.

"The yakuza initiated the attack," Uncle Carson mutters. "Your men ambushed Aurora D'Angelo and Abigail Sartori. They held and tortured the women, hoping it would end in bloodshed between the women's fathers and the bratva."

"We, the bratva, take this as an attack on us," I snap, unable to control the tone of my voice. "Unless you want a fucking war on your doorstep, you'll pay for the damages."

Damages my fucking ass. My woman was beaten so fucking brutally, she's traumatized out of her fucking mind.

Everything that's happened to her is because of the people she calls loved ones. Due to her father's stubbornness, there was a hit on her life. Due to her best friend's boyfriend having a pissing contest with the yakuza, she got kidnapped and beaten.

I'm done standing on the sidelines of her life that's an absolute fucking disaster.

She deserves her island where she can paint to her heart's content, and I'll make sure her dream becomes a reality.

Taoka lets out a sigh and shakes his head. "I respect the bratva. I'll talk to Viktor myself."

My eyes narrow on the man. "It wasn't Viktor's woman who was beaten."

Taoka stares at me for a moment, then curses in Japanese. "What do you want?"

No amount of money can compensate for the suffering Abigail was forced to endure, but just to make a point, I mutter, "Five million euros. One for every soldier of the yakuza who dared to touch what's mine."

I'll give the money to Abigail to do with what she wants. It will allow her to move out from under her father's control.

Taoka nods, and swallowing the bitter pill that's his pride, he says, "I apologize for my soldiers' careless acts. I never sanctioned the attack."

I nod and rise to my feet. "Transfer the funds to St. Monarch's."

Considering the meeting over with, I stalk out of the office and head to my suite so I can shower.

Stepping into my room, I rush through the tedious routine so I can get back to the infirmary. Taking into account all the shit that went down today, I'm surprised to find the infirmary quiet. I assume Aurora has been tended to and that she's resting.

Stopping outside the room where Abigail is, I softly knock on the door.

It only takes a moment before Alek opens. He nods for me to come in, then whispers, "She just passed out."

My eyes lock on Abigail, where she's lying on the bed in a fetal position, her arms tightly wrapped around her middle.

Christ, my heart.

With the blood cleaned off her face, I can see all her bruises. Her right eye is painfully swollen, a butterfly bandage over a cut beneath her eyebrow.

Her jaw is every fucking shade of the rainbow, and her bottom lip is split open.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter. I turn my head to look at Alek. "Thank you for killing the fuckers."

He just nods.

Wanting to avoid future misunderstandings, I say, “She’s mine.”

He nods again. “I know.” He glances at Abigail. “You’ll have to be patient with her. She’s traumatized and will need time.” His eyes come back to mine. “A lot of time. Don’t push her.”

Suspicious that something else happened to Abigail, my eyes narrow on Alek. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He shakes his head. “Just be patient with Abbie.” Sighing, he adds, “And I’m not going to turn my back on her.”

I don’t know much about Alek, only that he’s unhinged and a bratva enforcer.

He lets out another sigh, then mutters, “Stop planning ways to kill me. I’m just her friend. I saved Abbie, so naturally, she feels safe with me. That’s all it is.”

He better mean it, or he’ll lose his fucking dick.

My eyes turn back to Abigail, and I step closer until I’m next to the bed. Lifting a hand, I gently brush my fingers over her messy hair.

She lets out a whimper, curling into a smaller ball, and it fucking cracks my heart right down the middle.

My stomach drops, and my fucking soul shrivels as my eyes snap to Alek. Before I can ask if the unspeakable was done to her, he shakes his head.

Thank God.

I glance back at Abigail, my eyes drifting over every inch of her. She’s still wearing the same clothes, the blood on her shirt dry.

Walking to the door, I whisper, “I’ll get her clean clothes.”

The corner of Alek’s mouth lifts. “And I’ll stand here and guard her.”

We stare at each other for a moment before I nod and leave the room.

Grabbing a universal keycard from the security control room, I head to Abigail’s suite and let myself in. Her soft scent instantly envelops me, and I take a moment to stare at the paintings on display by the windows.

I’ll make sure you get to paint to your heart’s content, moya dusha.

It’s the second time I’ve called her my soul, and I only realize it now.

Is that what this woman is to me?

I want her happy, and I’ll kill to keep her safe.

My heartbeat speeds up, and my mouth grows dry.

I’ve fallen hopelessly in love with Abigail Sartori.

Christ, the woman who used to be the bane of my existence with her flirtatious and carefree nature, has taken my heart prisoner.

When the fuck did it happen?

I'm at her mercy now, and having no control over whether she'll love me back is unsettling.

Chapter 20

Abbie

Alek arranged with the doctor to start me on antibiotics in case I got a disease from the rapist's infested dick. At least I have a contraceptive implant, so I know I won't get pregnant.

I heard Alek threatening the doctor with his life if he told anyone I was raped.

Who would've thought the crazy guy I saw as a creep would become my protector?

It's the only thing I'm thankful for right now.

Standing in the shower, the hot water pelts my skin. The wounds on my face burn, and my body's scrubbed raw from my attempts to rid my skin of the feel of the rapist.

But no amount of scrubbing can remove the feel of him inside me.

I stare at the tiled wall, my breaths shallow and my heart only a whisper.

Did it really happen to me?

Suddenly, I'm bombarded with vile memories – I hear the bastard's grunts, and wrapping my arms around myself, I shut my eyes tightly as a whimper shudders from me.

I can't...

Using every ounce of strength God has given me, I force the memories back until a deadly silence settles within me.

Pretend it never happened.

Don't think about it. Don't give it power in your life.

It was just a nightmare.

You're stronger than the bastard. Don't let him break you.

He's dead. Alek killed him.

I open my eyes and suck in a quivering breath.

No one can know. You have to pretend nothing happened so they won't ask questions.

I lift my chin and turn off the faucets. Stepping out of the shower, I dry my body and put on the clean clothes Nikolai brought.

There's a pair of leggings and a t-shirt. I hate that the clothes fit tight on my body.

Lifting my head, I look at my reflection in the mirror. My face looks like someone took a hammer to it, but I couldn't care less. It's nothing compared to the wounds inflicted on my soul.

I open the door and wrap my arms around me before I walk back into the room where Nikolai and Alek are standing.

I don't look at the men as I walk to the other door.

"Where are you going?" Nikolai asks, his tone so gentle it makes tears jump to my eyes.

"To my suite," I whisper as I let myself out of the private room in the infirmary.

I hear Nikolai and Alek behind me as I walk down the hallway, and at the foot of the stairs, I stop to glance at them. "I'll be okay. I'm going to get some sleep."

Alek nods. "If you need anything, just let me know."

I lock eyes with him. "Thank you, Alek." My chin trembles with the gratitude I feel toward him.

I have to force myself to look at Nikolai because whenever I lock eyes with him, I want to cry myself to death. "I'll see you later."

He shakes his head. "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

Unable to find the strength to argue with him, I climb the stairs.

When we reach my suite, I'm surprised when he swipes a keycard through the lock. My eyes jump to his face, which has him explaining, "It's a universal card for all the rooms."

I step inside, my arms tightening around me. With my eyes lowered, I whisper, "I'll be okay. You can go."

Nikolai comes in and shuts the door behind him. I can feel his eyes on my face.

There's a dangerous vibe coming from him, but deep down, I know he won't hurt me. I think he's just upset by what happened today.

Still, his presence is an immense force in comparison to the shell that's left of me.

Reaching for my chin, he murmurs, "Look at me."

I pull away from him, shaking my head.

"*Moya dusha.*" The whisper is soft and intimate, but I don't know what the words mean. They sound loving, though, making my chin tremble.

I try to hold back the tears, wanting to appear as the old Abbie – the one who was sassy and strong.

But that Abbie died on a filthy floor, and all that's left is a broken woman.

I press my lips together, the cut stinging from my effort to fight the tears from overwhelming me.

“Christ, baby,” Nikolai groans.

His arms wrap around me, his hand covering the back of my head as he gently presses me to his chest.

The trauma builds and builds like a volcano until the pressure becomes unbearable. It explodes from me with absolute devastation, a heartbreaking cry ripping straight from my brutalized soul.

Nikolai holds me tighter as if he's trying to engulf me with his body. “I'm so fucking sorry you got hurt.” He presses a kiss to my damp hair. “It will never happen again. I promise you.”

I pull my arms free from between us and wrap them tightly around his waist, my fingers clinging to his shirt.

As I weep for what was done to me – what was taken from me – Nikolai holds me as though he would die if he let go.

He's the last man I was intimate with, and there will never be another. The mere thought of sex repulses me to the point where I feel physically sick.

But having Nikolai's arms around me offers me some comfort.

I mourn the loss of what could've been between us and feel feverish from all the crying when I finally manage to calm down.

Pulling away from Nikolai, I put a safe distance between us. I feel uncomfortable as I look at him. “Thanks, but if you don't mind, I want to be alone.”

He tilts his head, a frown line forming between his eyes. “I don't think you should be alone right now.”

“It doesn't matter what you think.” My words sound too cold, but knowing I must stop whatever was building between us, I push through. “We both know things were never going to be serious between us. It was fun, but it's over. Please leave.”

When he stares at me as if he's trying to look into my soul, I turn my head away.

“Now is not the time to talk about us.” He takes a step closer, and I quickly move farther away.

If he touches me, I might weep myself to death.

“Please leave, Nikolai.” I suck in a shuddering breath. “Today was traumatic enough. I have no energy to deal with you.”

Silence follows my words, and when it feels as if his soul is reaching out to mine, I spin around and rush to the safety of my bedroom. I shut the door behind me and turn the lock to make sure he can't come in.

Please leave.

There's a lot I can endure and overcome, but the trauma and Nikolai Vetrov are two things I can't handle.

The whiplash our weird and short relationship gave me will break me now. I can't fight for him anymore, not when the battle for my sanity hangs in the balance.

Stepping away from the door, I walk to my closet and grab a baggy t-shirt and sweatpants. I quickly change into the clothes and feel a little better when my curves are hidden by all the fabric.

Moving to the bed, I climb beneath the covers and pull them over my head while I curl into a small ball.

Refusing to think of Nikolai or the rape, I imagine I'm painting, forcing myself to focus on the brush sweeping over a canvas.

“Palette,” I whisper, listing all the supplies. “Canvas. Easel. Brush.” I keep repeating the words until, finally, sleep takes me from this violent world.

Chapter 21

Nikolai

I'm going to lose my fucking mind.

For the past week, Abigail has been a ghost of her former self.

Even though she *pretends* nothing happened, I see straight through her smiles and carefree demeanor. It's all a fucking act, and everyone's falling for it.

I see the terror in her eyes, the tight pull of her features. I can fucking feel her crumbling.

If she thinks I'm going to give up on her, she's sorely mistaken. I'm giving her the space she asked for, but as soon as she's recovered from the ordeal of having the shit beaten out of her, I'm chasing her down.

Make no mistake, Abigail Sartori will be mine.

Abigail's at the back of the studio, running on the treadmill as if she's attempting to outrun her demons. My gaze drifts over the bruises that are taking their sweet fucking time to heal.

My eyes lower to the long sleeve shirt that's out of place. She must be dying of the fucking heat. The cargo pants sit loose on her, and there are no signs of her sexy curves.

"Instructor Nikolai," Paula says, pulling my attention away from Abigail.

Right, the attendees are waiting to hear what they should do today.

I shake my head and clear my throat. "Pair up and spar," I order before I walk toward Abigail.

She's so deep in thought, and when I get close enough, I hear her whisper, "Easel. Canvas. Palette. Brush. Paint. Easel. Canvas. Palette. Brush. Paint."

"Abigail," I say to pull her out of her thoughts, making sure to keep my tone gentle. She blinks and seems to come out of the daze before she looks at me. "Go paint. It's too early for you to be back at training."

She shakes her head as she increases the speed on the treadmill, then mutters, "I'm fine."

I take a deep breath, so I don't yank her off the equipment. "You're

pushing too hard.”

Slamming the stop button, she gives me an angry glare. “No, you’re the one pushing. I’m here to train, Instructor Vetrov. Leave me be.”

She walks around me and heads toward the other attendees.

“Hawkins,” she snaps. “Let’s spar.”

Over my dead body. I stalk closer and order, “Caspian, get back to sparring with Duarte.”

I take another breath so my voice is calm when I say, “I don’t want to see you in this studio until you’re fully healed. Go get some rest.”

She stares at me for a moment, but there’s no sign of the daring spark that used to light up her eyes. Nodding, she turns around and stalks out.

I walk to the door and watch as she heads toward the armory.

God help me. Every ounce of my being wants to help and comfort her, but she’s shut me out.

For the millionth time since Saturday, worry creeps into my mind, and with every passing hour, it claws chunks out of my heart.

Yes, Abigail was brutally beaten, but I find it hard to believe it’s broken her. She’s stronger than that.

Something else happened. I bet my fucking life on it.

Leaving my studio, I walk down the hallway to where the lessons in torture take place and knock on the door.

Igor, the instructor, glances in my direction. “Can I help?”

I gesture to Alek. “I need to speak with Mr. Aslanhov.”

Alek lets out a sigh as he gets up. When he steps into the hallway, I nod toward my uncle’s office that’s not currently in use.

He follows me, and only when I shut the door behind us do I ask, “You found Abigail, right?”

He lifts an eyebrow and crosses his arms over his chest. “Yes.”

“What did you see?”

Alek stares at me, then shakes his head. “It’s not my place to tell you anything related to Abbie.”

Christ.

My eyes darken on him. “You not telling me will make me assume the worst.”

He shrugs again. “I can’t tell you what and what not to think.”

I let out a harsh breath because I know he won’t talk. If he swore to Abigail to keep quiet, he will take whatever happened to her to his deathbed.

Silence speaks louder than words, though. Abigail wasn't just beaten.

"You may go," I growl, not happy that I'm still in the dark concerning the woman I love.

Alek opens the door, then pauses to say, "If you care about Abbie the way I think you do, you'll be patient with her."

Patience is not a virtue I possess.

Alek returns to his training, leaving me alone in the office with my worries.

The word 'rape' shudders through my mind, but I shut it down, unable to associate such a violent act with Abigail.

No, she's just traumatized because she was almost killed twice in a matter of a week.

That's bullshit, and you know it.

"Christ, I hope I'm wrong about what I think happened to her," I mutter as I walk out of the office.

I'm just about to pass the armory when I decide to check on Abigail.

It's impossible to stay away from her.

I find her in the shooting range, busy emptying a clip on a target.

I move closer and lean my shoulder against the wall that runs along the back of the stalls.

When she stops to load a new clip into the gun, her head jerks as if she's trying to shake something off. She clenches her jaw and her hands still as she squeezes her eyes shut.

I watch as my woman fights against whatever demon she's facing, and unable to stand by while she struggles, I walk to her and pull her into my arms.

She freezes, and I feel her body tense.

"It's me," I say so she doesn't think it's some random fucker.

Instantly she slumps against my chest, her hand gripping my shirt. She lets me hold her for a while before she pushes away.

Lifting my hand to her bruised face, I gently cup her jaw. "Will you look at me?"

Abigail shakes her head before whispering, "I'm okay."

Leaning down, I press my forehead to hers, and our eyes lock. "You're not okay, and I'm not going to watch you break in front of my eyes." I pull a little back, my love for her pouring into my voice as I say, "I'm here for you, Abigail. I'll help you in any way I can."

She takes a step back and removes my hand from her cheek. “I’m just tired. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

I tilt my head and stare at her, wishing I could find a way to get through to her. Instead of pushing her, I say, “I’ll give you your space, but I’m not going anywhere. I’ll wait until you’re ready.”

She turns away from me, and picking up the gun, she starts walking toward the armory. I follow her, and only after she’s handed the weapon in does she glance at me. “Thank you, Nikolai, but I’m really okay. It’s just been a shitty two weeks.”

“Take a week off from training and get some rest. Okay?”

Abigail lets out a sigh and nods before she walks out of the armory. I follow her until I reach my studio, then watch her head toward the stairs.

I don’t know what I’ll do if Abigail continues to keep me out of her life.

Chapter 22

Abbie

As I'm not allowed to attend training during the day, I hide in my suite, staring at a blank canvas. The hours are long and torturous.

I don't know what to paint. Nothing is beautiful anymore.

I keep swirling the tip of the brush in the paint on the palette, the colors blending until everything is black.

It's fitting.

Lifting the brush to the blank canvas, I slash a line from corner to corner. Slowly I start to cover the white of the canvas until everything is black.

It's exactly what's been done to my life. All the color has been erased from it, leaving me in darkness.

Sitting with the palette and brush in my hands, the paint dries as afternoon turns to evening, and all I can do is stare at the ruined canvas that represents my life.

I wish I was stronger.

I hate that I can't erase the memories and reclaim my life.

I hear a knock at my door but don't move to open it. Whoever is here can go away.

When I hear the door click open, I close my eyes.

Nikolai. Only he has the keycard.

I hear movement, and while part of me wants him to hold me and make it all better, I wish he would leave me alone. It's hard to keep the secret from his piercing eyes that can look into my soul.

I barely have the strength to survive this hell, never mind, fight him.

"Abigail," he murmurs, his tone soft... almost loving.

God. I can't...

I lower my head while I set the palette and brush down.

I hear him place something on the coffee table before he moves closer to me.

Hold me and never let me go. Even if the odds of us working as a couple are zero.

I can't speak the words because Nikolai needs a strong woman beside him, and that's not me. I already told him there will never be anything between us, and I won't be able to do it a second time. The first was hard enough.

"*Moya lyubov'*," he says, his gentle voice cutting through the meager defenses I'm struggling to keep up around me, "you need to eat."

I can't. The bile in my stomach doesn't stop churning long enough for me to eat.

His touch is soft as he takes hold of my shoulders. I stand up and let him lead me over to the sofa, where I get to sit again. There's a plate of grilled chicken and roasted vegetables on the table.

I have no energy.

I have no will to live.

I have nothing to give to this cruel world.

Nikolai takes a seat beside me and cuts a piece of the grilled chicken breast. He brings the fork to my mouth, and I know if I refuse, it will lead to a fight.

My lips part, and I take the bite of food. No taste explodes over my tongue, and I struggle to chew and swallow.

"Relax. I'm here as a friend," he says before he spears a piece of broccoli.

A friend. I need that more than ever.

Aurora has finally found her happiness with Misha. They got engaged and will marry soon. I can't ruin that by talking to her about what happened to me.

I lift my eyes to Nikolai's face, and our eyes lock as I take the bite of broccoli from the fork.

The corner of his mouth lifts. "My mother used to force-feed us whenever we wouldn't eat our food."

It's hard to imagine the legendary Winter Hemsley being a mother. "What was your childhood like?" I ask.

"In short, it was amazing," he answers without hesitation. "I grew up in a loving home."

Unlike mine.

I let out a sigh. "It's rare in our world to come from a loving home."

Much to my surprise, he continues to tell me about himself. "I was a skilled fighter at the age of ten, and I killed my first man at sixteen."

"Who?"

Nikolai shakes his head. “It was a guard who helped Inna sneak out to the mainland.”

My eyebrow lifts. “So it’s true? You live on an island?”

He nods, and there’s satisfaction on his face as he feeds me another piece of chicken. “You’ll love it. There’s plenty of nature to paint.” His eyes flick to the black canvas before he focuses on spearing another vegetable.

After I swallow the food, I ask, “Didn’t it get lonely on the island?”

“No.” His eyes meet mine, and there’s no sign of the dangerous man I’ve flirted with before hell was unleashed on me. His eyes are warm and kind, and it has me staring at him.

“Inna is only three years younger than me. We grew up being best friends. I got to attend school on the mainland, where I met Maxim. He’s my brother-in-law.”

“It must be nice that your best friend married your sister,” I comment.

Nikolai shakes his head. “No, I married Maxim’s sister. Anja. Inna is married to Sergei Romanhov. He’s part of the bratva.”

I don’t think as I ask, “What was it like being married?”

Nikolai is quiet for a moment, cutting the rest of the chicken into pieces.

He feeds me a bite, then says, “I only recently realized it took a lot out of me. Deceiving a dying woman came at a price.”

My eyes lock on his. “What price?”

There’s a moment’s silence while he feeds me more food before he admits, “It was hard to be intimate with her. I’m not good at pretending, so I had to work my ass off to make her believe I loved her. I never want to be in a position like that again.”

I don’t even realize that having a normal conversation with Nikolai is making me forget my demons for a blissful moment.

Before I know it, Nikolai places the cutlery down on the empty plate.

I lean my shoulder against the back of the sofa as I ask, “Why did you marry her?”

He shrugs before taking a deep breath. “I did it for Maxim. He wanted his sister happy during her final days.”

There’s a spark of warmth in my heart. “You’re a good man, Nikolai.”

Letting out a chuckle, he smirks. “I beg to differ.”

I’m finally relaxed and begin to feel sleepy. “What’s the blood diamond business like?”

He moves into a comfortable position beside me, and my eyes drift over

his powerful body. My stomach flutters, but instantly bile douses the sensation.

I shake my head and close my eyes to focus on keeping the horrific memories under lock and key. The darkness rears up, chasing the relaxing atmosphere away and filling the air with tension.

Nikolai notices the change and whispers, "Can I hold you?"

Needing his strength, I nod. Instantly his arms envelop me, his hug like a comforting and protective blanket wrapped around me.

He holds me for a couple of minutes before he moves me to lean against him. I rest my head on his chest, and he presses a kiss to my hair.

"The blood diamond business is ruthless but lucrative. Dealing with rebels, you never know whether you'll walk away with a shipment or have to fight for your life. They're unpredictable and don't play by the same rules as the bratva and mafia," he continues to talk as if I didn't just have a mini breakdown.

"It must be stressful." I hesitate before I place my hand on his abs.

A week ago, I would've been jumping out of my skin to have Nikolai sit and talk with me.

But it's hard to find joy with the weight of the depravity bearing down on my shoulders.

"You get used to it," he chuckles, his chest moving against my cheek. He clears his throat, then asks, "What was your childhood like?"

I let out a deep breath. "Nothing like yours. My father was hardly home, and my mother loves her margaritas too much."

I feel his fingers brush through my hair, the touch soothing.

"What got you into painting?"

"Art class at school." My mouth almost curves into a smile. "I lived for the hour I got to paint."

With Nikolai telling me about himself, I want to give him something in return. "I don't want to take over my father's business." I swallow hard. "I don't want to be at St. Monarch's."

"You don't have to," he murmurs.

I let out a bitter chuckle. "I have no choice in the matter."

His fingers keep brushing through my hair. "You do." He places his other hand beneath my chin and nudges my face up so I'll look at him. "You always have a choice, but let's step off this subject so you can relax again. Tell me about your friendship with Aurora."

I stare into his eyes, wondering where this version of him came from. Before the ambush, Nikolai was distant and sometimes downright cruel.

But now he's warm and caring.

Why?

Does he know?

Does he pity me?

"Shh..." he hums. "Don't get stuck in your head. Talk to me."

I rest my cheek against his chest again and closing my eyes, I whisper, "I'd rather hear about your life. Is there something you love to do in your spare time?"

Nikolai chuckles, "I don't have enough spare time for a hobby."

"That's a pity."

I feel him pressing a kiss to my hair, and when silence falls between us, I start to drift off to sleep. I try to fight it because I know there are only nightmares waiting for me.

Nikolai brushes his fingers up and down my back, and it doesn't take long before I lose the battle against sleep.

Chapter 23

Nikolai

After Abigail fell asleep, I sat like a frozen statue before I dared to move her to the bed.

I spent the night holding the woman I've fallen unbelievably hard for while she slept like the dead.

Christ, I miss her flirtatious nature.

I miss her carefree smiles.

I miss her sass and how she always said what she was thinking with no filter.

She's not even a shadow of her former self, and it guts me to see her struggle. I wish she would open up and allow me to help.

I'm already late for my combat class with the third-year attendees when she starts to stir. Her cheek rubs against my chest, and her arm tightens around my waist.

She lets out a contented sigh that warms my heart, but a minute later, her head pops up, and confusion tightens her features.

"Morning," I murmur, making sure to keep my voice soft.

Her eyes dart to my face, and for a moment, there's only surprise, but then I see terror creeping back into her irises.

She pushes away from me and sits up. Sweeping a hand over her messy hair, she whispers, "Morning." When she climbs off the bed, she asks, "You slept here?"

"Yes." I get up and quickly put on my boots. "Did you sleep well?"

Abigail thinks for a couple of seconds, and with surprise flashing over her face, she nods. "I did." Her eyes dart to me. "And you?"

A smile curves my lips. "I got to hold you in my arms, so I slept like the dead." Worry darkens her eyes, and it has me asking, "What's going on in that head of yours?"

She glances in the direction of the living room, her teeth tugging at her bottom lip before she answers, "I can't be in a relationship."

"I know." Her gaze darts back to my face as I explain, "I just want to be

your friend, Abigail. I'm not sure what happened to you, but I'm hoping you'll let me be there for you."

"Just friends?" she asks, even though I can see she doesn't like the sound of that.

"Until you decide otherwise," I assure her before admitting the truth, "I'll take you any way I can have you."

Her eyebrows draw together, and she looks so fucking sad all I want to do is sweep her into my arms and never let go.

I fist my hands by my sides to keep from grabbing her to me.

"It's unfair to you, Nikolai." Her voice is hoarse, taking a swing at my heart.

Slowly I move closer to her until I'm able to place my hand against her cheek. "Being forced to the sidelines while I have to watch you struggle alone through this trauma is unfair. I know this isn't about me, but I'm begging you to let me in. Let me comfort you and give you the strength to get through this."

She lowers her head, so I can't see her eyes before she shakes her head.

I press a kiss to her forehead, then say, "I'm not going anywhere, Abigail. I won't ask questions and will just support you. Okay?"

Still not looking at me, she nods.

I kiss her forehead again before stepping away from her. "Go out into the garden and paint, *moya lyubov'*."

She nods again, and as I walk toward the living room, I hear her ask, "What do the words mean?"

I stop by the door, and opening it, I glance back to the bedroom where she's standing. Our eyes lock as I admit, "My love."

Again sadness washes over her features, and I hate leaving her but force myself to step into the hallway, shutting the door behind me.

Small victories win the battle, Nikolai.

Letting out a sigh, I head to my own suite so I can shower and get to work. I've stationed an extra guard in the security room to keep watch over Abigail. He's to notify me if she doesn't order food or go to the dining hall and if he sees anything out of the ordinary.

When I'm freshly showered and ready for the day, I stop by the security room to notify Karlin that Abigail will be painting in the garden today.

I'm walking to the studio when Uncle Carson calls out, "Come to my office."

Popping my head into the studio where the third-year attendees are, I order the cartel members, “Continue sparring for the rest of the lesson.”

When I walk into my uncle’s office, he instantly smiles at me. “I have good news.”

I take a seat opposite his desk, raising an eyebrow, “Yeah?”

“I found a replacement for the combat instructor position.”

I’ve waited to hear the words from him, but now I worry about leaving Abigail here. “Who.”

“Hey, brother,” I hear the familiar voice behind me, and surprised, I glance over my shoulder at my sister.

“Hey.” I rise from the chair and give her a hug. “What are you doing here?”

Inna lets out a chuckle. “I’m the replacement.”

My eyebrows raise. “You are?” Keeping a hand on her shoulder, I ask, “Why didn’t you tell me you were considering the position?”

Inna shrugs. “Sergei and I wanted to be sure it’s the right thing for the children.”

Wow. It’s seldom I’m caught by surprise.

“And before you ask,” Uncle Carson chuckles. “I did not strong-arm her into the decision.”

Moving my hand to my sister’s back, I nudge her toward a chair. Once we’re both seated, I stare at her and ask, “Are you sure? The attendees are nothing but an aggravation.”

A burst of laughter escapes her. “I’m the one who was blessed with patience. Unlike you.”

Right. Inna is the complete opposite of me.

She gives me a reassuring smile. “The kids will love it here, and they’ll get the training they need to take over the business once we retire.”

True.

I nod. “As long as you’re happy, I’ll support your decision.”

“I’ll still help with the family business,” she says.

Taking a deep breath, I smile at my sister and uncle before asking, “When is Inna starting?”

“In two weeks,” she answers. “Then you’re free to go home.”

I have two weeks left with Abigail. Fuck.

Nodding, I ask, “Are the children here?”

Inna shakes her head. “They’re at home with Sergei.” She stands up, and

I quickly rise to my feet. My sister presses a kiss to my cheek. “My flight is waiting.”

“Thank you for coming, Inna,” our uncle says. “We can’t wait for you to join the St. Monarch’s family. I’ll have a family suite readied for you.”

My sister smiles brightly. “I’ll see you in two weeks.” Then she turns her attention to me. “Don’t kill any of the attendees during your last two weeks.”

“I’ll do my best,” I mutter, not making any promises. “I’ll walk you out.”

After leaving the office, Inna asks, “Is the meeting with Tshimaga still set for the end of the month?”

I nod, then say, “You don’t have to attend. I can handle it.”

Inna lets out an amused chuckle. “When will you stop trying to keep me from dealing with the rebels?”

“Never.” We reach the castle's front doors, where we stop to finish the conversation. “Let me deal with the dangerous aspect of the business. Your children need you alive.”

Inna stares at me for a solid minute, and I’m just starting to think she’s going to tell me to go to hell when she nods. “If that’s what you want.”

My eyebrows fly up again. “Really? You’re agreeing?”

“Pfft.” She rolls her eyes at me. “Don’t make a big deal of it. Like you said, my children need me.” She waves a hand at the foyer. “Besides, I’ll be busy here.”

Inna’s eyes lock on the stairs, and it has me glancing over my shoulder. Abigail is standing at the top of the staircase, her arms full with her paint supplies and her eyes locked on my sister.

“Anyway,” Inna murmurs, “I’ll see you soon. Don’t miss me too much.” She presses another kiss on my cheek, and we give each other a tight hug.

“Hold on a second.” I glance at Abigail, and not wanting any misunderstandings, I say, “Come meet my sister.”

Surprise flutters over her face, and she descends the stairs. With her arms full, the two women can’t shake hands, but Abigail smiles at Inna. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Abigail Sartori.”

Inna tilts her head, her eyes darting between Abigail and me, then she gives me a questioning look.

I nod, answering her unspoken question, and it makes her smile widely. She turns her attention back to Abigail. “The pleasure is mine.”

My sister's eyes drift over the bruises on Abigail’s face, but wisely she doesn’t comment on them.

“I wish I could stay, but my flight is waiting,” Inna says before she gives me a mischievous look. “I’ll call Mom and tell her the good news.”

The good news being Abigail. God help me. Mom will blow up my phone with her calls.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I grumble playfully.

Inna just chuckles as she walks out of the castle.

I watch her climb into the back of an armored SUV, and only when the vehicle drives toward the gate do I turn around to find Abigail staring at me.

“What good news?” she asks.

I take the easel and canvas bag from her and start to walk toward the back of the castle. “Inna is taking over as combat instructor.”

“Oh.” I can feel Abigail’s eyes on me and meet her gaze as she asks, “When will you leave?”

“In two weeks.”

“Oh.”

Christ, there’s no way I’ll be able to leave Abigail here.

Only when we step out of the side door and make our way to the waterfall do I say, “I think a vacation would do you a world of good.”

She lets out an empty-sounding chuckle. “If only miracles happened.”

I set the easel down, and Abigail moves it into the position she wants. When she takes the canvas bag from me, she murmurs, “Thanks.”

My eyes are glued to her face as I blurt out the proposal, “Come home with me.”

Her gaze darts to my face, and she gapes at me. “What?”

Not wanting her to feel pressured, I quickly add, “Just for a short while. You’ll love the island, and you can paint to your heart’s delight. Take a break from St. Monarch’s and the pressures of life.”

“I...ahh...”

When uncertainty flashes over her face, I say, “You don’t have to give me an answer now. Think about it.”

Abigail nods, but she seems nervous as she places a blank canvas on the easel. Her eyes only dart to me for a second. “You don’t have to stay. I know you’re busy with work.”

Work can fucking wait.

Stepping closer, my tone is cautious when I mention, “I saw the black painting. Are you struggling to find inspiration?”

She lets out a miserable sigh. “I was just having a bad day.”

Wanting to distract her from her trauma, I take another step closer to her and ask, “Will you give me a painting lesson.”

The corner of her mouth lifts. “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

Shrugging, I shove a hand in my pocket. “Explain what everything is for. Show me how you hold the brush. Start with the little things.”

A small smile plays around her lips as she nods. “Okay, but I can’t guarantee you’ll learn anything.”

I don’t care about that, moya lyubov’. I just want to spend time with you and offer a distraction from your demons.

Abigail starts to list all the equipment and shows me the right amount of paint to squirt on the palette.

When her brush touches the canvas, and she starts to paint, she falls silent, and soon I watch the image take shape.

There are no blacks, but instead, vibrant colors, and I’m taking it as another win.

Chapter 24

Abbie

It seems feeling torn in two is becoming my new normal.

Whenever I spend time with Nikolai, who's been super patient and supportive the past week, I forget what happened to me. But once I'm alone again, the nightmare returns full force, and I know nothing can come of a friendship with Nikolai. At some point, he might try to initiate sex, and I'm afraid I'll lose my mind.

The thought of sex – the act itself – disgusts me.

I still feel attracted to Nikolai, and I think he's an amazing man. Even more so now that I'm getting to know him on a deeper level.

I want to run into his arms and beg him never to leave my side. I want this brutal and powerful man to protect me against the cruel world.

I want to get to know all of him. What makes him smile? What brings him joy? What he's like when he's with family?

But I can't be intimate with him. Not while everything in me is still reeling from the violence inflicted on me.

It's been a week since he asked me to go to his home, and I still owe him an answer.

The thoughts keep running through my mind while I'm sitting in Aurora's suite. My friend is wearing a wedding gown while a seamstress makes some last-minute adjustments.

"You look so beautiful," I compliment Aurora.

I have a smile in place while I go through the actions expected of me so she doesn't notice something's wrong.

The last thing I want to do is ruin her wedding day, and besides, I can't talk about the rape.

"Thank you," Aurora grins happily. "Gosh, can you believe I'm actually getting married in a month?"

I let out a chuckle. "You deserve this, Ra-Ra."

More than anyone. Be happy for the both of us.

When the dress fitting is done, Aurora comes to sit next to me, handing

me a glass of champagne.

She holds the glass up and toasts, “To *us* finding *our* happily-ever-afters.”

I’m afraid that’s not in the cards for me, but I clink my glass against hers.

She stares at me for a moment, then says, “Out with it.” I shake my head, widening my smile, but it has her giving me a concerned look. “I can see something’s bothering you.”

After I take a sip of the bubbly liquid, I set the glass down on the coffee table. “Nothing’s bothering me.”

Aurora tilts her head, her eyebrows drawing together. “Since when do we lie to each other?”

Knowing she won’t give up until I tell her something, I throw Nikolai under the bus. “Nikolai asked me to go home with him for a vacation.”

Her eyes almost bulge out of her head. “What?”

I find her reaction amusing as I murmur, “I didn’t give him an answer.”

Aurora grabs my arm and shakes me. “Why? Say yes!” Her excitement doubles by the minute. “Jesus, Abbie. When did this happen? Are you dating? Tell me everything!”

I wish I could enjoy this moment, but instead, my heart lies heavy in my chest.

I shrug while I shake my head. “Don’t get excited. We’re just friends. There’s nothing romantic between us.”

Instantly she frowns. “Then why would Nikolai invite you to his home?”

Hell, if I know.

Her face lights up again. “The man has the hots for you. There’s no other reason.” Her grip on my arm tightens. “Have you slept with him?”

My heart skips a beat before it speeds up, and I pull my arm free from her hold. The words come too fast from me. “Can we change the subject, please? I’d rather talk about your wedding. Do you know where you’ll go for your honeymoon? Are you still going to attend St. Monarch’s after you’re married? Where are you going to live?”

I bombard her with questions to get her attention off me, and luckily it works.

Aurora leans back against the sofa, a happy smile curving her lips. “The honeymoon is a surprise. Misha is keeping it a secret.” Then she pouts. “I have to complete my training at St. Monarch’s. My father won’t budge on it.”

“That sucks,” I murmur.

I hate being here. Nikolai is the only thing making it bearable, and soon

he'll leave.

“Misha has a house in Russia and here in Switzerland. We'll probably move between the two depending on his work.”

I force a smile to my lips. “I'm happy for you, Ra-Ra.”

A knock on the door draws her attention away from me, and as she goes to open the door, I stand up.

Misha steps inside, barely noticing me because he only has eyes for his woman. “Are you done with the fitting?” he asks.

Aurora wraps her arms around his neck, staring deep into his eyes. “Yes. The dress is gorgeous. You're going to love it.”

“I'm sure I'll love ripping it off you –”

“I'm going to let myself out,” I interrupt Misha.

Darting out into the hallway, I quickly walk toward the stairs and don't stop until I'm outside. I press my palm to my churning stomach and aimlessly walk through the gardens behind the castle.

“Abbie,” I hear Alek call and glance over my shoulder. He jogs toward me, his eyes searching my face. “How are you holding up?”

Alek is the only person I can be honest with. He knows everything, and even though I wouldn't call us friends, it's easy to talk to him.

“I'm not.”

He gestures to a bench that's in the shade of a tree. “Want to talk?”

We sit down, and I stare at the flowers around us as I admit, “It's not getting any better.”

Alek gives me a sympathetic look. “Still having nightmares?”

I nod. “I'm exhausted.”

“Are you eating?” he asks.

I let out a chuckle. “Nikolai force-feeds me.”

Alek smirks at me. “That's good.” His eyes narrow. “He's been trying to get information out of me about what happened.”

My eyes dart to Alek. “What have you told him?”

“Nothing.” He tilts his head. “I made you a promise to keep your secret, but I think you should tell him. He really seems to care about you, and honestly, I'm not the right person to support you.”

His features grow dark, which I've seen happen often whenever we talk about the rape.

Gathering the little courage I have, I ask, “Did something similar happen to you?”

Alek shakes his head. "I'm not the victim in my story." He glances over the garden. "The only reason I'm trying to help you is to repent for my sin."

My lips part, my gaze glued to his face.

Before I can ask another question, he stands up. "Tell Nikolai what happened. The man is losing his mind from worry, and he'll be able to make sure you get the help you need."

I shake my head as Alek walks toward the entrance, then I hear him whisper to himself, "In my story, I'm the monster."

Jesus, what does that mean?

I stare at Alek until he steps into the castle, then shake my head. I don't have the strength to wonder about what happened to him.

And I have my own problems that are trying to kill me.

How do I tell the man I'm falling in love with that I was raped?

No, it will kill me if Nikolai pities me. I'll never function right again, and he deserves more than the ghost I've become.

Letting out a sigh, I rest my elbows on my knees and cover my face with my hands.

God, this is unbearable.

My thoughts turn to Nikolai's offer of joining him at his home for a vacation.

I lower my hands and glance around me.

A change of scenery would be amazing, but what if I say yes, and he expects me to have sex with him?

I know it's not the only thing he wants from me, but one thing might lead to another, and I might find myself in that position.

What will happen if I refuse him? Will he be angry? Will it destroy this tentative friendship between us?

It's been almost a month since the rape, and Nikolai hasn't even tried to initiate a kiss. Maybe I'm just overthinking things?

Should I go?

Should I stay?

Ugh.

Standing up, I walk back to the entrance, and when I reach the dining hall, I almost bump into Caspian and Duarte.

I quickly move out of their way and rush to the stairs so I can get to the safety of my suite.

I hate St. Monarch's. I despise the training, the people, and everything

that's happened to me since I got here.

More than ever, I want no part in my father's business.

This life will kill me. I'm sure of it. I wish there were a way to escape it.

And Nikolai only has one week left. Once he leaves...

I can't even imagine it.

Go with Nikolai to the island. Buy some more time with him and get away from this place. Even if it's just for a week. You can tell him you're not open to intimacy and you're only going as a friend.

Will that be enough?

"Abigail," I suddenly hear Nikolai behind me, and startled, I spin around. He instantly stops walking. "Are you okay?"

"You just caught me off guard."

Cautiously he takes a step closer, his sharp gaze searching my face. "Are you going to your suite?"

Taking a deep breath, I nod. I walk to my door, and opening it, I pause. I glance over my shoulder, and gathering my strength, I ask, "Does the offer to visit your home still stand?"

The corner of his mouth lifts in a hot smirk. "Of course."

My eyes lock with his. "I'd love to see your home."

A relieved smile spreads over his face, that has me staring at him like an idiot. I've never seen him smile like that before, and it makes him look... loving.

"I have a condition, though," I add. "I'm only going as your friend."

Nikolai steps closer to me before nodding. His eyes capture mine, a serious expression making him look like the ruthless blood diamond king he is.

"I promise you will be safe with me. The vacation is purely for you to relax. I don't expect anything from you."

His words make me feel emotional, and I worry that he's figured out I was raped.

I search his eyes for any signs of pity but can't find any.

I step into my suite, then pause again to say, "I appreciate everything you do for me, Nikolai. Thank you for being my friend."

His eyes warm as he looks at me. "You're welcome, *moya lyubov'*. I only want what's best for you."

Hearing the words 'my love' once again has me wondering why he chose to call me that.

Surely, he doesn't love me? Right?

“We leave Friday afternoon,” he says before walking toward his suite.

For a moment, I stare at his back, then I shut the door behind me. Before I can get stuck in my head, wondering if Nikolai loves me, my eyes lock on the bedroom.

God, I'm so tired. I wish the nightmares would stop so I can get a decent night's sleep.

Chapter 25

Nikolai

With only five days left until I leave St. Monarch's, I'm trying to help Uncle Carson as much as possible.

I've also set up a training schedule for Inna to make things easier when she starts as the new instructor.

I'm so fucking relieved Abigail is coming with me. Even if it's just for a week.

I'm actually considering keeping her hostage on the island, but I know I'll never be able to force her into doing something she doesn't want.

At least I get more time with her.

It's another small victory.

It's been a long day, and I'm enjoying a tumbler of whiskey in the dining hall before I head to bed. I down the last of the amber fluid, and getting up, I walk toward the doorway.

Just then, I see Abigail rushing past, and I start to jog. It's late, and I assumed she was sleeping.

Up ahead in the hallway, I see her opening a side door and stepping outside.

Christ.

She shouldn't be outside this time of night. St. Monarch's might have a no-kill rule, but everything else is fair game.

When I finally catch up to her and grab hold of her arm, she swings around with a shriek. Her eyes are wide and filled with terror.

"It's me." I lift a hand to her cheek. "It's Nikolai."

Our eyes lock, and seeing the duress she's under breaks my fucking heart.

With every passing day, I grow surer that Abigail was raped during the ambush.

God help me. I don't know what I'll do if that's true.

We stare at each other for a couple of intense seconds while my mind runs away with me, conjuring up horrors.

Suddenly a sob bursts from Abigail, and she slams into my chest.

I wrap my arms around the woman who's become the love of my life over the past weeks, my heart weeping because she's in such unspeakable pain.

I move my arms beneath her back and knees and lift her bridal style to my chest. Abbie's arms circle my neck, and clinging to me, her body shudders with silent cries.

"I've got you, *moya lyubov'*," I murmur as I carry her back into the castle. I take her to my suite, and once the door shuts behind us, I sit down on a sofa, cradling her like the treasure she is.

"I'm here for you, baby. Let it all out."

Abigail cries until dry sobs wrack her body. With time they ease up. She doesn't move a muscle but rests against my chest, clearly drained of all her strength.

I press a kiss to her hair, my arms still steel bands around her.

Minutes pass before she whispers, "Please don't ask me any questions."

"I'll wait until you're ready to tell me what happened," I assure her.

Neither of us moves, and I'm surprised when her breaths even out. I glance down and see that she's fallen asleep.

Now that she's calm and getting some rest, anger pours into my chest.

The fuckers who hurt her can be glad Alek killed them. Christ, what I'd give to reach into the pits of hell so I can yank them out and torture them for all of eternity.

Abigail snuggles against my chest, a sigh escaping her lips.

I've got you, my love. I promise to protect you from this day forward. I'll kill anyone who tries to harm a hair on your head.

"I love you, Abigail," I whisper. "Christ, I love you so much. You've crawled beneath my skin and dug your way into my heart. There's no getting you out." I press another kiss to her hair before I stare at her sleeping face.

The last of the bruises are fading, and soon there'll be no sign of them.

I've avoided relationships because I didn't want anyone messing with my perfectly constructed life, and now I want Abigail to mess up every part of it.

I want her clothes scattered in my bedroom. Her hair blocking my drain. Her toothpaste in my sink. I want to be able to look around my house and see signs of her everywhere.

With my mouth pressed against her hair, I inhale her scent deep into my lungs.

But I know she's not ready, and I'll be patient. I'll wait forever for her if

that's what it takes.

'First, they crawl beneath your skin, and before you know it, your entire fucking world revolves around them.'

Dad's words echo through my mind, and the corner of my mouth curves up.

He was right.

My entire world revolves around Abigail.

Careful not to wake her, I stand up and carry her to my bed. I place her on the mattress before taking her sneakers off her feet.

Grabbing the shirt behind my neck, I pull the fabric over my head while I walk to the ensuite closet. I take off the cargo pants, and when I have a comfortable pair of sweatpants on, I head into the bathroom to brush my teeth.

Finally, I switch off all the lights and crawl into bed beside Abigail, gently drawing her into my arms.

It feels right.

This is where she belongs – with me.

As if Abigail agrees with my thoughts, she snuggles against my side and throws her leg across mine. Her arm wraps around my waist, then a contented sigh escapes her again.

I brush my fingers through her silky hair, and closing my eyes, I let out a satisfied sigh of my own.

Yes, this is where you belong. In my arms.

Chapter 26

Abbie

It takes me a couple of minutes to wake up. I can't remember when last I slept so soundly.

I hear Nikolai's heart steadily beating beneath my ear. I feel his skin against my palm and cheek.

I'm sprawled over his body, feeling rested and calm.

Just how powerful is this man that he can even keep my nightmares at bay?

"Morning," he whispers. "Did you sleep well?"

I nod, my cheek brushing against his chest. "Like the dead."

"That makes me happy."

I remember Nikolai finding me last night after I was woken by a nightmare. He brought me here and allowed me to cry my heart out without asking any questions.

Does he know?

For the first time since the rape, I consider telling Nikolai, but instantly my stomach churns, and my muscles tense.

"Get out of your head, *moya lyubov*," he says before his fingers find my chin, nudging my face up so I'll look at him. "Stay with me in the present."

I stare into his eyes until the demons retreat to the shadows, then murmur, "Thank you for last night."

The corners of his mouth lift. "Don't thank me, Abigail. I'm grateful you allowed me to comfort you."

Jesus, is this really the same man I drove insane with all my flirting? Over the past month, he hasn't lost his temper with me. He's become a solid rock I can depend on.

"I used to annoy the living shit out of you. Why are you so nice to me?"

I hold my breath until Nikolai lets out a chuckle. "Yeah, one minute I wanted to strangle you, and the next you held my heart in the palm of your hand." His eyes are intense as they stare into mine. "Isn't it obvious?"

Surprise ripples through me.

Could it be?

Really?

His fingers brush over my cheek. "I love you, Abigail."

But why? I've been an absolute disaster. We haven't been intimate since the ambush.

Nikolai must see the questions in my eyes because he answers, "I love you because you drive me insane. You have no filter."

My mouth curves into a smile. "It sounds like you should hate me."

He shakes his head. "I'll never be able to hate the best thing to ever happen to me."

Only then do the words sink in.

Nikolai Vetrov loves me.

Or the past version of me.

I push away from him and brush my fingers through my hair. "I've changed."

"I know."

"I'm not the same person you fell in love with."

I feel his hands on my shoulders, and his chest presses against my back. Nikolai kisses my shoulder.

"I love all of you, Abigail. The whole and the damaged." He turns me to face him, the serious expression on his face telling me he's being honest. "I want you any way I can get you." His fingers brush over my cheek again. "And right now, it's as a friend."

I stare at Nikolai, my eyes taking in his bare chest, the tattoos, and his tousled hair.

This is the kind of man I've always wanted. Everything about him is perfect.

And because I care for him, I won't give him false hope. I'd never be that cruel.

"I don't know if I'll ever..." I hesitate before I force the words out, "be ready for a relationship."

"I'm not asking for one," he assures me. "I just want your friendship."

To clarify, I say, "No friends with benefits."

He nods. "You have complete control over our relationship."

One of the most powerful men I know is giving me complete control.

I inhale deeply, his words acting as a soothing balm to my soul. They make me feel safe.

“Thank you.” I wrap my arms around him and press a kiss to his cheek. “Thank you for being patient with me.”

Nikolai lets out a chuckle. “You can reward me for my good behavior by joining me for breakfast.”

Pulling away, I smile at him. “Is feeding me a fetish you have?”

He shakes his head as he gets up. Walking to his closet, he says, “No, I just don’t like it when my woman starves.”

His woman.

Nikolai glances over his shoulder. “Are you okay with that? I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Okay with eating?” I ask.

“No. With me telling you how I feel and calling you mine?”

Be still, my swooning heart.

“Friends can love each other,” I say. “Right?”

A hot smirk curves his lips. “Of course.” He gestures to the door. “Go get ready for the day. I’ll wait for you outside your suite.”

“Yes, sir,” I chuckle, feeling so much better after the good night’s rest and knowing exactly what’s going on between Nikolai and me.

It’s one less problem to deal with, so I can use all my strength to process and heal from the rape.

It also feels good to know Nikolai supports me without knowing what happened. I feel safe with him because he doesn’t ask questions I can’t answer.

Walking to my suite, I quickly shower and change into clean cargo pants and a long-sleeve shirt. The clothes are a size too big for me, but that’s how I prefer them now.

When I step into the hallway and shut my door behind me, Nikolai’s leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest.

I might be broken, but I still think he’s the most attractive man I’ve ever seen.

“Ready?” he asks as he pushes away from the wall.

I nod, and as we walk to the stairs, bitterness creeps into my heart. My rapist stole so much from me, and I hope he’s suffering endless torture in hell.

Just as we head down the stairs, Nikolai’s phone rings. As he pulls the device from his pocket, he says, “Go ahead and grab us a table. I won’t be long.”

I walk to the dining room and pick a table in the corner. I sit down and pull the menu closer.

“Damn, girl,” a random guy says.

My eyes dart up, and seeing one of the cartel members who’s training here, I quickly climb to my feet.

He waves a hand over me. “What’s with the clothes? You used to be a sight for sore eyes.”

My heartbeat speeds up until it’s hammering in my chest, and sweat beads over my skin. My mouth is dry as I say, “Leave me alone.”

The cartel member’s eyes drift over my body. The way he’s looking at me is creeping me out and making the demons crawl to the surface.

Suddenly the table flies away from me as Nikolai shoves it out of his way.

His expression is pure rage as he stalks past me. The cartel member doesn’t even have time to react before Nikolai’s fist slams into his face.

Jesus!

I scurry away from them, pressing my back to the wall while Nikolai grabs the guy by his shirt and beats the shit out of him.

Oh my God. Nikolai’s going to kill the guy.

Just as suddenly as the fight started, it ends. Nikolai lets go of the cartel member, and the guy falls to the floor, out cold from the beating he just received.

When Nikolai turns to look at me, his features cut from pure rage and danger, I instinctively cower back against the wall.

He takes a step toward me, then pauses. I watch as he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. The dangerous vibe that tenses the air around me slowly fades away, and when he opens his eyes again, he’s calm.

He stalks toward me, wraps a hand around the back of my neck, and squashes me to his chest. “Are you okay?”

“Ah…” I let out a burst of incredulous laughter. “I should ask you that.”

Nikolai pulls back and frames my face, his eyes searching mine. “Are you okay, Abigail?”

I nod quickly, then whisper, “I think so.” My tongue darts out to wet my lips. “Why did you do that?”

Rage flashes over Nikolai’s face, and I watch as he struggles to calm himself again, so he doesn’t scare me. “No one hits on my woman right in front of me.”

“You almost killed him because he was hitting on me?” I gasp, finding it both hot and unsettling.

“Yes.” Nikolai wraps his arm around my shoulders and leads me to the other side of the room while he instructs the guards who have gathered to remove the cartel member from the dining hall.

He pulls a chair out and waits for me to sit before he takes a seat next to me. His hand grips mine possessively, and all I can do is stare at him.

His eyes scan over my face again. “Are you sure you’re okay?” He glances in the direction where the guards are dragging the cartel member to the door.

A server moves the table back into its original position.

Nikolai’s eyes swing back to me, and I quickly nod. “I’m fine. I’m more worried about you.”

Even though his lips curve up, he still looks murderous. Shaking his head, he says, “As long as you’re okay, I’m fine.”

I let out another burst of laughter, then ask, “So you’re the jealous and possessive kind?”

He tilts his head. “If keeping my woman safe means I’m jealous and possessive, then the answer is yes.”

I swear I swoon a little as warmth trickles into my heart.

“You don’t think you overreacted a bit?” I ask, making sure to keep my tone playful, so I don’t upset him.

Nikolai shakes his head. “The fucker is alive, isn’t he?”

Staring at Nikolai, I realize he’s still the same person I flirted with before the rape. He’s still the ruthless blood diamond king I was fascinated by.

Just because he’s patient and loving with me doesn’t make him less dangerous.

He’s just not a danger to me.

His fingers brush over my temple as he asks, “What are you thinking?”

“How lucky I am that I’m no longer your enemy.”

He chuckles, a hot smile spreading over his face. He pulls me closer and kisses my forehead before pushing a menu into my hands. “What do you want to eat, *moya lyubov*?”

Shaking my head at the sudden change in conversation, I decide on French toast and bacon.

Even though Nikolai just beat the shit out of a guy for talking to me, I feel even safer with him than before.

While Nikolai places our orders with a server, I stare at him again.
Maybe I should open up to him? He's done nothing but support me.
*God, he might already know what happened to me. If that's the case, I'm
sitting here worrying over nothing.*

Shit, should I speak to him about the rape or not?

Nikolai turns his attention back to me, then gives me a loving smile.

He said he loved me.

He's been honest about his feelings. Maybe it's time I do the same.

Chapter 27

Nikolai

After a long day, I've just taken a shower when I hear a knock at the door.

I grab a towel and wrap it around my waist before walking to the living room. "Who is it?"

"It's Abbie."

My lips curve up, and when I open the door, Abigail's eyes go wide as saucers.

"Oh...ahh...oh." She tilts her head as her gaze drifts up and down my body.

"I just got out of the shower. Come in." I wait for her to enter the suite before I shut the door behind her, then say, "Make yourself at home. I'll be back in a minute."

She nods, her eyes not leaving my body.

I'm fucking relieved to see she's still attracted to me, and I can't stop from grinning as I walk to the bedroom. I leave the door open as I drop the towel, and grabbing a pair of sweatpants, I pull them on.

When I return to the living room, Abigail's standing in front of the windows, staring out over the gardens.

She turns around, and her eyes get stuck on my chest again, then she shakes her head. "Ah, I wanted to ask you a favor."

"Anything," I murmur as I move closer to her.

She takes a deep breath before asking, "Would you mind if I slept here?"

A smile spreads over my face. "Of course not."

I take a chance and wrap my arm around her before gently tugging her closer.

She tilts her head back, uncertainty dancing in her eyes. "You're not going to ask why?"

I shake my head. "You'll tell me when you're ready."

She looks at me as if I'm one of the seven wonders of the world.

Christ, I really want to kiss her.

Abigail keeps staring up at me, and when I slowly lower my head, she

doesn't try to pull away. Not wanting to move too fast, I press a kiss to her cheek before lifting my head and meeting her eyes.

When she places her hands on my sides, I take it as a good sign, but not wanting to cross a line, I ask, "Can I kiss you?"

Her eyebrows furrow together before she whispers, "No one has ever asked my permission to kiss me."

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable," I explain.

Fuck, this friendship thing is pushing me to my limits, but I understand it's what she needs from me right now.

The corner of her mouth lifts. "I wasn't aware friends kissed each other."

"It's a new thing," I chuckle.

When she doesn't give me an answer, I ask again, "May I kiss you, Abigail?"

Just as I worry she might overthink things, she nods. "Just a kiss."

Christ, this is a huge moment. Don't fuck it up, Vetrov.

Lifting my hands to her face, I frame her cheeks and take a moment to just look at her.

Fuck, she's exquisite.

I feel the anticipation growing between us, and when she lifts her chin, I lower my head. As gently as I can, I press my lips to hers.

Slow and steady wins the race. Don't push her too hard.

It takes all my inner strength to only nip at her lips once before pulling back. Giving her a thankful smile, I murmur, "Thank you, *moya lyubov*."

Her gaze searches mine, then she asks, "That's the entire kiss?"

Letting out a chuckle, I pull her into a hug. "Yes, don't be greedy."

I feel her relax against me, and she lets out a relieved sigh.

You did good, Vetrov.

I get to hold her for a minute before she pulls back.

"Would you like to sit and talk?" I gesture to the sofa. "Or we can watch a movie?"

"I'd like to talk," she answers. When I remain standing, she asks, "Can you sit down?"

My heartbeat speeds up so fucking fast when I see the tension tightening her features.

Fuck, did I push her too hard with the kiss?

Reluctantly I sit down, resting my forearms on my knees. I lock my hands together and suck in a deep breath, my eyes glued to Abigail's face.

For a while, she stares at the carpet, then she whispers, “Do you know what happened to me?”

“Besides the beating?” My heart stutters in my chest. “I have my suspicions.”

Abigail turns her back to me and stares out the window again. I watch as she wraps her arms around herself.

I wish I could be the one to hold her.

But this moment is huge, and I won't do anything that will stop her from opening up to me.

She takes a deep breath. Her voice is strained when she says, “This is really hard for me.”

“Take your time, baby.” I clear my throat before I add, “I think it will help a great deal if I know for sure what happened, that way, I won't accidentally do something to trigger you.”

Abigail nods. “I'm struggling to say the words.”

“Why don't you start at the beginning? Tell me what happened when your SUV was hit.”

My eyes don't leave her as she gathers the courage to open up to me.

“Uhm...” she takes another deep breath, letting it out slowly. “The SUV flipped a couple of times. I was disorientated, but I heard their footsteps. They were talking in Japanese, so I didn't understand what they were saying.”

Abigail pauses, rubbing her hands up and down her arms as if she's cold.

“A man grabbed my feet and dragged me out of the SUV. He punched me until I lost consciousness.”

Jesus Christ.

Closing my eyes, I lower my head. This is fucking unbearable to hear.

Her voice is hoarse and nothing more than a whisper when she continues, “When I came to...” Her breathing speeds up.

Every muscle in my body tenses, and I swear my heart stops beating. My breathing stalls in my throat.

“One of them was on top of me.”

Fuck.

FuckFuckFuck.

I suck in a desperate breath of air as horrifying pins and needles spread over my body.

Unable to sit and listen, I rise to my feet. My eyes lock on Abigail as I

slowly move closer to her.

When I'm right behind her, a strangled sound escapes her. With her head bowed to try and hide her face from me, she turns around.

Seeing the tears spiraling over her cheeks cuts me to the bone.

"You don't have to say it," I murmur.

Her head jerks as if she's trying to get rid of the memories. Her jaw clenches, and I can hear her teeth grind against each other.

"I was raped," she delivers the blow that changes my life forever.

It's one thing having a suspicion, but it's a whole different monster when it becomes a reality.

My woman was violated in the worst way possible. A fucking bastard took what wasn't his to take.

The asshole in me rages because someone touched what's mine.

The man in me is fucking appalled with my species. I've been raised in a family where women are treated like the treasures they are.

The soul who loves this woman unconditionally weeps for the vile act she suffered.

Uncontrollable rage tears through me like a savage beast. My body starts to quiver like a bow that can't stretch any farther.

I lift a shaking hand and wrap my fingers around the back of her neck. It feels as if I'm stuck in slow motion as I pull her against my chest.

Stay calm. You have to be strong for her.

I close my eyes and force myself to focus on Abigail.

"I'm sorry I didn't get to you sooner," I groan, my arms locking around her trembling body. "I'm sorry I didn't stop you from leaving St. Monarch's."

She shakes her head as sobs burst from her.

"I'm sorry I didn't man up sooner. If I had told you how I felt...if I hadn't been so stubborn..."

"It's not your fault," she cries. "I was ordered to go home by my father. Nothing you did would've changed that."

I hold her tighter, curving my body around hers. "I'm so fucking sorry you had to suffer such an atrocity."

I press a kiss to her hair, my heart shattering into a million pieces. I feel her pain radiating from her, and for the first time since I've become a man, a tear rolls down my cheek.

My voice is unrecognizable when I whisper, "I'm sorry, *moya lyubov'*."

Abigail is the first to calm down, and pulling away from me, she wipes the tears from her face with the back of her hand.

When she keeps her eyes lowered, I place my finger beneath her chin and nudge her face up. Locking eyes with her, I say, “Don’t hide. I love all of you, Abigail. Your demons are my demons.”

Her face is torn from the despair she feels. “Do you pity me?”

“Christ, no.” I shake my head as I frame her face with my hands. “I’m fucking angry, and my heart hurts for you. My soul rages at the injustice that I didn’t get to kill the fucker.”

Fresh sobs burst from her before she throws her arms around me. It sounds like the cries are being torn from her soul as she breaks in my arms.

“It hurt so much.”

I clench my jaw as unrelenting rage consumes me. I need to destroy something the way she’s been destroyed.

Abigail lifts her tear-streaked face to me and allows me to see the disgust she feels. The horror that’s been hiding in her eyes is now a living monster.

“I don’t know what to do.” She shakes her head. “The memories are killing me.” Her hand grips my bicep, her nails digging into my skin. There is devastating desperation on her face as she looks at me like I hold the power to save her. “I can’t deal with it, Nikolai. I can’t...”

I sweep her up into my arms and walk to the sofa. Cradling my woman against my chest, I press kisses all over her face. “I’ll hold you, so you won’t shatter,” I promise. “I’ll carry you so you can use all your strength to fight the demons.”

Her arms wrap around me, and she clings to me.

She faced her trauma alone. For an entire fucking month.

“Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me,” I murmur hoarsely. “I’ll do everything in my power to help you heal.”

My arms cage her to me where no one will dare to touch her.

I have no idea how much time passes before she whispers, “I don’t have nightmares when I’m with you.”

Thank. Fucking. God.

“From now on, you’ll stay by my side, baby,” I order. If I can make sure she never suffers a fucking nightmare, then I’ll handcuff her to me if need be.

Abigail presses her face against my neck. “I feel safe with you.”

My heart constricts, the words meaning everything to me because I know it’s what matters most to her. She needs to feel safe so she can heal.

“I’ll never allow anyone to hurt you again. I’ll fucking kill for you, Abigail.” I pull her back so I can see her eyes as I vow, “You are mine, and I am yours. You’ll always be safe in my arms.”

There’s so much worry tightening her features when she asks, “What if I can never be intimate again?”

Jesus Christ.

“Baby,” I breathe, “don’t worry about that.”

“But…” her eyebrows draw together, her expression heartbreaking, “you deserve a woman who can give you everything.”

My eyes bore into her, willing her to hear every word as I say, “You. Are. My. Everything.” I shake my head hard. “You, Abigail.”

Her eyes drift closed. “I’m not the woman you fell in love with.”

“Open your eyes and look at me, baby.” It takes a moment before she obeys. “You are and always will be the woman I fell in love with.” I brush a tender hand over her hair. “You still drive me fucking insane.”

She lets out a burst of laughter, a look of wonder chasing the horror from her soft brown eyes. “You’re incredible.”

Not wanting her to worry about us, I say, “You have complete control over our relationship. I’ll never take anything you’re not comfortable giving.”

The way she’s looking at me, as if I’m her entire world, heals the cracks in my heart.

“Thank you. I needed to hear that.” She relaxes in my arms, resting her head against my shoulder. “You always seem to say exactly what I need to hear.”

I press a kiss to her forehead, then murmur, “Get some rest, *moya lyubov*’. I’ll watch over you.”

I’ll fight your demons and keep your nightmares at bay.

So help me, God, I’ll find a way to help you heal. You’ll laugh again. You’ll be carefree again.

If it’s the last thing I do.

Chapter 28

Abbie

There's something freeing about sharing your pain with another person.

Especially if that person is Nikolai Vetrov.

The weight on my shoulders isn't as heavy anymore. Since I told Nikolai I was raped, he's only left my side to use the bathroom.

During the last couple of days at St. Monarch's, I was at every combat class he had to give. I got a peek behind the scenes of St. Monarch's, watching as he dealt with active and closed contracts. I sat in on meetings between him and Director Koslov. I overheard business and private calls.

Nikolai didn't lie when he said I'd never leave his side.

As the private jet lands on the Vetrovs' island, my stomach spins with nerves. The entire criminal world knows not to fuck with a Vetrov. Not if you want to stay alive.

Nikolai's father, Damien Vetrov, is the best custodian St. Monarch's has ever produced. I heard he was meant to be Director Koslov's custodian back when he was still an assassin, but a marriage was arranged between Damien and Winter.

Nikolai's mother, Winter, was nicknamed the blood princess, and she's known to be ruthless.

Jesus, I'm going to have a nervous breakdown.

Only Aurora knows I'll be here for a week. I didn't dare tell my parents. Not that my mother would care. She's never sober enough to worry about me.

My father, on the other hand, will probably shit himself. Even though there's a tentative truce between him and the bratva, I'm sure he would disapprove of my relationship with Nikolai.

Bitterness swirls in my heart because my father hasn't even taken the time to ask whether I'm okay after the ambush.

As a child, I was shipped off to a boarding school. I hardly saw my parents and never felt loved by them. I'm just a product of a loveless marriage.

But the Vetrovs are different. Nikolai said he had an amazing childhood.

Will they approve of us?

Will they view me as the enemy who seduced their only son?

Will they refuse to acknowledge me as Nikolai's girlfriend?

What will they think of the age gap?

Shit.

"Hey." Nikolai grips my hand tightly. "Stop overthinking things. My parents are going to love you."

"I'm so freaking nervous," I admit.

Honestly, I'm still getting used to the fact that we're in a committed relationship. I just hope I didn't make a mistake by allowing it to progress from friendship to dating.

The plane comes to a standstill, and Nikolai tugs me to my feet. He wraps his strong arms around me and kisses my temple. "I have to warn you, though..."

Oh, Jesus.

When my body tenses, he lets out a chuckle. "My mother is going to lose her shit."

Fuck my life.

"I've changed my mind. I want to go back to St. Monarch's," I mutter.

"Too late." He pulls me toward the open door. "You're my captive now."

"Nikolai," I hiss as I tug against his hold on my hand. "Wait!"

I'm hauled down the steps, then hear a woman excitedly shriek, "My baby!"

I watch as a woman in her early sixties walks toward us. There's a breathtakingly beautiful smile on her face – the same one I've seen from Nikolai.

Winter.

GodGodGod.

"Finally, you're done with St. Monarch's and home permanently. My heart can rest." She presses a kiss to Nikolai's cheek before turning her full attention to me.

Ugh. I'm going to die.

"So this is the woman?" she says as she comes to stand in front of me.

Winter isn't much taller than me, but I know she can kill me with a flick of her finger.

Her eyes search mine, and I'm surprised when her expression turns soft. A smile curves her lips. "Welcome home, Abigail."

Huh?

I expected a ton of rejection, not this...not acceptance when she doesn't know anything about me.

Remembering my manners, I say, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Vetrov. Nikolai has only told me good things about you."

"Call me Winter." Lifting a hand, she pats my shoulder. "After all, we'll be family soon."

I let out a nervous chuckle. "Ah...we're only dating."

She gives me a knowing look. "Once you belong to a Vetrov, a wedding is a mere formality."

"*Mom,*" Nikolai mutters, warning lacing his tone.

She waves a hand in the air. "Oh hush, I'm bonding with the love of your life." She gives him an overly patient look. "Finally. You took forever, by the way."

He lets out a chuckle. "It's not my fault I'm so picky. You gave me the best all my life, so my expectations were high."

Feeling overwhelmed by the warm reception, I step closer to Nikolai's side. He wraps an arm around my shoulders, then says, "You can bond tomorrow. Right now, I'm taking Abigail to my house so she can rest."

"I'm arranging a barbeque for tomorrow afternoon so you can introduce Abigail to everyone."

"We'll be there," Nikolai answers before he steers me in the opposite direction of the main house.

A guard follows behind us with our luggage while Nikolai leads me into the woods. The island is absolutely stunning, the trees decades old with their leaves providing a carpet on the ground.

"It's beautiful here," I mention, my eyes darting around to take in all the beauty. I can hear the ocean crashing against the rocky shores.

It's so peaceful.

"I'm glad you like it."

We approach a luxurious log cabin, the timber dark against the backdrop of the woods. "Jesus, Nikolai," I breathe. "Your home is...God, I have no words."

He lets out a chuckle as he opens the front door, then he gestures for me to enter. I step into his personal space and instantly smell him in the air.

I glance at all the wood furnishings, the lights hanging from the ceiling like falling raindrops, and the comfy-looking living room.

Honestly, I expected steel and chrome, something representing the dangerous side of him.

“Make yourself at home, *moya lyubov'*.”

The guard places our luggage just inside the door, and with a nod of his head, he leaves us alone.

I walk deeper into the open space, the living room in front of me and the kitchen to my right. Beyond the huge windows, there's a fire pit, and beyond that, a perfect view of the ocean crashing against rocks.

This is nothing short of heaven.

Turning around to look at Nikolai, I see him with new eyes. To the world, he's a ruthless diamond smuggler, but to me, he's love and safety.

A tear rolls down my cheek as I stare at the man who's given me a safe place to escape to.

This is exactly what I needed. A secluded island where I can lick my wounds. Where I can attempt to patch the pieces of my soul together.

Concern flashes over his face as he moves closer to me. “Is anything wrong?”

Slowly, I shake my head. “No.”

“Why do you look shocked?” He lifts a hand to the side of my neck. “Did something trigger a memory?”

I shake my head again, and lifting myself on my tiptoes, I press a soft kiss to his mouth. “Thank you, Nikolai.” My eyes lock with his. “Thank you for knowing what I need.”

His lips curve into a hot smirk. “Come, I have a surprise for you.”

He takes my hand and leads me past the kitchen. We walk into a den, and my lips part.

There are three easels, each with a different size canvas. Every oil paint and brush imaginable is neatly placed on a workbench. The French doors are open, and a light breeze carries the fresh scent of nature from the woods.

“This is your room.” Nikolai lets go of my hand. “I think my mom got everything you need, but let me know if we missed something.”

Lifting a hand to cover my trembling mouth, I walk closer and brush my other hand over the canvasses and tubes of paints.

Jesus. This is a dream come true.

Chapter 29

Nikolai

Seeing the emotions flitting over Abigail's face, it feels like I performed a miracle.

Suddenly, she turns around and rushes toward me. Slamming into my chest, her palms grip my jaw before her mouth presses against mine.

It's the second time she's kissing me, but this time her tongue swipes over my bottom lip. I open and allow her to brush her tongue over mine.

Christ.

Finally tasting her after all this time, my body shudders.

Her arms wrap around my neck as she deepens the kiss, and it takes every ounce of my strength to give her the complete control I promised her.

Abigail kisses the ever-living fuck out of me, our breaths rushing, our teeth nipping, our tongues massaging and tasting.

I grow hard at the speed of light, fisting my hands at my sides so I don't grab her to me so she can feel how fucking much I want her.

The kiss slows, and she pulls back, her eyes locking with mine. "Have I told you how much I appreciate you?"

Letting out a chuckle, I mutter, "No."

A beautiful smile spreads over her face, one I haven't seen in a long time. "You're a dream come true, Nikolai."

My gaze softens on her. "Are you happy, *moya lyubov*?"

She doesn't hesitate to nod. "All because of you."

I brush my knuckles over her cheek. "I'm going to take a shower and unpack."

"I should probably freshen up, as well."

Taking hold of her hand and weaving our fingers, I lead her to my bedroom, loving her reaction to my home.

Soon it will be our home.

When we walk into the master bedroom, I free her hand. Picking up her luggage, I carry it to the walk-in closet.

"Don't worry about my stuff. I'll live out of the bag," Abigail says.

I shake my head. “Hell no. Put your clothes with mine.”

I want to see her belongings everywhere. I want to know she’s here.

Leaving her to unpack, I head to the bathroom. There’s no door separating the bathroom from the bedroom, and it’s never been a problem up until today. Not wanting to trigger Abigail by her seeing me naked, I call out, “I’m going to shower, baby.”

“Okay,” she answers.

I strip out of the combat uniform, glad I won’t have to wear it again. I miss my suits.

Opening the faucets, I wait for the water to run warm before I step inside the shower that’s big enough for a group of people.

As I start to wash myself, I feel the air change. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of Abigail as she slowly inches forward. She’s gripping her toiletry bag tightly while she stares at me.

“What do you want to have for dinner?” I ask to make conversation and to keep her thoughts focused on me.

“Whatever you feel like,” she answers, her tone soft and cautious.

Knowing this is one hell of a crucial moment, I turn to face her as I wash my hair. “The weather is nice. I can grill some steaks.”

Her eyes dart over my body before they get stuck on my face, then she breathes, “Sounds good.”

Again her gaze lowers to my pelvis, then back to my abs and up to my chest.

“How are you holding up?” I ask.

“Surprisingly okay,” she admits.

Once I’m done rinsing the suds from my hair and body, I ask, “Yeah? No triggers?”

She shakes her head. “I thought I’d feel...repulsed.”

Thank fuck, I don’t have that effect on her.

“One win at a time, baby. I’m proud of you,” I say as I shut off the faucets and step out of the shower. I grab a towel and dry myself before kissing her forehead. “Freshen up while I get everything ready for dinner.”

I walk to the closet and take my time getting dressed in my favorite suit, a dark grey one with a long sleeve shirt. I leave the top three buttons undone, then slip my feet into my shoes.

Brushing my fingers through my damp hair, I walk toward the doorway, and passing by the bathroom, I catch sight of Abigail’s naked body right

before she darts into the shower.

Christ, her body is as hot as I remember. Her curves aren't as curvy, but I'll take care of that this week.

Keep walking.

Just keep fucking walking, Vetrov!

I adjust my hard-on, the squeeze giving it a sliver of relief.

She should be in the shower for ten minutes, at the very least.

Walking back into the closet, I stop by her open bag. I find one of her lace panties and bring it to my nose while I pull my zipper down.

Fuck, her tits are so firm, her nipples hard as if they're begging for my mouth.

I pull my painful hard-on out and fist it as I bring up the image of Abigail spread naked before me. The way she looked when I lifted her ass and slammed into her the first time.

The way she took every inch of me.

My fingers massage the solid steel between my thighs.

I remember the erotic sounds she made as I hammered into her and how fucking hot it was to watch me push inside her.

My fist moves faster, my ass clenching from the intensity building in me. I cover the swollen head of my dick with her panties right before pleasure seizes me.

FuckFuckFuck.

Watching as I come on the lace, I clench my jaw, so I don't make a sound. Breathing hard through my nose, the last of the ecstasy ebbs away, and I quickly clean the mess.

I hear the shower turn off and shove Abigail's panties into the laundry basket. I'll have them washed before returning the lace to her luggage.

Tucking my cock back into my pants, I pull up the zipper. I turn around to head to the kitchen just as Abigail enters the closet.

Jesus Christ, you're trying to kill me.

She has a towel wrapped around her body, her legs on full display.

She's naked beneath the towel.

Don't fucking go there.

Abigail freezes, her eyes roving over me. Before she can panic, I say, "The closet is all yours. Come find me in the kitchen when you're done."

She steps aside as I pass by her, and I only take a full breath once I walk out of the bedroom.

Fuck, that was a close call.

The corner of my mouth lifts in a grin because the taboo moment I stole was so worth it.

Chapter 30

Abbie

Jesus.

I have zero brain activity.

Holy shit.

Nikolai in a suit is...ahhh...still zero brain activity.

I stand in the closet, blinking like an idiot, while drool threatens to drip down my chin.

HOT.

Taking a deep breath, I try to calm my excited heart while I drop the towel. Digging through my luggage, I grab underwear and put my bra and panties on.

I've gotten used to wearing baggy clothes, but as I reach for a t-shirt, I pause to think.

It's only Nikolai here, and he won't do anything to hurt me.

I take out a tight pair of pants and rub the fabric between my fingers.

Do I want to feel sexy?

Am I ready for that?

Before I can overthink things, I pull the pants on and pair them with a silk blouse that shows ample cleavage. I slip on my high heels and turn to look at my reflection in the mirror.

A sexy bombshell stares back at me.

Hi, Abbie.

I've missed you.

My eyes tear up, and I suck in deep breaths to keep from crying.

I don't want to be this ghost anymore. I'm going to fight for you.

I want to be flirtatious again with Nikolai. I want to drive him insane with my sass and watch as he unravels.

Walking to the window, I sift through my emotions, wanting to make sure I'm ready for the next step.

I feel so safe with Nikolai, and the attraction is there. Hell, it's grown over the past month.

My emotions calm, and for the first time since the vile act, I feel a sense of power trickle into my heart.

I want to be normal again and see where things can go with Nikolai.

Walking back to the bathroom, I free my hair from the ponytail it's been stuck in twenty-four-seven and pull a brush through the strands.

I also swipe on some mascara and lipstick, and before I can change my mind and take it all off, I rush out of the bedroom.

I slow my pace as I near the kitchen, where I can hear Nikolai moving around.

Feeling nervous, I take a couple of quick breaths, lift my chin, and enter the kitchen. I see Nikolai seasoning steaks.

"Damn, Mr. Vetrov," I purr.

His head snaps in my direction, his hands freezing in place. There's surprise on his face as he stares at me.

I let my eyes drift over his body, once again thinking I'm definitely a girl who appreciates a man in a suit.

"You keep looking that hot, and I might misbehave."

Emotion washes over Nikolai's face as if I'd just told him I found the solution to world peace.

He tilts his head, his eyes locked on me.

Slowly I saunter closer until I'm able to place my hand on his chest. I slip my palm beneath the silky fabric of his shirt. "I *really* like this look on you."

A frown forms on his forehead. "You're looking for trouble, little girl."

A smile splits over my face as we share this moment of me being the flirty girl who dared to hit on her instructor.

Nikolai's eyes soften. "You look beautiful, *Malyshka*."

My hand moves up until my palm rests against his jaw. "You make me feel beautiful."

Nikolai presses a kiss to my forehead, then pulls away. "Could you open the wine and pour us some?"

"I've never opened one before. I scrunch my nose. "I can try, though."

He lets out a chuckle. "I'll teach you."

Nikolai pulls the bottle of wine closer to him, then crooks a finger at me. "Come closer."

My stomach flutters as I step into the small space between him and the counter. He wraps his strong arms around me, his chest pressing against my back.

My abdomen clenches so hard I go a little weak in the knees.

Oh, Jesus. I think it's safe to say I'm not entirely broken.

The realization makes me lightheaded with happiness.

Just maybe, Nikolai has the power to heal me.

I focus on the feel of his solid chest behind me. The safety of his arms as he pulls the bottle and corkscrew closer.

His breath skims the sensitive skin beneath my ear. "Are you watching?"

"Uh-huh." I'm freaking breathless, and all he's doing is standing close to me.

The image of his naked body in the shower, the water pouring down his tanned skin, his impressive manhood – they bombard me until my heart is beating faster than a hummingbird's wings.

I watch his strong hands twist the corkscrew into the cork and how easily he pulls it out.

The tension between us is palpable, my body humming with need.

Feeling nervous, I ask the most random question I can think of, "Why are you wearing a suit? Not that I'm complaining."

"I like suits. I'm not a jeans and sweater kind of guy." He presses a kiss to the side of my neck, then murmurs, "The jacket covers my gun."

Jesus, the word 'gun' shouldn't sound so hot on his lips.

"So you're wearing a jacket because I'm here?" I turn around in his arms and lift my eyes to his.

At this moment, I feel like my old self – the girl who was never afraid to speak her mind. The woman who went after what she wanted.

Lifting my arms, I push the fabric off his shoulders. "I don't mind seeing the gun. Take this off, so you look relaxed."

Nikolai obeys and lays the fabric down on the counter before locking eyes with me again.

You can do this, Abbie. Flirting with Nikolai is safe.

And God, I missed it.

Giving the man of my dreams a seductive look, I say, "The only thing that will make my view better is if you roll up your sleeves."

Nikolai chuckles as he shakes his head at me, then he gives me my wish. My eyes are glued to his hands and forearms as he pushes the fabric up.

"Much better," I almost purr, loving the sight of the veins snaking beneath his skin.

Nikolai captures my eyes with his and stares at me for a long moment.

“Why are you staring?” I ask.

“I missed your flirtatious nature.”

I scrunch my nose. “I’m trying to reconnect with my old self.”

His tone is soft and intimate when he says, “I’m proud of you, *moya lyubov’*.”

I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you.

Being honest, I admit, “It’s all because of you.” I lift my hand to his jaw. “Everything feels natural with you.”

His mouth curves into the beautiful smile I love. “That makes me very happy.”

Pulling away from me, he pours two glasses of wine and hands me one. Taking the plate of steaks, he walks toward the open French doors. “Are you joining me outside?”

“Of course.”

Nikolai pauses, then points at my feet. “Take off the heels, baby. I want you to be relaxed.”

I kick them off by the doors and step out onto the veranda where the fire pit is. Taking a seat on a comfortable lounge chair, I watch as he checks whether the grill is ready.

“Tell me more about your life,” he says while he places the steaks on the grill.

“My life is actually quite boring,” I chuckle. “I attended a boarding school. After that, I got locked up for two years for sneaking out of the house. Then I was sent to St. Monarch’s.”

Nikolai flips the steaks before staring at me, anger burning in his eyes. “You were locked up?”

“Aurora and I snuck out to go to a nightclub. The place was bombed, and we got hurt.” I let out a disgruntled sigh. “Honestly, I think my father was more upset I disobeyed him than the fact that I got hurt.”

Saying it out loud makes me realize how alone I’ve been for the majority of my life. If it weren’t for Aurora, I don’t know how I would’ve survived.

There’s a dark frown on Nikolai’s face. “Your father was responsible for the bombing. He was targeting Misha and his friends.”

What?

Shock shudders through me, my mind racing to process the information.

Nikolai’s expression softens. “You didn’t know.”

I shake my head. “No.”

Surely it should hurt more than it does, finding out that my own father almost killed me?

But I'm not that surprised. I always knew he'd sacrifice me in a heartbeat for his own gain.

"I'm sorry, *moya lyubov*.'" There's compassion softening his eyes. "I can't imagine what it must be like for you not to be able to depend on your parents."

I shrug it off as if it's nothing, something I'm used to doing all my life. "It is what it is." I force a smile to my face. "Well, there you have it. My life in a nutshell."

Clearly unhappy with it, Nikolai argues, "That can't be your entire life."

I shrug again. "Sadly, it is. My parents weren't involved in my upbringing, that's why I'm so close with Aurora."

"What are your plans after you're done with your training?"

I let out a sigh as I stare at the scenic nature at the side of the cabin. "My father wants me to take over the business." A bitter chuckle escapes me. "There's probably an arranged marriage waiting for me."

When I turn my eyes back to Nikolai, it's to see pure rage on his face. "Over my dead body, will you marry another man."

Yeah, I didn't think this through. My father will kill me if he finds out about Nikolai and me.

Then again, do I really care what my father thinks?

"You know how our world works, Nikolai. I don't get to choose my husband."

"You have a choice," he mutters, barely controlling the sharp tone of his voice.

"What choice?"

"You have me." Nikolai takes the steaks off the grill, then comes to crouch next to me. "You don't have to do a single thing your father demands of you."

Do I have the strength to tell my father to go to hell?

I've always obeyed his rules for the sake of peace.

"You have time. Don't decide now," Nikolai says. "When you're done at St. Monarch's, you can live with me."

A lot can happen in three and a half years.

Wanting to put this conversation to bed, I nod. "I'll think about it." Rising to my feet, I pick up the plate of steaks. "I'm starving. Let's eat."

Thankfully, Nikolai doesn't push the subject, and as we walk back into the cabin, I wonder about my future.

What if I say to hell with it all and take Nikolai up on his offer?

Chapter 31

Nikolai

I barely slept last night.

With Abigail's flirtatious nature returning, I've been walking around with a constant hard-on. Having her in my bed didn't help at all.

Needing to let off some steam, I called Dad and told him to meet me in the barn that acts as a gym.

While Abigail paints, I feel it's safe to leave her alone for a short while.

I see the barn door is pushed open, and entering, I find Dad waiting.

He gives me a wide grin before coming to hug me. "Welcome home, son."

The moment his arms wrap around me in a fatherly embrace, I grab hold of him.

He's always been my rock, and now that I finally have a moment to myself, the weight on my shoulders becomes unbearable.

"Hey," Dad murmurs. "What's wrong?"

I grip him tighter. "It's been a fucked-up week."

Christ, I had to push my rage away so I could focus on Abigail, but now that I'm standing in my father's arms, I can let it surface.

He pulls back to see my face, then orders, "Tell me what happened."

I wish Abigail had this growing up – a father who will burn down the world for her the way mine would do for me.

Fuck, I'm lucky.

There are no secrets between my father and me, and I know he won't tell anyone else.

He knows about the ambush and that Abigail got hurt, so I don't have to elaborate as I say the vile words, "Abigail was raped."

Dad takes a step back, his features turning to stone. "Fucking filthy bastard." Instantly concern washes over his face. "How is she holding up? Is there anything we can do for her?"

I shake my head. "She just needs to heal, and that will take time."

Dad nods, then locks eyes with me. "How are you holding up?"

“I want to fucking destroy something,” I growl, my heart aching for the trauma my woman has suffered.

Dad gestures at the gym equipment. “Then destroy something.”

I walk deeper into the barn, and shaking my head, I allow myself to remember how it gutted Abigail to tell me about the horror she endured.

Her tears.

Her desperation.

The vile disgust.

A man forced himself inside her while she was fucking unconscious.

Christ.

Breathe.

I can’t imagine the trauma she suffered when she regained consciousness only to find a man fucking her.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Bending over, I place my hands on my knees and desperately suck in air.

“Let it out, son,” Dad murmurs.

I straighten up and wipe a hand over my face, a groan tearing from my chest.

I feel my father’s strong presence. “I’m here, Nikolai. It’s safe for you to break down.”

The blood on her face. The horrified daze she was caught in. The way she clung to me and cried as if her soul had died.

Remembering how I found her in the trainyard and her reactions, overwhelming pain rips through me like a destructive force.

The roar rumbling from my gut is filled with every ounce of rage I feel. Unable to bear my own weight, I drop to my knees.

Dad rushes to me, and kneeling beside me, his arms wrap like steel bands around me.

“I’ve got you, son.”

I grip his shoulder and break down, weeping that a carefree soul like Abigail suffered a fate worse than death.

And there’s nothing I can do to avenge her.

I can only support her and pray she heals enough to become carefree again.

Once I calm down, I pull back to look at my father. “I don’t know how to

help her.”

“Just be whatever she needs.”

Christ, will that be enough?

“Come on. Get up.” We rise to our feet, and Dad grips hold of my shoulders, looking me dead in the eye. “You’re a Vetrov. You’re a force to be reckoned with.”

Inhaling deeply, I nod.

“Just love Abigail, son. That’s all you can do.”

I nod again, then admit, “Christ, Dad, I didn’t know it was possible to love someone so much.”

A smirk tugs at the corner of his mouth. “I told you they take over your entire world.”

Locking eyes with Dad, I say, “Thank you for being such an amazing father and man.”

He gives me a pat on my back, then nods toward the door. “Get back to your woman.”

When we exit the barn, Dad reminds me, “Don’t forget the barbeque at two. Your mother is excited.”

I’m sure she is.

Feeling a little better, I walk toward the woods and follow the path to my house.

I walk to the back so I can enter via the den, and when Abigail comes into view, her easel facing the trees, I see a soft smile playing around her lips.

I pause to stare at the vision and feel a moment of peace because she looks happy.

This is where Abigail belongs – on this island where she can paint to her heart’s delight.

Come hell or high water, she will marry me and not some random fucker her pathetic father chooses for her.

For Abigail, I will go to war against Emilio Sartori.

When I walk closer and enter the den, Abigail’s smile widens. “Hey.”

I shrug off my jacket and ask, “How’s the painting coming along?”

She scrunches her nose. “Slowly.”

At least she’s painting.

I move to stand behind her and look at the canvas. “Are you painting the trees?”

“Yeah.” She sets the palette and paintbrush down, then stands up. “What

time is the barbecue? Should I make a salad?”

“It’s at two pm.” Taking her hand, I tug her closer to me. “Don’t worry about the salad. My grandmother will take care of everything.”

“I’m nervous,” she admits.

“My family already loves you,” I assure her.

As I brush a wisp of hair from her face, she asks, “Can we watch a movie, or do you have work to do?”

“I can do both at the same time.”

“I just want to snuggle next to you,” she admits.

We walk to the living room, and I gesture for Abigail to sit.

“So the whole family lives on this island?” she asks as she makes herself comfortable.

Today she’s wearing a dress, and even though it reaches her feet, her cleavage is on full display, and it’s clear she’s not wearing a bra.

Was she hiding her body beneath the oversized clothes while at St. Monarch’s?

I missed the self-assured woman who couldn’t give two fucks about what people thought of her, and I’m glad to see she’s slowly coming back.

I grab the TV remote and take a seat beside her. “Yes, it’s for safety reasons, but I love having my family nearby.”

“I’d die if I was stuck on an island with my family,” she chuckles.

I switch on the TV, then ask, “What do you want to watch.”

Abigail grins at me. “John Wick.”

“Hmm,” I grumble. “Do I have competition?”

“Oh, definitely,” she laughs. “I’m sorry to say, but no one beats Keanu Reeves.”

Smiling, I lean back, resting my arm on the back of the couch. “Is that where your love for old men started?”

“Old men. Pfft,” she scoffs. “Age is just a number.” She snuggles against my side. “I like my men mature. I’ve never been interested in boys my age.”

I select John Wick and press play.

Abigail pulls her legs up, resting them against my thigh. Letting out a sigh, she whispers, “This is nice.”

I move my arm from the couch and wrap it around her.

This is perfect.

Chapter 32

Abbie

Instead of focusing on John Wick kicking ass, I'm highly aware of Nikolai.

So I obviously lied. There is one man who outshines Keanu.

I place my hand on Nikolai's abs, taking in the feel of his solid body.

Since yesterday, my stomach has been buzzing with anticipation. Being alone with Nikolai allows me to focus solely on him.

Honestly, I hardly think about the rape, and it makes me wonder whether I'm ready to take the next step with Nikolai.

If I don't try, I'll never know.

Moving my cheek away from his chest, I look at him. His eyes leave the TV to lock on mine, and there's an instant electric current between us.

Nikolai is safe. When we had sex, it was mindblowing.

I know this man.

I want to intimately connect with him.

I need this.

Leaning closer, I brush my lips against his before pulling back.

The corner of his mouth lifts, his eyes softening on me.

I have complete control.

I close the distance again, initiating a tender kiss. Moving onto his lap, I pull my dress up so I can straddle him. Not breaking the kiss, I take hold of his hands and push his arms up, so they're resting on the back of the couch.

"Don't move," I whisper against his lips.

"Okay," he obeys, his fingers digging into the leather.

Lowering my mouth to his throat, I suck on his skin while unbuttoning his shirt. I shove the fabric open, revealing his flawless muscled chest.

My lips kiss their way to his tattoos as I tentatively push my core down on his hard-on. The feel of him hard and ready beneath me is nothing short of glorious.

So far, so good.

Moving off his lap, I reach beneath the fabric of my dress and pull my panties down my legs. I drop the lace on the floor before climbing back on

top of Nikolai.

His eyes turn ravenous as if he's starving for any touch he can get from me.

I pause for a moment to make sure this is what I want and that I'm ready. There's no panic or disgust as I lock eyes with him.

"Take your time, Abigail. Don't force yourself."

Jesus, I love this man.

Reaching down, I unbuckle his belt and pull down the zipper. I take a deep breath as I push the fabric open so I can see his lower abdomen and the perfect V carved from his hips to his pelvis.

The sight is so hot I don't hesitate to reach beneath the fabric. Wrapping my hand around his thick girth, I pull his hard-on free.

I stare at his manhood and wait for the horror to hit, but there's nothing, just like when I saw him naked in the shower.

I'm not broken.

It's the last thought I have before I'm taken over by my desire for him.

"You can move," I order. "Touch me."

Nikolai takes hold of my dress and tugs it up. I lift my arms, letting the fabric pass over my head. He drops the dress on the side of the couch before skimming his knuckles over my hardened nipple.

Our mouths crash together, and the wild passion we had before the attack explodes to life.

I let go of his cock, and wrapping my arms around his neck, I begin to rub my clit against his hard-on. The friction makes my abdomen clench.

I kiss Nikolai with everything I feel for him. Combustible passion. Eternal gratefulness. Undying love.

His hands move greedily over my body, tweaking my nipples before he grips my ass.

"Christ," he growls. "You're so fucking hot."

His words make me feel sexy and give me back my confidence.

"Fuck me, *Daddy*," I moan, my voice needy.

Nikolai reaches down between us and positions his hardness at my entrance. "Eyes on me, Abigail."

I obey, looking deep into his darkened irises.

"Are you ready, *Malyshka*?"

"Yes," I answer loud and clear, confidence lacing the word.

He smirks at me as dominance pours off him. "Do you need my cock,

baby?”

Desire floods every part of my body, making me moan, “Yes.”

I need him to fill me and erase the feel of the monster.

His thumb brushes over my clit, and I jerk from the sharp sensation of pleasure.

I feel his erection stretch my opening, then he stops and asks, “You good?”

“No,” I groan. “You’re killing me by going so slow.”

Nikolai thrusts hard but only manages to enter me a couple of inches.

“Christ, how the fuck did you get tighter,” he grumbles, his features drawing tight.

I lift myself a little before pushing down on his cock, taking him all the way. It feels like he hits my stomach, and I’m impossibly full.

“Jesus,” I gasp. “You fill me so good.”

My words unravel Nikolai. He grabs my ass again and starts to thrust with so much strength the friction threatens to set me on fire.

“Yes,” I whimper, my eyes never leaving his. “God, yes.”

Only Nikolai can feel this good inside me. I swear he’s trying to brand me as he fucks me raw. The heat between us burns the ghost of my trauma to ashes.

Unable to do anything but enjoy the ride, I cry, “Harder.”

His fingers dig into my ass, and as he thrusts up, he yanks me down. I feel pain from him hitting me so deep and let out a satisfied moan.

I move my hands to his shoulders, and holding on tight, I start to slam down on top of him with all my strength, greedy for more pain and pleasure.

The sounds spilling from my lips are obscene as I fuck the man I’m obsessed with.

“Come, Abigail,” he growls, clearly about to orgasm by the judge of the strain on his face.

My movements grow erratic, and my body convulses, overpowering pleasure seizing me. I scream from how intense the orgasm is while my nails dig into his shoulders.

Nikolai’s features tense, and I feel him swell inside me. His body jerks three times as he thrusts hard and deep, his own orgasm hitting.

Sparks of pleasure keep shooting through me, and I slump against his chest. I wrap my arms around his neck again, breathless and satisfied.

Nikolai holds me tightly to him, his thrusts slowing down until he stills

inside me.

Thank you, Jesus.

With my mouth near Nikolai's ear, I whisper, "I love you. Not because you have a magical cock, but because you're everything I've ever wanted in a man."

He pushes me back until our eyes lock, then demands, "Say it again."

A smile curves my lips. "I love you, Nikolai Vetrov."

"Again."

"I love you."

With him still buried deep inside me, he stares at me for a while before asking, "No demons?"

I shake my head. "Not with you inside me."

A smile curves his lips. "That makes me happy, baby."

"Not half as happy as I am," I wiggle on his lap, drawing a groan from him.

Suddenly he grabs my ass and stands up. I quickly lock my legs around him, mourning the loss of his cock when he slips out of me.

Nikolai carries me to the kitchen and lays me down on the island. When he leaves me to grab a towel, I ask, "What are you doing?"

He wets the fabric and wrings out the excess water before coming to clean his cum from between my legs.

My eyebrows lift when he sits down on a stool, and gripping my hips, he yanks me to the edge of the island's top.

"I'm starving, so you better find something to hold onto."

It's the only warning he gives me before he pushes his face between my thighs. His teeth are the first to assault my clit, making my back arch as I desperately search for something to grab onto for support.

"Nikolai," I cry.

I end up grabbing my breasts, squeezing the ever-living hell out of them, and loving the pain.

"Yes, *Daddy*," I moan. "Punish my pussy."

"Fuck," he growls before he goes to town on my slit, alternating between biting and lashing me with his tongue.

For the second time in the space of minutes, I come so hard my vision blurs. My screams echo through the house as I grab his head, rubbing my aching clit all over his mouth and chin.

Instantly I turn overly sensitive, and I let go of his head. "Jesus," I gasp,

my body still spasming with aftershocks.

Nikolai stands up and bends over me, bracing a hand on the counter. “I love when you scream.”

“Good,” I gasp, trying to catch my breath.

His palm covers my sensitive clit. “This is my pussy,” he demands.

“Okay,” I agree while letting out a chuckle. “You won’t hear me complain.”

Nikolai pushes his middle finger inside me to gather some of my arousal before lifting his hand to his mouth.

I watch him suck my orgasm off his finger, then I groan, “We’re going to be so late for the barbeque.”

He lifts me bridal style and carries me to his bed. “We still have two hours, but I’m sure they won’t mind if we’re late.”

Nikolai strips out of his clothes, and when he crawls over my body, there’s no doubt in my mind that he was made for me.

Chapter 33

Nikolai

After we've eaten, we sit around the fire surrounded by my family.

"I annoyed the living hell out of Nikolai until he gave in." Abigail's telling my mom how we met. "The poor man didn't stand a chance."

Mom lets out a bark of laughter while Dad has a smile curving his lips.

Grandpa shakes his head. "Once a woman sets her sights on you, there's no use fighting."

Grandma places her hand on his thigh. "Still, you fought tooth and nail."

"I had to take care of Winter," he defends himself.

"Hey, don't blame me. You're on your own with this, Cillian," Mom chastises him before turning her attention back to Abigail. "Nikolai told me you love to paint. Were the supplies I got the right ones?"

My woman is burrowed against my side, and I'm loving it.

"Yes, it's my passion, and the supplies are perfect. Thank you so much." Abigail pats her hand against my abs. "While I'm visiting here, I hope to paint the piece I owe Nikolai."

"It has to be one of a kind," I remind her.

"Bossy, just like your father," Mom scolds me. She looks at Abigail again. "What do you paint?"

"I prefer nature scenes. I'm not good at painting people."

"I'd love to see some of your pieces one day."

"Maybe I'll get to show you when I visit again." Abigail pulls away from me. "Where's the restroom?"

I stand up, and taking her hand, I lead her into the house. I wait outside the restroom while she uses it, and once she's done, I grip her hand tightly again.

When we pass the living room, she tugs me to a stop. "Wait. I want to look at the photos on the mantelpiece."

I follow her into the room and watch as she takes a moment to look at every framed photo.

Abigail reaches for one Grandma took when I was little. We were out in

the woods, shooting each other with paintballs. I chuckle as I point at the photo. “I shot the shit out of my Dad that day.”

There’s a soft smile on Abigail’s face. “You all look so happy.” She presses the photo to her chest, then asks, “Can I borrow it this week?”

“Sure, but why?”

“I think I know what to paint for you.”

This woman. Will my love for her ever stop growing?

Probably not.

We head back outside and take our seats again. I gesture at the photo in Abigail’s hands. “Remember how we used to shoot each other with paintballs?”

Dad lets out a chuckle. “Inna shot Cillian on the ass.”

Grandpa lets out a huff. “It was a lucky shot.”

“We should do it again,” Mom mentions. “Abigail, have you played paintball before?”

My woman shakes her head. “No, but it sounds fun.”

“Does tomorrow work for everyone?” Mom asks.

“Hell no, my ass is too old to run away from paintballs,” Grandpa mutters.

“Tomorrow is perfect,” Abigail answers, excitement shining in her eyes.

I lean my head closer to hers. “Still enjoying yourself?”

She nods, a happy smile on her face.

There’s my girl. Welcome back, baby.

I only have today left with Abigail, and I’m seriously contemplating holding her captive on the island.

She’s her old self again, and I worry with her returning to St. Monarch’s she might relapse.

Then there’s the fact that she won’t be by my side.

Christ, I’m going to worry myself to death over her.

I walk into the den, and instantly Abigail mutters, “Don’t look at the painting.”

She’s even turned the easel so the wall’s behind her while she paints. I’m dying to see what she’s working on.

I head outside and take a seat on one of the lounge chairs. From here, I have a perfect view of Abigail.

“This week went by way too fast,” I complain.

“Yeah.” She lets out a sigh while she continues to paint.

“I’m thinking about keeping you captive,” I admit.

Abigail lets out a chuckle. “Hold off on that idea until after Aurora’s wedding. I’m sure when I’m alone at St. Monarch’s, I’ll beg you to kidnap me.”

“Are you looking forward to the wedding?”

She nods, then asks, “Will you be my plus one?”

“Do you even have to ask?”

She chuckles again. “True. It’s three weeks from today.”

Leaning forward, I rest my forearms on my thighs. “I want you to promise me something.”

Abigail glances at me. “What?”

“That you’ll call me the second the demons come back. Don’t try to handle it on your own.”

“Oh, trust me, I’ll call you even if it’s at the ass-crack of dawn.” She brushes a couple more strokes of paint on the canvas, then tilts her head to look at her work. “I’m done.”

I shoot to my feet. “I’ve waited all week for this. Show me.”

Abigail stands up from her stool, then orders. “Close your eyes.”

I obey and hear how she moves the easel, then she whispers, “You can look.”

My eyes lock on the artwork that evokes so many emotions in me, my heart squeezes in my chest.

She captured the woods perfectly. There are shadows of people peeking from behind the trees while streaks of color zip through the air. I can feel the laughter coming from the painting.

“Soooo?” My eyes dart to Abigail’s face when she speaks. Looking nervous, she’s biting her bottom lip. “Do you like it?”

I turn my gaze back to the canvas holding one of my favorite childhood memories. “It’s absolute perfection, Abigail.”

“Really?” Excitement pitches her voice as she looks at the painting.

I walk to my woman and sweep her up against my chest. Crashing my mouth to hers, I kiss the hell out of her before begging, “Don’t return to St. Monarch’s. Stay with me.”

Abigail wraps her arms around my neck and locks eyes with me. “I have to go back. I need time, so I can break the news that we’re dating to my

father. If I stay here, he'll find out."

Being realistic, I ask, "What will you do if your father demands you stop seeing me?"

Abigail lets out a sigh. "If it comes to that, then at least I've tried."

Impatiently, I growl, "Meaning?"

"I'll have to cut ties with my family."

It's not like her parents deserve to be called her family. Where were they when Abigail needed them most?

"You'll always have a family here," I assure her. "But will you be okay if it comes to that?"

Abigail nods. "You can't miss something you never had."

Christ, she's so strong.

I press a tender kiss to her lips, then say, "I've transferred five million euros to your bank account."

Shock ripples over her face. "Why?"

"So you have money of your own." There's no way I'm telling her it's the money I got from the yakuza. It's a secret I'll take to my grave.

"Nikolai," she breathes, once again looking at me like I'm one of the seven wonders of the world. "You didn't have to do that."

I tighten my hold on her. "You're mine, Abigail, which means I have the honor of taking care of you."

"When you say things like that, I swoon." She presses closer to me. "And then I need you to fuck me because it makes my pussy all achy and needy."

I grow hard at the speed of light. "Christ, I love it when you talk dirty to me."

"Yeah?" A mischievous glint shines in her eyes, and I know what she's going to say. "Punish me with your cock, *Daddy.*"

Christ, the effect those words have on me is unreal.

I bend at the waist and lift Abigail into the air. When I have her hanging over my shoulder, I stalk to the bedroom.

Dropping her on the covers, I order, "Strip naked. I want to see every inch of my most treasured possession."

Opening the bedside drawer, I remove the handcuffs and vibrator I got on a quick trip to the mainland.

"Oooh...I like where this is going," Abigail teases while she takes her clothes off.

I quickly undress, then gesture for her to lie down on the bed. "Spread

your arms and grip hold of the headrest.”

Abigail obeys and allows me to cuff her wrists to the wood. As I move down her body, I say, “Tell me the moment it becomes too much for you.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that won’t happen,” she taunts me.

I give her a wicked grin. “We’ll see about that.”

Climbing off the bed, I grab the vibrator and switch it on. The buzzing sound has Abigail spreading her legs wide open.

Fuck, I love her confidence.

I kneel between her thighs and slowly circle each of her nipples with the toy.

I watch as her cheeks flush and her irises dilate, need tightening her features.

“I’m going to show you what I want you to do when we’re on a call, and I’m fisting my cock.”

“Show me,” she begs.

Sitting back on my haunches, my left hand wraps around my hard-on while I brush the tip of the vibrator over her clit.

“Jesus. You’ll need to show me several times before I leave.” She gasps as I circle her opening. “I’m a slow learner.”

I pump my hard-on as I watch the tip of the vibrator push inside her.

“Fuck, I love how your pussy wraps around the rubber.”

Her hips swivel while her eyes burn on my cock, and I stroke myself hard for her viewing pleasure.

I increase the vibration and push a little deeper. Abigail’s ass lifts off the bed, and she throws her head back.

“Jesus, Nikolai,” she moans. “Just fuck me already.”

I pull the vibrator out, and when her scowl lands on me, I thrust harder into my fist.

“You’re a tease,” she complains, her wrists straining against the cuffs.

“I have the entire afternoon and night to fuck you, *Malyshka*, and I intend to use every second of it.”

I start the torture process all over, and by the time I pull the vibrator out of her for a fourth time, Abigail is whimpering for her release.

She’s so fucking wet, her arousal coating the inside of her thighs.

I drop the vibrator on the bed, and bracing my hands on either side of her waist, I push painfully slowly inside her.

“Please,” she begs feverishly. “God, please.”

“Eyes on your god while you’re begging him,” I demand, my voice low with dominance.

Abigail’s gaze instantly connects with mine.

I watch as I slowly push inside her until I’m buried to the hilt, then pull out even slower, her arousal coating my cock.

“I love seeing my cock fuck your wet pussy.”

When I thrust inside her again, the imprint of my cock actually shows beneath her skin. I fucking reach all the way to her belly button.

I brush my fingers over her abdomen, feeling the indent of me so fucking deep inside her.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Losing my mind, I thrust faster, my eyes glued to her abdomen as I watch myself fuck her.

“Oh God,” she starts to chant, her body trembling. “Nikolai!” she cries.

“Come, baby,” I give the order she desperately needs.

Abigail shatters beneath me, her moans and whimpers filling the air.

I hammer into my woman as if my life would end if I dared to stop.

She’s sobbing by the time pleasure sizzles down my spine. My ass clenches, and I bare my teeth, the orgasm ripping through me, robbing me of all control.

Drained of my strength, I slump over Abigail while desperately gasping for air. “Christ...that...was...amazing.”

With some of my strength returning, I lazily plunge inside her, chasing the last of my orgasm.

“I’m dead,” Abigail groans beneath me. “But what a way to die.”

Chapter 34

Abbie

While I'm reluctantly zipping up my bag, my phone rings.

Thinking it's Aurora because she's the only person who calls me often, I answer. "Hey."

"Where the fuck are you?" my father's voice rumbles over the line.

Shit.

"Ah...Father."

"Who gave you permission to leave St. Monarch's?" he demands.

"I'm almost twenty-two," I argue. "I can make decisions without your permission."

"Get back to St. Monarch's. Today!"

The call ends, and I inhale a deep breath before dropping the device on the bed.

Hi, Abbie. How are you, Abbie?

Jesus, would it be so hard to show me some love?

I swear, sometimes I wonder whether I wasn't adopted. I'd never treat my child like this.

Suddenly Nikolai asks, "What's wrong?"

Not wanting to cause him worry when he has the deal in Africa happening tomorrow, I shake my head. "I'm just going to miss you."

"You can still change your mind and stay," he taunts me with the perfect dream.

For a moment, I consider his offer.

What would I be going back to? Training at St. Monarch's, which I have no interest in...my parents, who don't give a fuck about me?

Aurora. You're going back for Aurora. Her wedding is in two weeks.

"Ask me again after Aurora and Misha's wedding."

Nikolai lifts a surprised eyebrow. "Do you mean that?"

I walk to him and wrap my arms around his neck. Smiling at my man, I say, "Yes. I'll come back if you still want me in two weeks."

"Permanently," he demands. "I won't let you go a second time."

I can't describe the feeling of knowing there's one person on this planet who wants me. Who loves me so much, he can't live without me.

"I love you, Nikolai," I say, my entire heart in my voice.

He lifts his hands to my face, framing my cheeks. He looks into the depth of my soul. "*Moya zhizn'. Moya dusha. Ty mayo vse.*"

Before I can ask what the words mean, he translates, "My life. My soul. My everything."

Standing in his arms, I know I would say yes if he asked me to marry him.

A kaleidoscope of butterflies erupts in my stomach, the thought becoming my new dream.

Nikolai presses a tender kiss to my lips, then lets out a heavy sigh. "Let me walk you to the private jet before I give in and keep you here against your will."

It will never be against my will.

We grab my luggage, and I swipe my phone off the bed. When we walk out of Nikolai's home, that's become a haven of peace and love, there's a sinking sensation in my stomach.

I don't want to leave.

What if the demons come back? What if this was only a temporary fix, and I can't function without Nikolai?

He takes my hand and weaves our fingers together. As if he can read my mind, he says, "If you need me, call me day or night. I won't have any signal during the flight. If something happens while I'm out of reach, call my mom. She'll come to get you from St. Monarch's."

God, I'm going to miss him.

Nikolai carries my luggage up the stairs and hands it to the flight attendant. "Sit, *moya lyubov'*," he orders before he straps me in, ensuring the safety belt is secure.

He crouches in front of me and stares at my face as if he's trying to imprint me in his memory.

"Call me the moment you land in Switzerland."

"I will," I promise.

"Sir, we're ready," the pilot informs him.

Nikolai leans over me, pressing a desperate kiss to my mouth.

It's just two weeks.

"I love you, Abigail," he whispers, his voice hoarse.

Tears sting my eyes. "I'll see you soon. Don't miss me too much."

Nikolai straightens up and places his hand over his heart. "That's impossible. I'm half a soul without you."

Jesus.

I swallow hard, my throat straining as I watch him leave the aircraft.

Too soon, the plane moves down the runway, and as it lifts into the sky, I let out a heavy sigh.

The flight feels longer than it should, and with every mile the distance grows between Nikolai and me, I miss him more and more.

The moment we touch down in Switzerland, I turn on my phone and dial Nikolai's number.

He answers on the first ring. "You can still come back."

"I wish," I mutter as I get up from the seat. I grab my luggage and exit the plane. "I miss you."

"Not half as much as I miss you."

Smiling at the St. Monarch's guards, I climb into the SUV Nikolai arranged for me and grumble, "The next two weeks might actually kill me."

"I'll try to visit after I'm done with the deal in Congo."

A smile spreads over my face. "I'll make it worth your while."

"In that case, I'll see you on Tuesday."

I let out a chuckle as the vehicle takes me to the castle.

"I'll call you as soon as I'm back in Europe," he promises.

"Have a safe trip, and don't get hurt," I say, worried about this meeting he's having in Congo. "I love you and want you back in one piece."

"Don't worry about me. Love you, baby," he murmurs before ending the call.

I tuck my phone into my handbag and glance out the window.

Suck it up, Abby. Focus on Aurora's happiness and making her wedding day special.

Maybe I'll get to know Inna. With Nikolai being close with his sister, I feel it's important that we get along.

The SUV pulls up to the front steps of the castle, and one of the guards opens the door for me. I notice a row of SUVs parked around the fountain but don't think anything of it.

"Thank you," I say to the guard as I climb out, and taking hold of my luggage, I head inside.

Excitement starts to bubble in my chest because I can't wait to tell Aurora

everything.

I open the door to my suite and step inside before I shut it behind me. When I turn around, the blood drains from my face. My lips feel numb as I whisper, “Father?”

Looking like a thundercloud that’s about to rain on my parade, he stands up from where he’s sitting on a sofa.

I hear movement in my bedroom and see guards packing the rest of my clothes.

“You’re coming home,” my father barks. His face turns red as he stalks toward me. I take a step back and am absolutely stunned when he slaps me across the face. “How dare you whore yourself out to a Vetrov!”

I cover my stinging cheek with a trembling hand, anger rushing through me. “How dare you hit me!”

My father’s soldiers pour out of my bedroom. Two carry my luggage while the other three head straight for me.

I swing around and yank the door open, but I’m grabbed from behind and lifted off my feet. Letting out a scream, I try to kick and headbutt the guard whose name I don’t even know, but it’s of no use as I’m carried down the hallway.

“Let me go!” I shout angrily, the man’s touch repulsive and threatening to make all my demons come back.

“Calm the fuck down,” my father snaps. “You’re a fucking embarrassment.”

My heart is pounding out of my chest, as I’m carried out of the castle and shoved into one of the SUVs I saw parked around the fountain. My father slides in next to me, and in absolute shock, I watch as he takes a gun from the driver.

Sitting casually, the weapon pointed at me, he sneers, “Either you behave, or I’ll kill you myself, but there’s no fucking way I’m allowing a Vetrov to have *my* daughter.”

What. The. Fuck.

My lips part, but no words come out.

“That’s what I thought,” he mutters before barking at the driver, “Go!”

Jesus, have I just been kidnapped by my own father?

“This is ridiculous,” I protest. “You can’t—”

“I can do anything I want, Abbie. You’re *my* daughter.”

“I’m not your property,” I cry, my mind still reeling from what just

happened.

“You are, and the sooner you come to terms with that, the better.”

“For you or me?”

His stubborn gaze locks with mine. “For you.” He lets out an angry huff. “After everything I’ve done for you, this is how you repay me?”

“Everything you’ve done for me?” I hiss.

“Stop with the tantrum,” he chastises me like I’m a little girl that’s upset because he won’t buy me a toy.

We stop at a different airport, and I’m once again manhandled as I’m yanked out of the car and forced onto the private jet.

“Asshole,” I snap at the guard as he shoves me down in a seat.

The second the guard turns his back on me, I dart from the chair. When he grabs me, I swing my arm back, slamming my elbow into his nose.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I shout, my body vibrating with anger.

I’m tackled from behind and fall with a hard thud. I scream with panic as my trauma rears from the darkest shadows in me. When a knee presses into my back, and my hands are tied together, the memories of the rape flash through me like a horror show.

I’m hauled from the floor like a ragdoll and shoved back into the seat. My breaths explode over my lips as I struggle to regain control over the demons.

My father shakes his head at me, the expression on his face pure disgust, as if I’m shit beneath his shoe.

The flight to Italy takes forever, and my arms are aching from being restrained by the time we touch down.

The guard I elbowed doesn’t come near me again, and a different one hoists me over his shoulder like I’m nothing but a sack of potatoes.

The touch from a strange man sends shivers of revulsion through my body.

I wait until we’re on solid ground before I slam my knee into his chest. The bastard grunts but doesn’t drop me until we reach my father’s G-Wagon. I’m tossed into the back seat, and a moment later, my father climbs in.

“I never should’ve sent you to St. Monarch’s,” he mutters.

In hindsight, it’s one of the few good things my father did for me. Otherwise, I never would’ve met Nikolai.

Nikolai.

Where the hell is my handbag?

I try to remember what happened to it, but I can’t recall.

Jesus, my phone is in that bag.

Chapter 35

Nikolai

After a thirteen-hour flight, we land in Congo for the meeting with Tshimaga. There's no fucking signal, so I can't call Abigail to hear if she slept well or had nightmares. The last time I spoke to her was when she landed in Switzerland, and it feels like weeks have passed, not just sixteen hours.

Christ, I hate this part of the world.

With Inna at St. Monarch's and Mom at home, it's just Dad and me.

And a small army, of course. I trust the diamond smugglers as far as I can throw the fuckers.

I check my bulletproof vest and my weapons, a submachine gun slung over my shoulder.

As we step off the plane, two jeeps are parked at the edge of the field. Each vehicle has a group of men on the back, all armed to the teeth.

The fucking humidity is something else as drops of rain start to fall.

Just another day at work. At least it's not pouring buckets.

Tshimaga walks toward us, two of his soldiers following right behind him, carrying a small fold-up table. The soldier sets it down between us, and a worn briefcase is placed on it.

"Mr. Vetrov, welcome to the DRC," Tshimaga says. Even though there's a cruel gleam in his eyes, I can see he's a businessman. It's all about the money for him.

I nod at him. "Thank you."

Dad steps closer until I feel him slightly behind me as he guards my back.

"I trust you'll approve of the quality. You won't find the same stones anywhere else," Tshimaga says as he gestures at the worn briefcase.

I gesture for Bryant, one of my best men, to open the briefcase.

When he flips it open, I step closer to inspect the diamonds. I can spot a fake a mile away and have a keen eye for the real deal.

I take my time, checking every stone, and happy with the quality, I say, "You have a deal. One million euros as agreed."

I gesture for Bryant to take the diamonds, and he quickly places them in a

small steel box. Once he seals it, only a Vetrov can open it because no one else knows the code, and the box is impenetrable.

I pull the black card from my pocket with the authorization code for the funds printed in gold on it.

The million euros is safely in an account at St. Monarch's, and once Tshimaga presents the code, they'll release it to him.

"Nice doing business with you, Mr. Vetrov. I hope to see you again."

I tip my chin. "I'll be in touch."

I don't move a muscle as Tshimaga and his men fold up their little table and head back to their jeeps. Only when they're driving into the jungle do I turn around and walk back to the plane.

Dad lets out a tired sigh. "Now for the thirteen-hour flight home. I'm getting too old for this."

I need to train Bryant to meet with the smugglers in Africa so he can make the runs for me.

Once we're all seated and the pilot announces we're ready for take-off, I ask Dad, "Would it be too soon to propose to Abigail?"

A wide smile spreads over his face. "It's never too soon. I knew your mother two weeks when we were married."

Right.

"But it all depends on whether Abigail is ready to take that step. You need to talk to her about the matter and see how she feels."

"You're right," I mutter. "But then I won't be able to surprise her."

"You really love Abigail?"

Without hesitation, I nod. "More than life itself."

"Well, if she loves you, then go for it. You can be engaged for a while before you get married if she needs time to get used to it."

I let out a chuckle. "If Abigail says yes, I'm not going to wait a year or even months."

Dad shakes his head at me, a huge smile on his face. "I'm going to get some shut-eye. You should do the same."

Abbie

This is insane. I can't believe my father is going to such lengths.

You knew he would lose his shit if he found out about you and Nikolai.

Instructed to freshen up for dinner, I've been locked up in my bedroom for the past hour.

I'm freaking livid and haven't been able to sit down for a second. I'm too wired and keep stalking up and down.

It will take Nikolai an entire day, if not longer, before he finds out I'm no longer at St. Monarch's. I try to calculate how long it will take for him to get to Congo, have the meeting, and come back.

That's like... twenty-eight hours? Thirty?

Shit.

Aurora should've noticed by now that I'm not at St. Monarch's. She'll try to call, and if she can't reach me, she'll hopefully ask Director Koslov about me.

Crap, does Director Koslov even know I'm dating his godson? Would he perhaps search for me?

Inna might notice as well. If Nikolai can't reach me once he's back, he'll check with them.

Thirty hours. A lot can happen before he realizes I'm not at St. Monarch's.

It's up to me to get out of here.

I glance around my room, and my eyes lock on the widow.

You've snuck out plenty of times. You can do this.

I rush to the doors leading to the balcony but find the key has been removed. Just as I search for something to break the glass with, the door to my room opens, and my mother comes in.

She holds a margarita glass in her hand, and I notice her eyes are glassy. "Your father is calling for you."

She sees that I'm still wearing a pair of jeans and a blouse, then frowns. "You should've changed. He'll be upset."

"I don't care." I shake my head hard. "You know this is insane. You can't keep me here."

She lets out a tired sigh as if her soul has been sucked dry of all its energy. "Don't make a scene. He's doing what's best for you."

I can hear she doesn't believe her own words. "This is not what's best for me, and you know it. Are you going to keep me locked up here forever? Is that the plan?"

Letting out another sigh, she takes a sip of her margarita before walking

out of the room, leaving the door wide open.

I rush forward, but the moment I step into the hallway, guards grab my arms, flanking me. I start to struggle against their hold as I'm practically dragged down toward the staircase and manage to kick one bastard against his shin.

I'm taken to the formal lounge, and when I see another man smiling with my father while they're in deep conversation, ice flows through my veins.

Oh, hell no.

My father and the man turn to look at me as I'm shoved into the room. I glare at the guards before I lift my chin to meet my father's eyes.

"This is my daughter, Abbie. She has her mother's temper."

When she's not drunk off her ass.

My father looks at the man as if he's a walking bank vault with unlimited money. "This is Antonio Vittori, the man you'll marry."

I'd much rather die, but I have no plans to end my life, so I have to find a way out of this mess.

Antonio smiles at me as he walks closer, and I instantly recoil. "Don't you dare touch me."

He's in his early thirties, and I'd go as far as to say he's handsome. Before falling in love with Nikolai, I would've been accommodating. I always knew an arranged marriage lay in my future.

Antonio takes a ring from his breast pocket, and when he reaches for my left hand, I turn to run, only to be blocked by two overgrown apes.

One of the guards grabs my shoulder and forces me to face Antonio. My father grabs my left hand and holds me forcibly in place as Antonio pushes the ring onto my finger.

"I'll never marry you," I spit at Antonio.

My father lets out a dark chuckle, shaking his head. "I apologize for my daughter's behavior. She's stubborn."

Father shakes hands with Antonio. "We'll celebrate the engagement tomorrow night."

"I look forward to it," Antonio mutters. When his eyes flick to me, and I see the smug look in his eyes, I suppress the urge to spit at him.

As soon as Antonio has cleared the room, my father orders, "Let her go."

The moment the guards take their hands off my arms, I swing around and knee the nearest one. He clutches his crotch as he sinks to his knees with a painful groan.

Winter would be so proud of me.

My father lets out a heavy sigh. “Stop with this attitude! You’re impossible. Antonio Vittori is wealthy. This is an important alliance.”

“I’m not a possession you can pawn off to the highest bidder!”

“Stop complaining!” he barks. “You’ll accept this arrangement and learn to be submissive to your fiancé like your mother did with me.” He looks at me with thinly veiled disappointment. “Hopefully, you’ll give him a son and not a petulant daughter.”

My body trembles with rage as I hiss, “I’ll never submit.”

My father steps closer to me, his features drawn tight because I dare to fight for the life I want. “The engagement party is tomorrow night. You will look like the Sartori princess you are. You will smile and be thankful I’m not giving you to Geseppi. Disobey, and you’ll be married to Geseppi before this week is over.”

Geseppi is a friend of my father’s and a vile man. He’s already been married twice, and both women took their own lives to escape him.

I’ve always known this would be my life, an arranged marriage to a man of my father’s choosing. But Nikolai changed that.

He changed everything.

He showed me what it’s like to be loved. He’s stood by me during the darkest time of my life.

I’ll never settle for anyone but Nikolai. I’ll only marry him. I’ll only bear his children. I’ll only submit to him.

I have time until the engagement party. Nikolai will be back in Europe by then, and I know he’ll come for me. After the week I spent on the island, the Vetrovs accepted me as family.

They will raise hell on this planet to get me back.

The corner of my mouth lifts in a smile, and forcing down the urge to fight, I nod while faking submissiveness. “You win.”

“Of course,” my father sneers. “Now go to your room. I’ve had enough of you for one day.”

Turning around, I give the guards a look of warning. “I can find my room by myself.”

They don’t grab or try to manhandle me but follow right behind me as I walk through the mansion and up the stairs.

Nikolai will come for me, and when he does, I won’t stop him from killing my father.

Chapter 36

Nikolai

As I stop in front of the castle, worry is gnawing my insides raw because I haven't been able to reach Abigail. I keep getting her voicemail and have left messages for her to call me as soon as possible.

It's been too long since I last spoke to her.

After I had her to myself for a week, the past thirty hours felt like a lifetime. I don't know how I'm going to survive two weeks. That's if she doesn't decide to complete her four years' training at St. Monarch's.

Fuck, four years will kill me.

When I enter the castle's foyer, Uncle Carson is waiting for me. "Do you miss us already?" he chuckles.

"Hell no," I grumble playfully. "Have you seen Abigail? She's not answering her phone."

My uncle frowns at me. "I thought Abigail told you she won't be attending St. Monarch's any longer. She checked out on Sunday."

Shock shudders through me as I shake my head, "She did what?"

"Actually, her father checked her out. They cleared the suite late Sunday afternoon."

There's no way Abigail would leave St. Monarch's without telling me, and she didn't speak kindly of her father.

"I want to see the security footage. There's no way she would leave St. Monarch's without telling me."

"You were traveling halfway across the world. Maybe she couldn't reach you?"

We walk toward the security room, and dread curdles in my gut. "When I finally had cellphone reception, there was no message from Abigail."

She wouldn't just leave without letting me know. The past week Abigail became part of the family. I even caught her and Mom training one day. Mom was showing her how to knee a man so he won't get up afterward.

She was happy, and I'm certain she loves me. This is not like the Abigail I know, which tells me something is very wrong.

We enter the security room, and I order the guard, “Bring up the security feed for Sunday afternoon.”

It takes a couple of minutes before he finds the footage where Abigail arrives at St. Monarch’s. Just seeing her makes the tension in my body ease up a little.

The camera feed switches from the foyer to the staircase to the hallway, and I see a smile curves her lips.

Is she thinking of the week we spent together?

When she steps into her suite, we lose sight of her. It takes five minutes before the door opens, and a man carries a struggling Abigail out of her suite. The horror is back on her face, and instantly anger floods my body, tensing every muscle.

More men follow along with Emilio Sartori.

“Christ,” I growl as I watch my woman try to free herself from the soldier’s grasp.

I’m going to fucking kill them all.

The security feed changes as they move through the castle until I see them shoving her into an SUV.

“She was taken by force,” Uncle Carson mutters the obvious.

I turn an enraged glare at him. “Why the fuck was this allowed?”

He shakes his head at me. “You know the rules of St. Monarch’s, Nikolai. Emilio is her father. He brought her here. He paid for her stay. She was his to take.”

“Bullshit,” I shout, my entire body shaking with anger. “She’s mine!”

“Why didn’t you inform me of this?” He takes a step closer to me. “How was I to know you’ve claimed her and weren’t just fucking her for fun?”

I hold up my pointer finger for him to stop talking while I try to breathe through the inferno wreaking havoc in my chest. “Don’t. Abigail belongs to me.” I lock eyes with him. “Consider this me informing you.”

Stalking out of the office so I can go get my woman, Uncle Carson calls out, “Where are you going?”

“To war,” I growl.

I walk to Aurora’s suite and bang on the door. When she opens, surprise flutters over her face. “Oh...hi.”

Unable to keep the anger from simmering in my voice, I demand, “Have you spoken to Abigail today?”

“No, but I saw her father on Sunday, and he said she was going home.”

I can hear the worry in her voice and ask, “Is Abigail in danger? Would her father hurt her?”

She quickly shakes her head, “I don’t think so. He’s never abused her if that’s what you’re asking.”

Thank fuck.

“Will she be safe at her family home?”

“Oh yes. Definitely. The Sartoris have an army.” She pauses for a moment. “Haven’t you heard from her?”

“No, that’s why I’m talking to you.”

“Do you want me to check in on her and get back to you?”

“Please. I’d appreciate that.”

“Just give me a minute.” She disappears into her suite.

I can see Aurora in her living room as she picks up her phone and makes a call. When there’s no answer, she indicates for me to wait as she tries a different number.

“Hi, Aunt Greta, it’s Aurora,” she says into the line. “I’m well, and you?” A couple of seconds pass. “Oh yes, I’m very excited about the wedding. Ah...is it possible to speak to Abby?” I watch as Aurora listens, then her eyes flick to my face, and I see the worry tightening her features. “Oh...okay. Uhm...yeah, of course, I’ll be there.”

When she ends the call, I ask, “Was that Abigail’s mother? What did she say?”

Looking nervous as fuck, Aurora walks to me. “There’s no easy way to say this.” She sucks in a deep breath of air. “I’m just the messenger.”

Losing the little patience I have, I roar, “Fucking tell me!” Aurora flinches, and I quickly take a couple of breaths to calm down. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I can see you’re worried,” she says before she drops the bomb, “There’s an engagement party tonight. For Abbie and Antonio Vittori.”

I swear I see red as Aurora’s word sink in, and it takes me a moment to process everything.

“Her parents are forcing her into an arranged marriage?” I ask to make sure I heard right.

“Yes.” Aurora gives me a compassionate look. “It was bound to happen. I’m sorry, Mr. Vetrov.”

Over. My. Dead. And. Rotting. Corpse.

I take a step back, my mind racing as it forms a plan of action.

When I stalk down the hallway, Aurora calls out, “Should I give Abbie a

message?”

I stop to glance over my shoulder, and not knowing if I can trust Aurora, I mutter, “No.” Then I think to ask, “Will Misha be your plus one to the engagement?”

“Yes.”

Good. I’ll have a bratva enforcer on the inside. This can work in my favor.

“Thank you for the help, Aurora,” I say before I head toward the stairs.

Tonight I’ll burn down the whole of Italy because, so help me God, I will get my woman back.

Stalking into Uncle Carson’s office, I lock eyes with him. “Have the guards bring Misha here. I need to talk to him.”

“Nikolai, think before you act,” he warns me.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and dial Viktor’s number. “I’m getting my woman back today if it’s the last thing I do.”

Accepting that Abigail is the one for me, Uncle Carson nods and instructs a guard to find Misha.

The call goes through, and it doesn’t take long before Viktor answers, “It’s been a while. How’s the family?”

“We’re all alive,” I mutter. “I’m calling to inform you that I’m planning an attack against Emilio Sartori.”

“I just got the man to yield to me. Why are you attacking?”

“He took Abigail.”

There’s a moment’s silence before my cousin asks, “Do you love her?”

“More than life itself. I’ve claimed her.”

“And Emilio took her? Why?”

I let out a growl. “He’s forcing her into an arranged marriage with Antonio Vittori.”

Victor sighs before he mutters, “What do you need from me?”

“I plan on killing one of your allies. It will probably piss off D’Angelo. Your blessing will do.”

“Is there any way to prevent bloodshed? Their businesses are lucrative and bring in a large sum to the bratva.”

Christ, that’s like asking a starved wolf not to devour a carcass.

“I can’t make any promises.”

“Emilio is Abigail’s father. Try to keep this in mind before you kill her father right in front of her. It took Rosalie years to heal, and I almost lost her

because of it.”

I close my eyes, trying to find some way to calm down so I can think clearly. “There’s no love between Abigail and her father, but if there’s a way to avoid bloodshed, I won’t kill him.”

“Good. I’d hate to lose the money, but I understand you must fight for your woman. It’s a tricky situation.”

“Misha will be at the engagement party tonight. Can I use him to tell me what’s happening inside the mansion?”

“Yes, but he’s not to take part in the attack. I might agree that you have a right to defend your woman, but the bratva can’t be a part of the attack.”

“I understand. My parents and I will handle the situation.”

“I’m sorry this happened, Nikolai. I hope you get her back.”

“Thank you.”

I end the call as Misha comes into the office.

“Sir?” he asks.

“You’re going to an engagement party tonight.”

He nods. “Aurora just told me.”

“Viktor is aware of everything, so you won’t get in trouble. I need you to be my inside man,” I inform him. “You’re not to take part in the attack. As soon as I hit, you take Aurora and get out of there. Understood.”

“Yes, sir.”

I give him my phone number, then order, “I want to know how many guards there are and where they’re situated.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll give you a minute to escape with Aurora before I attack,” I warn him.

“Thank you, sir,” Misha says before leaving the office.

I turn my attention to Uncle Carson, who comes to stand in front of me. “How can I help?”

I shake my head. “As the director of St. Monarch’s, you need to stay out of this.”

We quickly hug before I rush out of the castle so I can get home and gather my army. When I climb into the armored SUV, I pull my phone out.

I know the chances that Abigail will answer are slim, and her phone has probably been confiscated, but still, I dial her number.

‘Hi, you’ve reached Abigail. I can’t come to the phone right now, but if you leave a message, I’ll call you back. Bye.’

I dial the number again so I can just listen to her voice while the SUV drives to the airfield where my private jet is waiting.

When the phone beeps for me to leave a message, I growl, “I’m coming for you, *moya lyubov*’.”

Chapter 37

Abbie

I've taken a long, relaxing bath to try and calm my nerves.

Just keep up appearances until Nikolai comes.

I walk into my bedroom after lathering my body with my favorite lotion and stare at the dress I'll wear to the 'engagement party.'

It's a beautiful silk gown, the color of a starry night. I put on my underwear, then reach for the dress. It glides over my skin, hanging low enough to show cleavage. The slit comes high, showing my thigh.

I step into a pair of high heels and grin when I think I'll be taller than Antonio. The bastard can look up at me because I'll never kneel before him.

I'm wearing this dress for Nikolai.

I hear the door to my suite opening before Aurora calls out, "Abbie? Are you dressed? Misha is with me."

"In my bedroom," I call out as I rush to the door.

I'm so freaking glad to see her and hug her for a long moment.

"How are you holding up?" she asks as she rubs a hand up and down my back.

"I'm trying not to panic," I admit. "It's been a crazy two days."

When we pull back, I glance between my friend and Misha, then ask, "Have you spoken –"

Misha gestures for me to stop talking. He taps a finger against his ear, indicating my father might be listening.

He steps closer, and leaning into me, he whispers, "Nikolai is coming."

I grab his arm and almost let out a relieved cry.

Thank God.

Misha steps back to stand next to Aurora, and for a moment, we all just stare at each other as I process the good news.

My man is coming to get me.

Misha clears his throat. "When you're ready, I was hoping you could show me around the property?"

"I'm ready," I say, excited to get out of the room.

“What about your hair and makeup?” Aurora asks.

“Ugh,” I mutter. I dart back into my room and pull a brush through my hair, letting it hang down my back. Swiping on some mascara and lipstick, I turn to leave before my eyes land on the engagement ring on my table.

Letting out a sigh, I grab the ring and shove it onto my finger, once again reminding myself to keep up appearances.

During the past twenty-four hours, I’ve thought of ways to escape. Trust me, I fantasized the shit out of beating up the guards and walking out with my head held high.

But I’m one woman against an army, it would be stupid to try and escape on my own.

That’s why I’m trying to remain calm while I wait for my man to come to rescue me.

It’s not because I don’t have the guts to risk my life in an attempt to get free, but pure common sense. I don’t want to die, because I want my dream life with Nikolai, and I know there’s a risk that I’ll be killed if I try to make a run for it.

God, I miss Nikolai.

I walk back into the small sitting room and say, “I’m ready.”

As the three of us step into the hallway, two guards follow behind us.

Being the perfect mafia princess, I lift my head. “There are four bedrooms in this wing and five on the other side of the mansion.”

I’m hoping the reason Misha asked for a tour is so he can get the information to Nikolai.

“There’s a helicopter pad on the roof,” I mention before I lead my friends down the grand staircase.

I fake a chuckle as I look at Aurora. “Remember how we used to sneak out the back gate?”

She forces a burst of laughter. “Yeah, we used to get into so much trouble.”

I glance at Misha, and he subtly nods at me to continue.

When we walk to the sliding doors at the back of the mansion, and I see my father talking on his phone, I hook my arm through Aurora’s.

My father’s eyes land on us, and he mutters, “Hold on.” His eyes flick from me to Aurora to Misha, then he demands, “Where are you going?”

Smiling brightly, I answer, “I’m showing Misha the gardens.” I fake concern. “There’s time before the other guests arrive, right?”

My father stares at me, and when he's satisfied that I'm not a flight risk, he nods. "You have ten minutes. Antonio will be here soon, and I expect you to receive your fiancé at the door."

I want to receive Antonio with my fist breaking his nose.

"Thank you, Father," I reply dutifully. "We won't be long."

The guards keep following us as we take the steps down to the garden.

Servants and catering staff are running around to get everything ready for the party. A big marquee has been erected in the middle of the garden, and tables are decorated as if there'll be a wedding and not an engagement.

Fairy lights are being hung everywhere. There are white tablecloths, beautiful bouquets of lilies and baby's breath, and the finest silverware.

Jesus.

Worry claws at my chest, and leaning into Aurora, I whisper, "It looks like a wedding. Tell me I'm wrong."

I wouldn't put it past my father to force me into marriage with Antonio at gunpoint.

There's no way I'll be able to say I do. Those words belong to Nikolai.

"Your mother didn't say anything about you getting married today. Your father is just going all out to impress Antonio."

God, I hope so.

I'm desperate to ask Misha whether he knows what time Nikolai will come, but not willing to risk it, I keep the question to myself.

Misha glances over the backyard, then nods at me.

"Let me show you the ground floor," I say cheerfully.

My father watches us like a hawk eyeing his next meal when we pass him to enter the mansion.

I show my friends the dining room, the two lounges, and the kitchen, making sure Misha sees all the entrances, then he asks, "Is there a restroom I can use?"

"Sure." I gesture at a hallway. "It's on your left."

He leaves Aurora with me, and when I look at her, she asks, "How are you holding up?" Her eyes widen slightly, then she whispers, "Don't answer. Your father is coming."

Smiling brightly, I say, "I'm excited. Have you seen the engagement ring?" I lift my hand, and Aurora pretends to fawn over the diamond.

"Antonio is here," my father informs me. "Give him a warm welcome."

Warm welcome, my left tit.

Like a good little girl, I walk to the open front door. Antonio comes up the steps, dressed in an immaculate suit. When he reaches me, he grips my arm and kisses me on both cheeks.

My skin crawls at the contact, and for a horrifying moment, the memory of the rape shudders through me.

I yank away from Antonio, my breath exploding over my lips.

“Abby!” my father roars. “That’s no way to greet your fiancé.” He shakes Antonio’s hand, then apologizes, “I’m sorry. She’ll come around with time.”

Antonio shoots a glare in my direction as Aurora rushes to my side. When the men walk toward the back of the mansion, she asks, “Are you okay?”

I still haven’t told anyone but Nikolai about the rape. Alek only knows because he was there.

I give her a trembling smile. “I’m just grossed out by Antonio.”

My mother comes down the stairs, dressed in black, as if she’s attending a funeral.

It’s fitting if you ask me.

She waves a servant closer, then demands, “Open a bottle of champagne and bring me a glass.”

The servant scurries off to carry out the order while my mother walks toward us.

I watch as she and Aurora greet each other, then her eyes sweep over me. “Good choice. Antonio will like the cleavage and leg you’re showing.”

Disgust wells in my chest. “Wow, that’s real classy, Mother.”

She takes the glass of champagne from the server, then chuckles, “The sooner you learn a man is only interested in what’s between your legs, the better.”

Holy shit, she did not just say that to me.

I gape at the woman who gave birth to me and ask, “Do you love me at all?”

She starts to saunter toward the back of the mansion, muttering, “Love isn’t a luxury people like us can afford.”

“Wow,” Aurora mutters. “That was harsh.”

She rubs a comforting hand up and down my back.

Misha joins us, then he says, “Can I borrow Aurora for a second?”

“Oh...okay,” I reply. “Meet me out back. My father will shit himself if I don’t join them.”

Misha takes hold of Aurora’s hand and leads her to the kitchen.

Letting out a sigh, I head back to the garden again.

Chapter 38

Nikolai

Stalking into my parents' house with Dad right behind me, I mutter, "I'm fucking going to kill everyone."

"You can't," Dad reminds me.

"How did the run go?" Mom asks as she comes out of the kitchen.

"Good. The diamonds are high quality," Dad answers.

Mom's eyes lock on my face, "What's wrong?"

"Abigail's father removed her from St. Monarch's. He's arranging a marriage for her with Antonio Vittori," I growl, barely able to say the words out loud.

A dark frown forms on Mom's face as she gasps, "What the hell?"

We all move to the living room, where Mom and Dad take a seat. I start pacing, unable to sit with the pent-up energy rushing through me.

"I've spoken with Viktor," I inform Mom. "He asked that I try not to shed blood because it will cost him the money he makes off them."

"The D'Angelos and Sartoris aren't just people you attack," Dad grumbles. "It will cause a rift that Viktor's worked so hard to bridge over the years. They've only just yielded to the bratva."

"I know," I mutter. "Trust me, I fucking know."

"Buy Abigail," Mom mentions.

"She's not cattle to be sold and purchased!" I take a deep breath to calm down, then whisper, "Sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to raise my voice at you."

She gets up and comes to rub my arm. "I know this is hard. We all want her back. If you charge the Sartori's mansion and go in guns blazing, she could get killed. All hell will break out."

She's right. I can't risk Abigail's life, no matter how badly I want to kill her father. Never mind the strain it would put on my relationship with my cousin.

Fuck.

I have to buy Abigail.

God, I hope she'll understand I'm doing it to save her.

“How do you want to handle this?” Dad asks.

I let out a heavy sigh. “We’ll go to the Sartoris’ mansion, and I’ll buy my woman from the bastard.”

I might not get to kill him today, but I sure as fuck will punch the ever-living shit out of him.

“Let’s get ready,” Mom says as she hurries to the door.

My eyes meet Dad’s, and I mutter, “At least, this way, our children will inherit the Sartori empire. I’m going to think of it as an investment.”

“Yes, bloodshed isn’t always the answer,” Dad agrees.

“You’ll need to keep me calm,” I warn him. “So I don’t kill the fucker in a fit of rage.”

Dad lets out a chuckle as he stands up. “Why did you have to inherit your mother’s temper?”

“I heard that!” Mom calls from somewhere in the house.

Abbie

The guests are starting to arrive, and I have to fake being happy while receiving their well-wishes.

This sucks.

I help myself to a glass of champagne and slowly sip on it. The last thing I want is to get drunk tonight.

Antonio is standing by my side, his hand resting on the small of my back. Again my skin crawls as if a million fire ants are going to town on my ass.

“You’re so lucky,” Mrs. D’Angelo says to me. “Antonio is a fine choice.”

I’m sure. They’re just too freaking happy to take the man’s money.

After all, what benefits my father, benefits Mr. D’Angelo.

“Where’s Aurora?” she asks, her eyes scanning over the guests for her daughter.

“I don’t know.” Come to think of it, I haven’t seen them since Misha pulled her aside. “I think she’s in the kitchen with Misha.”

Mrs. D’Angelo lets out a huff. “She better watch her weight, or she won’t fit into the wedding dress.”

I almost roll my eyes but catch myself in time.

“So, Antonio,” she addresses him, “when will your wedding be?”

Yeah, I have news for you. It takes two people, and I sure as hell won't be there.

Antonio tugs me to his side, the closeness making bile churn in my stomach.

“We won't wait too long.” He smiles at me while his hand flirts with my ass, sending a wave of disgust through me. “Next month?”

I shrug before downing half the champagne.

“Oh. My. God,” a guest exclaims.

“Fuck,” another whispers.

I watch as shock and fear ripples over the guests' faces, and confused by their reactions, I glance around.

Antonio's arm tightens around me as he takes a step backward.

What the hell is going on?

Then my eyes land on Nikolai, where he's standing by the sliding doors. The glass slips from my hand and falls on the grass.

Behind him are Damien, Winter, and Grandpa Cillian.

My heart speeds up at the sight of them.

They came.

Intense emotion washes over me.

“The Vetrovs,” Antonio whispers. “What are they doing here?”

A smile splits over my face, and I yank away from Antonio. “They're here for me.”

Nikolai's eyes lock on me, then he takes the steps down. The guests part like the red sea before him, and I have to admit it's one of the hottest things I've ever seen.

Get out of the way, people. My man is here.

Someone grabs hold of my arm, and I'm yanked backward. Seeing the person is my father, worry pours into my veins.

As much as I don't get along with my family and hate what they've done to me, I don't want a war to break out on my account.

“What is the meaning of this?” my father demands.

Nikolai stops in front of us, looking like a dark prince, ready to avenge his princess' honor.

My father ignores Nikolai and glares at Damien. “I don't recall inviting you.”

“You have something my son wants,” Damien replies.

I'm yanked farther back and stumble, almost falling on my ass.

“Yank her again, and I’ll rip your fucking arms off,” Nikolai growls, his expression so dark and dangerous it makes a chill skitter down my spine.

“Let go of me,” I hiss before I manage to pry my arm free from my father’s biting hold. I rush forward, and Winter grabs my hand, pulling me to her. When her arm wraps around me, I feel emotional from the relief of being with the Vetrovs.

I take the ring off my finger and throw it at Antonio’s feet before clinging to Winter.

“You’re going to be okay, my baby,” she coos.

Feeling her motherly love, I bite my bottom lip, so I don’t start crying.

How can a woman I’ve only known a week feel more like a mother than the one who gave birth to me? It’s insane.

“I should never have left the island,” I whisper.

“It’s okay. We’ve come to take you home,” she assures me.

“Abigail belongs to me,” Nikolai declares with so much authority it has Antonio scurrying into the group of guests in an attempt to blend in with them.

“She’s my daughter,” my father barks. He lets out a burst of incredulous laughter. “Does Viktor know you’re here?”

“The bratva has nothing to do with this,” Nikolai mutters. “Viktor has no authority here. This is between you and me, Sartori.”

The confident expression on my father’s face wavers.

My mother downs her glass of champagne before helping herself to another while she watches the drama unfold with little interest.

What an empty life she must live. That would’ve been my future had I not met Nikolai.

Nikolai lets out an impatient sigh, then asks, “How do you want to handle this?”

“Everyone leave,” my father barks at the guests.

They all rush to get away as fast as possible, Antonio running with them.

Coward.

When it’s just the Vetrovs, Sartoris, and D’Angelos left, my father says, “Abbie is a valuable asset.”

My eyebrows lift, and I shake my head at the man who calls himself my father.

“How much?” Nikolai demands.

I can’t believe what I’m hearing, but understanding Nikolai is trying to

avoid bloodshed, I can't get upset.

My father's eyes flick to me, and all I see is greed. "I would've obtained fifty million euros from Antonio on their wedding day."

Say what?

Winter's arm tightens around me as if she's trying to comfort me because my father is selling me.

"How much do you want, Sartori?" Nikolai shouts, rage brimming in his voice.

"Double."

Jesus Christ. One hundred million euros. That's a shit-ton of money!

My eyes dart between my father and Nikolai. The tension builds until I expect one of them to pull out a gun.

"And, of course, an invitation to the wedding," my father adds. "You don't want an asset like Abbie to be free for too long. Another man might make me a better offer."

Nikolai darts forward, slamming his fist repeatedly into my father's face.

Damien moves quickly to pull Nikolai back, then whispers, "Stay calm. Focus on getting Abigail out of here."

My father wipes the blood from his nose, sneering at Nikolai. "You should listen to your father, son."

"I'm not your fucking son." Nikolai glares at my father. "The money will be in your account by midnight." He turns around, and grabbing hold of my hand, he drags me toward the mansion.

"I look forward to seeing the infamous Vetrov island," My father taunts him. "It was nice doing business with you, Nikolai."

"Keep pushing me, fucker," Nikolai growls under his breath.

"Just keep walking," Damien murmurs.

All the Vetrovs are on high alert as we rush through the house and out the front door. I'm bundled into an SUV, and Nikolai and Winter slide in on either side of me. Damien climbs in behind the steering wheel while Grandpa Cillian takes the passenger seat.

When we pull away from the mansion and drive through the gates, I glance over my shoulder and release a relieved breath. "I expected bullets to fly."

Grandpa Cillian lets out a chuckle. "Enough money can stop any war."

Right.

I was just sold to Nikolai.

As the thought crosses my mind, I'm yanked into my man's arms and squashed to his chest. His breaths are harsh, as if he's run a marathon.

"Thank you for coming for me," I whisper.

"I'll always come for you." He holds me for a few minutes before he pulls back to look at me, his eyes drinking in the sight of me. "Did they hurt you?"

I shake my head and try to joke to ease the tension in the vehicle. "Damaged goods don't sell for as much."

I'm pressed to his chest again. "I was so fucking worried."

I hold Nikolai tight, glad there wasn't any blood shed today. I really don't want anyone to die because of me.

After a while, I ask, "What happens now?"

"Now, we go home," Winter answers.

Home.

Never in a million years did I think I'd become part of the Vetrov family.

A smile curves my lips as I lean against my man.

Thank God for miracles.

Chapter 39

Nikolai

I'm so fucking tired of flying when we step off the private jet.

Grandma is standing on the main house's porch. "Oh, thank God." She hurries closer to hug Abigail. "I was so worried."

"I'm okay, Grandma Dana," my love assures her.

A smile curves my lips because I'm grateful that everything worked out and Abigail didn't get hurt.

"Come, I've prepared dinner."

"Christ, you probably cooked enough to feed an army," Grandpa mutters.

Grandma waves an arm over the property. "And what do you call all the men guarding us?"

"An army," Grandpa grumbles.

I chuckle as I place a hand on Abigail's lower back. When we walk to the house, I lean into her and whisper, "You look breathtaking in the dress."

She smiles up at me. "I wore it for you."

I hold her back as my family heads into the house, and turning to face her, I ask, "Are you okay? Did the fuckers trigger anything?"

Abigail wraps her arms around me, leaning her cheek against my chest. "I'm grossed out when any other man touches me. There was a moment when it all rushed back, but I managed to push the demons away." Turning her head, she stares up at me, her eyes soft with love. "You're the only man who can touch me."

My mouth curves as I brush some strands of hair from her face. "Am I an asshole for loving that?"

She lets out a burst of laughter. "No, just my overly jealous and possessive caveman."

"Are you coming?" Grandma calls from the front door.

"Yes," Abigail answers excitedly. "I'm starving."

We follow my grandmother to the dining room and take our seats. A feast is spread over the table, which has Abigail salivating next to me.

I grab her plate and load it with a bit of everything, and only when my

woman is eating, do I help myself.

Mom lets out a happy sigh before she says, “Remind me to give you some clothes before you go home.”

“Clothes?” Abigail frowns, then her eyes widen. “Shit...I mean, shoot, I didn’t bring anything.”

“Don’t worry.” I wink at her. “I’ll take you shopping tomorrow.”

A wide smile spreads over her face. “You might regret it. I’m a shopaholic.”

“I’ll never regret spending time with you.”

Mom’s laughter draws our attention. “I need to record this. When you come home and complain about having to sit through a whole day of Abigail trying on clothes, I’m playing it back to you.”

“And trust me, it will take an entire day,” Abigail chuckles

The food is so good I help myself to a second plateful and load more onto Abigail’s plate while I’m at it.

After we’re all done stuffing our faces, we move to the living room to have coffee with my parents.

Abigail glances at my family, and I see emotion tightening her features. “Thank you for coming for me.”

“Of course,” Dad murmurs. “You’re family.”

Abigail takes a deep breath, blinking fast to keep the tears back. I pull her tightly to my side and press a kiss to her hair.

“I’ve never felt like I belonged until I met you all,” she admits. “I’m so glad I wore Nikolai down.”

We all chuckle at her comment, then I say, “It’s time for us to head home. I’m sure Abigail is exhausted after the day she’s had.”

“Oh, let me just grab you some clothes,” Mom exclaims before running out of the living room.

While we wait, I mention to Dad, “I’ll check with the buyer tomorrow to set up a meeting for the diamonds. I’d like to move them as soon as possible.”

“I agree.”

Mom comes back in with a small bag and hands it to Abigail. “It’s just something to sleep in and clothes for when you go shopping tomorrow.”

“Thank you so much.” Abigail gives Mom a quick hug before we finally head to the door.

I take the bag from Abigail, and wishing everyone a good night’s rest, we

walk toward the woods.

“Wait.” Abigail takes hold of my arm to keep her balance as she slips off her high heels. I open the bag so she can put them inside.

As we walk through the cool evening air, she sighs, “It’s only been two... three days, and I missed the island.”

“Hopefully, not more than you missed me?” I mutter.

“Trust you to be jealous of an island,” she teases.

We walk between the trees, following the path to my house, with the stars shining brightly in the sky.

“This is actually romantic,” Abigail comments. “A midnight stroll through the woods with the man of my dreams.”

“Sorry, I’m not more romantic.”

She grins at me. “Don’t worry about it. The awesome sex makes up for it.”

“Is that so?” I slap her on the ass, making her shriek.

Abigail stops walking, and glancing around, she lifts her hand to her cleavage and brushes her finger seductively over the curve of the breast. “Will any of the guards see us here?”

“Why?”

“I’ve never been fucked in the woods.”

My mouth curves up as I drop the bag onto the carpet of leaves.

“Take me here,” she purrs, her eyes filled with desperate need for me.

I grip a fistful of her hair and tug her head back, exposing her throat to me. We stare into each other’s eyes, the anticipation between us building.

Christ, this woman does it for me in ways no other woman ever has.

The power Abigail has over me should scare me, not turn me on. Still, I’m painfully straining against my zipper, threatening to tear through my pants to get to her.

Our breaths speed up, and when I tease her by brushing my lips against hers, she moans.

I tease her again, this time nipping her bottom lip.

“Jesus, Nikolai,” she groans. “You’re driving me insane.”

“Now you know how you make me feel,” I chuckle.

She lifts her hands to my chest, clinging to my shirt while she pushes up on her toes to reach my mouth. I allow her to kiss me for a couple of seconds before I tug her back by her hair.

She tastes like sex and love, the combination driving me wild.

“You’re mine,” I say, my tone filled with certainty that this is the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with.

Her teeth nip at my bottom lip. “I’m yours. Now, will you please fuck me?”

I slam my mouth to hers, kissing her with wild passion. My woman moans, happy that I’m giving her what she wants.

I’ll always give her what she wants.

Grabbing her ass, I lift her against my body. I take two steps forward until I can pin her to a tree while our mouths hungrily devour each other.

Abigail locks her legs around me, and I quickly push the silky dress out of the way. Unzipping my pants, I pull my hard-on out.

“Ready, *Malyshka*?” I ask as I push her panties aside, positioning myself against her soaked entrance.

“Please, *Daddy*,” she moans with such a seductive look on her face, I slam fucking hard into her, her body jerking from the force.

“Goddddd,” she groans, pain and pleasure warring in her eyes. “Sooo good.”

She wraps her arms around my neck and holds on tightly to me.

Pressing my forehead to hers, I begin to fill her with ruthless thrusts, each one jolting her body.

Her lips are parted with breaths rushing from them. Moans and whimpers spill from her mouth, the sounds making me fuck her harder and faster.

“You drive me insane,” I growl. “So fucking insane.”

“Good,” she sasses me right before her face tightens.

“Beg me,” I demand, wanting to hear my favorite sentence in the world.

“Please let me come on your huge cock, *Daddy*,” my woman gives me what I want.

“Come, *Malyshka*,” I give her the permission she needs.

Her cries of ecstasy echo through the woods, then she holds her breath as her pleasure seizes her body, her inner walls squeezing the fuck out of my cock.

My orgasm hits hard, and I draw my bottom lip between my teeth as I come deep inside her.

Our eyes remain locked as we come down from our shared high, and only after I press a tender kiss to her swollen lips do I pull out of Abigail and lower her to her feet.

“Don’t move,” I order as I tuck my cock back in my pants, then I slip my

arms beneath my woman and pick her up bridal style.

She chuckles as she wraps her arms around my neck again. “Good, my legs are numb from the orgasm.”

“I’m letting you gather your strength for round two,” I warn her.

Her voice is husky and playful as she asks, “Mhhh...will you fuck me all night long?”

“Woman,” I growl, “I’m going to fuck you for the rest of your life.”

“Promise,” she demands.

“I promise. I want you to feel me inside you twenty-four-seven.”

“Walk faster,” she chuckles. “I want you to do filthy things to me.”

Chapter 40

Abbie

Nikolai carries me to the bedroom, where he sets me down on my feet.

“You want filthy, baby?” he says, his tone low and deep.

Shivers rush over my body as I nod. “So badly.”

Stepping closer to me, he brushes his knuckles over my cheek before taking hold of the dress's straps, shoving them over my shoulders. The silk pools around my feet, and the air kisses my skin.

Nikolai's eyes burn over my hard nipples, then he orders, “From now on, you will wear a bra when you're around other people.” He tweaks my nipple hard, making heat flush to my core. “No one gets to see your nipples straining against silk but me.”

“Yes, *Daddy*,” I answer like a good little girl.

His hand lowers to my panties, wet from his release and my arousal, and he drags a finger over the lace. “Is that my cum dripping from your pussy?”

“Yes,” I breathe.

“Do you need me to fill you again, *Malyshka*?”

“Please.” I lower my lashes and bite my bottom lip. “I want your cum running down my legs.”

“Christ,” he growls. “You're so fucking hot. I'm aching for you.”

I reach down and grip his hard-on through his pants, giving him a hard squeeze.

“Are you my little whore?” he asks, his voice hoarse with desire.

Jesus, I love this. I can talk dirty with him all night long.

“I'm your little whore, *Daddy*,” I moan as I lean into him, squeezing him again. “I need you to fuck me so hard it hurts.”

Nikolai clenches his jaw right before he rips my panties off. He grabs me by my left asscheek and yanks me flush against his body. His eyes burn into mine, his teeth tugging at my bottom lip.

“I love it when you do that,” I admit.

He nips at my mouth again before giving me a hot-as-hell smirk. “So you like being fucked while there's a chance someone might see us?”

“It’s one hell of a turn-on.”

He pushes me back until I bump into the window.

“The guards circle the house every two hours,” he murmurs. “I’m not sure what the time is, so they can pass by any minute.”

My abdomen clenches hard, and I let out a whimper. “Fuck me so they can see who I belong to.”

Nikolai shakes his head. “On your knees, Abigail. I want to come all over your tits.”

YesYesYes.

I sink to my knees and conjure up my most innocent expression. “What do I do now, *Daddy*?”

Fire lights up his eyes, his features carved from granite as he growls, “Unzip my pants and free my cock,” he orders.

I pull the zipper down and tug his pants down to his ankles. He steps out of the fabric, and while he unbuttons his shirt, he demands, “Wrap your hand around me and stroke me hard.”

I obey, my eyes drinking in the sight of the angry vein running from the base to the head.

“Suck me so deep you choke,” he gives me another command.

My lips part, and I take Nikolai to the back of my mouth. Relaxing my muscles, I move forward, allowing him down my throat.

“Christ,” he grunts roughly. His hands grab my hair, and he grinds his pelvis against my face. “Fuck, Abigail.” His muscles strain so much his body starts to shake.

Breathing through my nose, I swallow hard. It has the desired effect as he swells and jerks in my throat.

“Again,” he orders, his voice hoarse.

I swallow hard again, then start to bob my head, fucking him as rough as I can with my mouth. My teeth scrape over his swollen head as tears stream down my cheeks.

“FuckFuckFuck.” Nikolai grips my hair so tight I lose strands, the pain making my arousal coat my inner thighs.

Suddenly he pulls out, then warm cum spurts over my breasts and neck. I swipe the tip of my finger over my skin, catching some of his release and bringing it to my mouth.

Nikolai watches as I taste him, my tongue swirling around the digit. “Hmm...so good.”

In total amazement, he shakes his head. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but I’m fucking grateful you’re mine.”

Chuckling, I climb to my feet. I turn around and squash my breasts to the window. “You better make me orgasm before one of the guards sees me naked.”

There’s a hard slap to my ass, the stinging pain forcing a whimper from me.

“I love how red your skin turns,” Nikolai groans.

He slaps my ass again, then he orders, “Spread your legs.”

I hear him move away from me and glance over my shoulder. Nikolai removes the vibrator from the bedside drawer and comes back to me.

I love a man who’s so freaking confident he’s not intimidated by a toy.

“Are you ready to scream, *Malyshka*?”

“Please.”

I hear the vibration start and push my butt out, anticipating the pleasure, but instead, I get another slap to my asscheek.

My hands are flat against the window, and I’m just about to curse Nikolai a blue streak when he pushes the vibrator between my legs and through my slit.

“Oh yes,” I gasp.

Slowly he rubs the toy all the way from my slit to my butt and back again. Shivers rush through my body, goosebumps exploding over my skin.

“Again,” I beg, breathless with need.

Nikolai presses his chest to my back, and with his free hand, he grips hold of my hip. Keeping the torturously slow rhythm, he rubs the vibrator up and down my slit.

“God, Nikolai,” I beg. “Please.”

He lets out a dark chuckle before finally pushing it deep inside me, then the speed increases dramatically.

I come instantly, the pleasure so intense my legs go numb, and Nikolai has to wrap an arm around me to keep me from sinking to the ground.

My lips are parted in a silent ‘O’ while my body convulses as if I’m being electrocuted. I’m caught in my post-orgasm bliss when he lifts me up in his arms and carries me to the shower.

He opens the faucets and waits for the water to warm before pulling me beneath the spray.

With a satisfied smile on my face, I watch as my man washes my body,

thinking life doesn't get any better than this.

"I love you so much," I murmur.

"Is that the orgasm talking?" he chuckles, his eyes flicking to mine.

"No, it's my heart."

Nikolai rinses the suds from my body before he pulls me into his arms. He presses a tender kiss to my lips, then says, "We should get an engagement ring while we're shopping for your new wardrobe."

My eyebrow darts up. "That better not be your proposal."

He tilts his head. "Ah...will you marry me?"

Gaping at the man, I slap his shoulder. "Seriously. I just let you come all over me. I want romantic."

"Baby," he groans. "I don't know how to be romantic. Tell me what you want."

Lifting my hands between us, I tick the list off on my fingers. "A candlelit dinner. Beneath the stars. You telling me how you can't live without me."

"Okay, but are you going to answer me now?"

Giving him a playful look, I say, "No. I'm going to make you suffer. I'll answer you when I get my romantic date."

He grips my butt and squashes me to his chest. "I love it when you're bossy. It's cute."

"I wasn't going for cute, but okay."

He captures my eyes with his, then murmurs, "Please let me love you for the rest of my life."

Jesus, my heart.

"Let me protect you, take care of you, and satisfy you until my last breath."

I'm hit with a wave of happy emotions, and my chin starts to tremble.

"I want you to make me a father. I need all your stuff scattered all over my house, so I see you everywhere."

"Nikolai," I whisper as a tear spirals down my cheek.

"I need you, Abigail. Now and forever and every day in between."

I start to nod, then whimper, "Yes to all of that."

A grin spreads over his face. "So you'll marry me?"

"Nope. Not until I get my romantic dinner."

"Christ, you drive me insane," he grumbles before he pushes me up against the tiles, desperate to be inside me again.

Chapter 41

Nikolai

We take the helicopter to the mainland, accompanied by five of my best men because there's no way I'm taking a chance with Abigail's life.

My woman has a beautiful smile on her face as we enter the first store.

"What's my spending limit?" she asks.

I shake my head. "There's no limit, *moya lyubov'*. Shop to your heart's content."

"Wow, that's a dangerous thing to say," she chuckles. "I'm going to drain your bank account."

"Good luck trying." I gesture for a shop attendant to come closer, then tell the woman, "Shut the doors. My fiancée needs all your attention."

I hand her my black card, which has her eyes widening. "Yes, sir."

My men guard the front of the store, and Abigail is taken to a small lounge where she's offered a glass of champagne.

I shake my head before they can ask me if I want one too. Taking a seat, I relax back in the armchair and watch as my woman admires every item they show her.

"I need something that's going to make my ass look great," Abigail says without blinking an eye. "My fiancé is an ass-man."

No filter.

God, I love her.

"What about this leopard print leather?" the lady asks.

I shake my head before Abigail can answer. "Hell no to anything with a leopard print."

Another pair of leather pants is brought for us to see, and I nod.

"Okay, let me try it on," the love of my life says before she heads to the dressing rooms.

Getting up, I follow after her and check each of the stalls before I'm satisfied that she'll be safe.

When I start to walk back to the lounge, she asks, "Don't you want to stay?"

“No, I don’t think the shop attendants want to hear me fucking you senseless.”

“Ooh, new kink unlocked,” she taunts me before pulling the curtain shut behind her.

I shake my head as I take a seat again, my eyes locked on the entrance to the dressing room. I love my woman’s kinky side, but what she doesn’t know is that the window in my bedroom is one-way glass. There’s no way I’ll ever risk another man seeing her naked.

When Abigail comes out and twirls in a circle for me, I nod immediately. “It’s perfect. Get two because I might rip that one off your body.”

“Hmm... promises, promises,” she teases me before swaying her sexy ass back to the stall.

While I watch Abigail try on one outfit after the other, I wonder how men can hate this. Seeing her smile while she tries to tempt me every chance she gets makes me happy.

Christ, I’m so fucking happy. How did I ever live a day without her?

When Abigail is satisfied with her wardrobe, I arrange for everything to be packed and carried to the G-Wagon we keep in Finland for our shopping trips.

I pay the outstanding amount, and taking my future wife’s hand, I lead her out of the store.

“Oh my God, Nikolai. Look!” I’m yanked across the road to where a petting zoo has been erected in the middle of town. “It’s a llama.” Without any fear, Abigail rubs the animal’s head.

“Careful,” I warn her.

“Aww...he’s smiling at me,” she coos.

“Llamas, don’t smile,” I grumble, the pungent smell of all the shit getting to me.

“I want one,” she demands.

“Hell no. They spit.”

“You won’t spit at me, Right?” she talks to the animal while scratching behind one of his ears.

Again I’m yanked as Abigail darts to the next pen. “Aww, aren’t they cute?”

“They’re pigs,” I state the obvious.

“Pot-belly pigs,” she corrects me as she lets go of my hand to crouch down. “Aren’t you an adorable little piggy.”

I can't help but smile at the sight of Abigail petting a pig.

"I want one. I can name him Bacon."

My smile drops from my face, and I shake my head. "You're not serious."

She gives me a mischievous smile before she heads for the enclosure holding bunnies.

Dear God. She's going to make me look at all the animals.

Abigail frowns at me, then asks, "Don't you like animals?"

"Not when they smell like shit."

Her frown deepens. "Oooh, I don't know if I can marry a man who doesn't like animals."

"I love them." I wave a hand over the petting zoo. "You can take them all."

She lets out a burst of laughter before grabbing hold of my hand again. "I'm just playing with you. Let's go look at engagement rings."

"And a wedding band," I add.

I plan on marrying her as soon as possible. It will have to be this coming weekend because Aurora and Misha are getting married the week after.

A wide smile spreads over my face, which catches Abigail's attention.

"What's that smile for?"

"Nothing," I chuckle as I lead her to the jewelry store.

When we enter, Abigail says, "I don't want something big. I like a dainty ring."

"How can we help?" a male attendant asks.

"We want to see your most expensive, dainty engagement and wedding rings," I answer, never in my life thinking I'd use the word 'dainty.'

He guides us to his desk and gestures for us to take a seat. "Does the lady have anything specific in mind? White gold? Yellow gold? Platinum?"

"Ah, I don't know." Abigail looks at me. "You're the expert."

"Let's see all of them," I answer the man. Locking eyes with Abigail, I ask, "Do you have a favorite stone?"

"Isn't it obvious," she grins. "I'm marrying the king of diamonds."

Damn, I like the sound of that.

I let out a chuckle, and when the man returns with a selection of rings, Abigail tries them on.

Lifting my hand, I tuck some hair behind her ear before resting my hand possessively on the back of her neck. My thumb brushes over her soft skin,

which makes her smile grow.

“What do you think of this one?” she asks as she holds her left hand up.

An average size diamond is set in rose gold, with three tiny stones on either side of the main one shimmering like stars. I would’ve preferred something bigger, but Abigail made it clear she wants something on the smaller side.

I take hold of her hand, bringing it closer to inspect the stones. There’s almost no color which tells me they’re the real thing and fall on the rarer side.

“I like it,” I give my approval.

“I want this one.” Abigail’s smile is so beautiful it steals my breath.

We continue to search for the perfect wedding band to match the engagement ring, and once my bride-to-be is happy with her choices, she says, “Your turn. We might as well get your wedding band while we’re here.”

I didn’t even think about myself. It only takes me a couple of minutes before I select a plain platinum band. No frills, no fuss.

I settle the bill, and the shop assistant promises the rings will be ready for collection the day after tomorrow.

As we leave the store with my men flanking us, I hand Abigail my black credit card. “Use this for anything you need.”

“Oh wow, you’re really brave,” she chuckles. She pushes up on her toes to press a kiss to my cheek. “Thank you, my love.”

I grin like a love-sick idiot, willing to give her everything I have to my name.

Yeah, this woman has me wrapped around her little finger, and there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

Chapter 42

Abbie

I'm so glad I know Aurora's number off by heart. Using my brand new phone, I listen as the line connects.

"Aurora speaking," she answers, her tone uncertain.

"It's me. Abbie."

"Oh, my God! Are you okay?" Aurora shrieks, worry thick in her words.

"Yes. I'm sorry I didn't call you sooner. I left everything I had at my parents' house," I tell her. "Things were a little crazy."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there. When we got to the kitchen, Misha threw me over his shoulder and carried me out of the house," she grumbles.

"He knew Nikolai was coming and was only looking out for you."

"I know. Still, I was worried sick."

"I'm okay. Nikolai and his family came to get me. I'm on the island and don't think I'll be returning to St. Monarch's."

"Ooooh...tell me everything. Are you and Nikolai officially a couple? Do I hear wedding bells?"

I let out a chuckle. "Yes, and yes. We bought our rings today, but I've told him I won't say yes unless he gives me a romantic proposal."

"Aww, I'm so happy for you. You're still coming to my wedding, right?"

"Of course. I'm the maid of honor." I pause for a moment, then say, "Look at us, Ra-Ra. We both have the man of our dreams."

"We do."

"Jesus, it's been a crazy couple of months."

"Yeah, I'm not going to disagree," she mutters. "I'm just glad we all got through it alive."

Getting up from the couch, I walk out of the French doors and take the steps down. I head into the woods and clear my throat as I lean back against an old tree. "There's something I have to tell you."

"What? Are you pregnant?"

Chuckling, I shake my head. "No." I take a deep breath. "During the ambush, something happened to me."

I hear Aurora's breaths speed up.

"I couldn't talk about it...until now," I admit. "Uhm...so one of the men raped me."

"No," Aurora gasp. "No, Abbie."

I press my lips together as tears blur my eyes. "Don't worry too much. Every day I heal a little more."

"Oh my God," Aurora starts to cry, and I close my eyes when I hear her pain.

"I'm okay, Ra-Ra."

"I'm so sorry I didn't see it," she starts to apologize. "I'm such a shitty friend. I'm so sorry, Abbie."

"Don't do that."

I hear movement behind me, then Nikolai comes to stand in front of me. His eyes search my face, and I give him a reassuring smile that I'm okay.

"The signs were all there. You lost weight which you never do. You looked like you weren't getting any sleep. God, I'm never going to forgive myself."

"Please, Ra-Ra," I whisper. "Stop blaming yourself. I didn't want you to know."

"My God, Abbie," she breathes. "Are you really okay? Jesus, I wish I could hug you."

"I'm really okay. Nikolai is helping me heal." I lift my hand and place my palm against his jaw. "He's been amazing."

"I'm so glad to hear that," she sighs.

Changing the subject, I ask, "Are you going to stay at St. Monarch's?"

"Only until Misha is done with his training." Her voice grows lighter as she says, "I found out where the honeymoon is going to be."

"Where?" I ask Aurora the question while I watch Nikolai head back into the house.

"Bora Bora," Aurora shrieks.

"I'm so happy for you."

"Hey, I have to go or I'll be late for a class."

"Okay. Talk to you soon," I murmur as I end the call.

Walking into the house, I find Nikolai in the living room.

"What are you doing, Mr. Vetrov?" I ask playfully.

"Waiting for your call to end."

"I'm all done."

Suddenly Nikolai sinks down to his knees, gesturing for me to come closer. "I'm hungry, baby."

Jesus, I love seeing this powerful man kneel before me.

Nikolai takes my pants off and positions my one leg over his shoulder, immediately burying his face between my thighs and going to town on my clit.

My eyes are glued to his face as I watch him suck and bite my clit into oblivion, the view easily one of the hottest things I've ever seen.

Later that night, when Nikolai blindfolds me with one of his neckties, I can't stop grinning.

"Are you going to gag me with your belt?" I ask seductively.

"Hmm," the sound rumbles deep from his chest. "Did you like it?"

"A lot," I answer honestly.

"Your kinky fantasies will have to wait until after you've had your surprise," he chuckles.

"Surprise?"

I'm swept up into his arms and try to guess where he's taking me. When I know we're outside, my smile widens.

My romantic date.

We walk for a minute or so before I'm placed on my feet, then Nikolai murmurs right by my ear, "Ready?"

"Yes," I breathe, excitement rushing through my body.

He unfastens the necktie, and as it falls away from my eyes, my breath catches in my throat.

A little round table is standing in a small clearing. In the middle of the table is an arrangement of green leaves and candles captured in a glass dome so the breeze can't blow out the flames.

There's an arch over the table, fairy lights creating a halo, and up in the sky, the stars shine brightly.

"And you say you can't do romantic," I whisper as I walk closer.

Two plates are covered with lids, and as I lift one, there's nothing short of a work of art waiting to be eaten. Two slices of salmon lie on a bed of greens, instantly making my mouth water.

Nikolai pulls my chair out, and once I've taken my seat, he moves around the table to sit down.

Pure happiness floods my heart as I whisper, “Thank you.”

Looking pleased, he murmurs, “You’re welcome, *moya lyubov*’.”

While we enjoy the skillfully prepared dinner, I admit, “I’m so glad you love me back. When I started flirting with you, I never imagined we’d end up like this.”

Nikolai chuckles, “Yeah, there were a couple of close calls where I almost strangled you.”

“Instead, you fucked me,” I purr. “And look at me now. I’m totally addicted to your cock.”

“I’m glad because it’s addicted to you too.”

The moment we swallow our last bites, Nikolai locks eyes with me, a serious expression on his face. “Just to be clear, you’re not going back to St. Monarch’s.”

I nod. “I’m so over that place.”

“You’ll spend your days painting,” he orders.

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

“Always so fucking sassy,” he murmurs.

“Just for you.”

Nikolai stands up, and when I move to rise to my feet, he shakes his head. A second later, he goes down on one knee while taking my left hand in his.

Awwww...

“Abigail Sartori, you’re someone I never expected. I was really content with my life.”

Geez, what a way to start.

“You’re the one person I never knew I needed, and once I got you, I couldn’t fathom how I managed to survive a day without you.”

My heart.

“You barreled into my life with your flirtatious nature and sass, knocked me to my knees, and since then, I never wanted to get up. You’re the only woman I’ll kneel before.”

My chin trembles as my heart fills with unspeakable happiness.

“You’re the love of my life, my soulmate, and the queen of my heart.”

I suck in a trembling breath, furiously blinking to clear the tears from my eyes.

“Will you, Abigail Sartori, please do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

I nod like a crazy person as I leap off my chair to fall into his arms.

“YesYesYes.”

Nikolai chuckles as he holds me tightly in his arms. “Thank you for making me the happiest person alive.”

I shake my head and pulling back so I can see his face, I say, “I’m the luckiest person. I never knew what love was until you showed me. Thank you for making all my dreams come true and giving me a loving family.” I press a tender kiss to his lips as tears spiral down my cheeks. “Thank you for giving me an island where I can paint all day long.” *Another kiss.* “Thank you for helping me get through my darkest moments.” *Kiss.* “Thank you for not letting the age gap get between us.” *Kiss.* “Thank you for choosing me.”

“I’ll always choose you, baby.”

Nikolai pulls a tiny box from his jacket’s inner pocket, and flipping it open, he pushes the beautiful engagement ring onto my finger.

“Now the whole world can see you’re mine,” he whispers, emotions tightening his voice. Clearing his throat, he adds, “We’re getting married this Sunday.”

My eyebrows fly up. “What?”

Nikolai locks eyes with me. “I need you to be my wife more than I need my next breath. I’ve arranged everything for an intimate wedding here on the island with only our family and closest friends.”

“Oh my God,” I gasp. Excitement and pure bliss explode through me like fireworks. “I’m getting to marry you in two days?”

A stunning smile spreads over his face. “Yes. We can have a formal affair with your family in Italy, but I want our ceremony to be personal and intimate.”

Nodding wildly, I slam my mouth to his and push him onto his back, so I can show him how much I love his plans for us. Straddling my man, I pull my dress up my thighs, and unzipping his pants, I can’t free his hard-on quick enough.

When I finally take him deep inside me, my satisfied moan echoes over the small clearing, and soon it’s followed by the sound of me fucking Nikolai as hard as I can.

Breathless and only able to grunt with each thrust, my man’s hands grip my breasts tightly, his muscles straining beneath me before he comes so hard, his roar fills the night air.

I slow down my pace until I’m sensually grinding my clit against his pelvis, pushing myself over the edge, my pleasure hitting the breath from my

lungs.

“Christ, I love you,” Nikolai growls as I ride him until I come down from high.

“I love you more,” I gasp as I slump over his chest. “So much more.”

“We’ll agree to differ,” he murmurs.

Chapter 43

Nikolai

“Hey,” Maxim answers my call. “I’m starting to think you hate me.”

Letting out a chuckle, I ask, “Why?”

“Cami is a fucking headache,” he complains.

“Cami?” I tease him. “You already have a nickname for Camilla?”

“Shut up,” he grumbles, then his tone softens, “How are you?”

“I’m getting married,” I drop the bomb.

“What?” There’s a moment of stunned silence. “To Abigail?”

“Yes.” I grin from ear to fucking ear. “She’s the one.”

“Damn, brother.” I hear the happiness in my best friend’s voice. “That’s great. When’s the wedding?”

“This Sunday. Please tell me you can get the day off. I’ll send the private jet for you.”

“Let me speak to Mr. DuBois. I’m sure one of the other guards can babysit Cami for the day.”

I clear my throat. “I’m asking my father to be my best man. You understand, right?”

“Of course. I’m just fucking happy you met the love of your life. You deserve it, Nikolai.”

Emotion washes over me. “It means a lot coming from you.”

“Listen, I have to go, but I’ll be in touch regarding Sunday. What time is the wedding?”

“Ten in the morning.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you soon.”

We end the call, and tucking my phone in my pocket, I call out, “Baby, I’m heading over to my parents’ place. I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Okay,” she answers absentmindedly from where she’s lost in her painting.

I leave our home and walk toward the main house, my mind going over all the arrangements for the wedding ceremony. I want it to be nothing short of perfect for Abigail.

My phone starts to ring, and pulling the device out of my pocket, I see Emilio Sartori's name flashing on the screen.

Fucking bastard.

"What do you want?" I answer, unable not to growl.

"I received the invitation to the wedding," the asshole mutters. "You're not wasting any time putting a ring on my daughter's finger, are you?"

I suck in a deep breath to keep calm, not wanting to give the fucker the satisfaction of knowing he's upsetting me.

"My wife and I won't be attending," he informs me.

Just like I thought, he's too fucking cowardly to meet me on my turf. It's the only reason I sent the invitation.

"There's no way I'm setting foot on the Vetrov island," he sneers. "I'm not that fucking stupid."

I let out a chuckle. "I'm sorry to say you won't be missed."

"I'll arrange an extravagant celebration here in Italy where all the mafia and bratva families can witness the union of our two families."

I let out an overly patient sigh, "Yeah, I'm sure you can't wait to flaunt that you're connected to the Vetrovs through marriage. Do you even care about Abigail?"

"Of course," he chuckles. "The hundred million in my bank account is a welcome bonus."

Fucker.

"After the wedding celebration in Italy, I'll make sure you see her as little as possible," I vow.

"Good. It means I won't have to look at you."

The call ends, and I stop to close my eyes so I can calm down before entering my parents' house.

I can't wait until Emilio Sartori is lying on his deathbed so I can tell him everything he's ever worked for will belong to my and Abigail's oldest child.

His life's work will belong to a Vetrov.

Heading inside the house, I hear everyone talking in the kitchen.

Mom's head snaps up when I enter. "Oh good, you're here. Do you want butterflies or doves to be released after you've said your I-dos?"

"Butterflies," I answer. I take hold of my Dad's arm to get his attention, and in front of my family, I ask, "Will you be my best man?"

His eyes lock on mine, and I watch as emotions wash over his features. "I'd be honored, son."

We don't get to bask in our moment for long because Mom's in wedding mode. "Abigail needs to come over this afternoon so Dana can have her fit on the dress. For the love of God, make sure she doesn't have paint on her hands. I'll shit myself if she gets it on the dress."

I chuckle, loving how excited my mom is about the wedding.

Sunday will be perfect, just like Abigail is, and then she'll have my last name.

Abigail Vetrov.

Fucking perfect.

Abbie

Dressed in the wedding gown of my dreams, I'm speechless and overly emotional.

The heart-shaped lace bodice leaves my shoulders bare, and at my waist, chiffon falls in a cloud to my bare feet. My hair hangs in a long braid down my back, baby's breath woven into the strands.

I stare at my beautiful reflection, in total wonder at the pure bliss that's my life.

Hi, Abbie. I'm so proud of you. Look how far you've come.

Tears blur my eyes, and I swallow hard.

You've survived so much and managed to get the man of your dreams.

Thank you for fighting for me.

"Are you ready?" Winter asks softly from the doorway.

Turning around, a wave of emotion hits hard, and I struggle to keep the tears back.

"Oh, baby," she coos as she rushes to me. I'm pulled into a gentle hug. "It's okay to cry on your special day."

Pulling back, I inhale deeply before I meet her eyes. "Thank you for everything, Winter. I appreciate you so much."

A soft smile curves her lips as she adjusts a curl by my ear. "Will you do me one favor?"

"Anything," I whisper.

"Love my boy as much as I do."

I nod, a tear spiraling down my cheek.

“Okay, it’s actually two favors,” she chuckles as she blinks to stop her own tears from falling.

I smile through the emotion overwhelming me.

“Will you please call me mom?”

Oh shit. There goes my makeup.

My face crumbles, and I hug her so hard as a sob escapes me. “I’d like that very much, Mom.”

“Oh my God,” Please tell me you’re both not crying your makeup off,” Grandma Dana cries as she hurries toward us.

Mom and I pull apart, chuckling as Grandma Dana tries to salvage our makeup.

When we’ve calmed down enough to leave the room, nerves spin in my stomach. We exit the house and walk to the woods. Right before we reach the small clearing where Nikolai proposed to me, Mom and Grandma Dana leave me alone so they can take their seats.

Soft piano notes fill the air, and I’m so freaking emotional that my whole body is trembling like a leaf in a shit-storm. I’ve decided to walk myself down the aisle like the strong, independent woman I am.

I suck in a quivering breath, my heart racing in my chest as the tempo starts building, then I take a step forward.

Then another.

And another.

I break through the trees, and seeing all our loved ones seated on either side of the white rose petal aisle, a tear spirals down my cheek.

Then my gaze locks on Nikolai, his features tense with emotion as he stares at me in absolute wonder. Subtly he tries to brush a tear away from the corner of his eye.

Slowly, I move toward the man who’s changed my entire life, and when the final notes of the song trickle through the air, I stop in front of him.

“Christ,” he whispers, his voice hoarse. “You take my breath away, Abigail.”

He leans down and presses a tender kiss to my forehead before we turn to face Grandpa Cillian, who’s officiating the marriage.

Grandpa Cillian smiles at us, pride shining from his eyes, then he says, “I was told to make this short and sweet.” Our guests chuckle. “Wow, can we all just take a moment to look at this beautiful bride my grandson managed to snag?”

I let out a burst of laughter and turn in a circle so everyone can see my dress.

“She’s too gorgeous for you, Nikolai,” Maxim calls out.

I met him earlier when he arrived on the island.

I love how light-hearted the atmosphere is.

Grandpa Cillian draws our attention back to him as he says, “Nikolai and Abigail have chosen to say their own vows.”

Yeah, I’m so going to suck at this, but here goes nothing.

I turn to face Nikolai, and we take hold of each other’s hands.

“Mr. Vetrov,” I say with all the seduction I can muster while feeling so damn emotional. “There’s only one word to describe you.” I suck in a trembling breath. “Hero.”

Oh Jesus, please give me the strength not to cry until I’m done talking.

“You’re my hero.” My voice is so strained I fear he might not understand what I’m saying. “You’re everything I ever wanted. I annoyed you with my corny come-on lines. I drove you insane with my persistent flirting.”

Nikolai smiles at me as he remembers when we first met.

My voice is nothing but a soft whisper. “You carried me through my darkest moment. You became the solid ground beneath my feet, the sun warming my days, and the love I never had.”

He reaches up to brush the tears from my cheeks.

“You’re my everything, Nikolai.”

When it’s his turn, he clears his throat. “Everyone knows I’m a stubborn bastard who doesn’t like it when people mess with my routine.” Chuckles and mutters of agreement come from the guests. “But you, Abigail,” he shakes his head as he stares at me with unconditional love. “You didn’t let it scare you off, and I’m so thankful for your bravery and sass. You’re so deep in my heart and soul, there’s no more me. There’s only us and our future together.”

He takes a step closer to me as he says, “You’re my beginning and my end, Abigail.”

While we say our I-dos, we slip our wedding rings on, and a moment later, Grandpa Cillian pronounces us husband and wife.

Nikolai sweeps an arm around me, then tips me backward before he kisses the ever-living crap out of me.

When he lifts his head, he stares deeply into my eyes. “Hi, Mrs. Vetrov.”

A smile spreads over my face. “Say it again.”

He rights me on my feet, and taking my hand, he turns me to face our

guests. “I’d like to introduce you all to my wife, Mrs. Vetrov.” Shaking his head, his eyes drift over me with adoration. “Isn’t she exquisite?”

The guests stand up, and suddenly white butterflies fill the clearing.

I cover my mouth with both my hands as I look up, the tiny wings looking like snowflakes. “Oh my God, Nikolai,” I breathe. “It’s beautiful.”

Coming to stand behind me, he presses a kiss to my temple. “I’m happy you love it.”

Turning around in his arms, I look up at the man I love more than life itself. And that’s saying a lot because I *love* my life.

I place my palms on his jaw, and lifting myself on my tiptoes, I kiss him with everything I feel for him, then I whisper by his ear, “I’m so going to fuck your brains out later.”

“I’ll hold you to that promise,” he chuckles.

We turn to our guests, and as we make our way down the aisle, applause and cheers fill the air.

We spend a perfect day with our loved ones before I get to go home with my husband so I can show him just how much he means to me.

Tomorrow we’ll leave for our short honeymoon in Ha Long Bay, situated in Vietnam, where I’ll spend my first week as Nikolai Vetrov’s wife – the one he chose for himself.

Epilogue

Nikolai

(Five years later...)

“Nikolai!” Abigail screams from inside the house, panic lacing her words.

I drop the ax next to the wood I was chopping and break out into a run. Pulling my gun from behind my back, I take the safety off and dart into the kitchen.

“Abigail!” I roar, ready to kill whatever’s threatening her.

“I’m in the den! Shit. Fuck.”

I rush inside to see my wife standing with a palette and a paintbrush in her hands while staring at her feet. Her eyes dart to me, then she frowns. “Put away the gun. My water broke.”

Christ.

I quickly shove my gun into the waistband of my pants. “I fucking thought you were being attacked.”

“Oh, Jesus,” she gasps, the palette and brush falling from her hands. She bends over at the waist, groaning painfully. “The baby is coming, and just like his father, he’s freaking impatient.”

Wrapping my arm around her, I help her to walk, but when she doubles over again, I sweep her up into my arms and carry her out of the house to where the helicopter is on standby.

I’ve made every possible arrangement well in advance. There’s even a packed bag for Abigail and our unborn son waiting on the aircraft.

“I can walk,” she says. “The contractions have passed.”

I set her down on her feet so I can pull my phone from my pocket and quickly call the doctor I have on speed dial.

“Yes, Mr. Vetrov?”

“Abigail’s water broke. We’re on our way.”

“Everything is ready,” he assures me before we hang up.

I dial Mom’s number, and as soon as she answers the phone, I say, “Abigail’s in labor. Meet us at the hospital.”

“Oh, my Godddd!” I hear Mom scream before I end the call.

“Run ahead and get the pilot to start the engine,” I order a guard who’s standing at his post.

“Remind me why the freaking helicopter isn’t right outside our house,” Abigail mutters as she clenches her jaw.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize, knowing not to argue with her right now. If she says the sky is pink, then the sky is fucking pink.

Finally, we make it to the helicopter, and I help Abigail to climb inside. I place a set of headphones over her head before I grab my own.

Two of my best guards also get into the helicopter, then the pilot asks, “Ready for take-off, Mr. Vetrov?”

“Yes,” I give the order. Grabbing Abigail’s hand, I give it a squeeze. “How are you holding up?”

She shoots me a glare. “How do you think I’m doing?” Her face contorts with pain, then she groans, “Jesus, Nikolai.”

“Breathe, *moya lyubov*’.” I check the time on my wristwatch to keep track of how far apart the contractions are.

“Don’t fucking tell me to breathe,” she snaps before she starts breathing like she’s been taught during our prenatal classes.

When the contractions pass, she slumps her head against my shoulder. I press a kiss to her hair, praising her, “You’re incredible, Abigail. I’m so fucking thankful for you.”

“I don’t feel incredible,” she complains.

The helicopter touches down on the hospital’s roof, where the doctor and nursing staff are waiting.

“I want all the painkillers,” my wife demands before I help her out of the aircraft.

When I have her sitting in a wheelchair, I say, “Whatever you want, baby.”

A nurse wheels Abigail into an elevator, and I quickly dart inside with our guards and the doctor right behind us.

“Do you know how far apart the contractions are?” Dr. Koskinen asks.

“Ten minutes. She’s only had two.”

We’re taken to a private room where everything is ready for our son’s birth.

“Stand guard by the door,” I order my two men.

“Yes, sir.”

Lifting Abigail from the wheelchair, I place her on the bed before pouring

a glass of water for her.

“Here you go, baby,” I murmur, and while she takes a sip, I reach for the facecloth that’s soaking in icy water.

Wringing the cloth out, I pat over her forehead, which has her letting out a satisfied moan. “So good.”

Suddenly she hands me the bottle, then starts to breathe faster.

I notice the nurse timing the contraction while the doctor takes a seat at the foot of the bed. “Let’s have a look and see how far you’re dilated.”

My top lip curls as the nurse pushes Abigail’s dress back and helps her out of her underwear.

Every time this man is between my wife’s legs, I have to remind myself not to kill him.

When Dr. Koskinen is done checking, there’s a pleased smile on his face. “It’s almost time. We’re going to do a couple of practice pushes.”

Abigail nods, and my heart begins to beat faster.

The nurse shows me how to help Abigail into the right position, and then the doctor says, “Take a deep breath, then push as hard as you can for ten seconds.”

Abigail inhales as deeply as she can, then pushes until the count of ten.

When she slumps back, I grab the facecloth from the icy water again and wipe the sweat from her forehead. “I’m so fucking proud of you.”

“You better be,” she sasses me.

God, I love this woman.

“Push again, Mrs. Vetrov,” the doctor instructs.

My wife gives the push her all before slumping back again.

We continue with the pushes for twenty minutes when the doctor says, “It’s time.”

Christ.

Okay.

Fuck.

What do I do?

Abigail lets out an agonizing cry as she starts to push.

“Breathe through the contraction,” the nurse tells her.

“Don’t fucking tell me what to do!” my wife screams, the expression on her face that of a ruthless queen. She grabs my hand in a death grip, then whimpers, “Nikolai.”

I press my forehead to her temple. “You’ve got this, Abigail. You’re so

fucking strong. You're going to be an amazing mother." I praise her through her pain until she's able to gasp for air.

The contraction comes again, and Abigail lets out a fucking war cry that gives me goosebumps. This time she doesn't stop pushing, and with the doctor's guidance, she gives birth to our firstborn son, who we're naming after my father.

"You have a healthy baby boy," Dr. Wells says while the nurse takes care of Damien.

She wraps a blanket around our newborn son before bringing him to us.

My fucking heart.

I watch as Abigail takes our son, cradling him against her breast.

Never in my life have I seen anything more beautiful than my wife and my son.

"Is my wife okay?" I ask. "Is my boy healthy?"

Dr. Koskinen chuckles. "They're both in perfect health."

Leaning over my precious family, I whisper, "My miracles. Christ, I love you both so fucking much my heart aches."

Abigail gives me a teary smile, exhausted from the labor. "We have a son, *Daddy*. Look how perfect he is..." she pauses to clear her throat, emotion thick in her voice, "just like his father."

Completely overcome with emotion, I press a kiss to her forehead. "*Moya zhizn'. Moya dusha. Ty mayo vse.*"

That's what Abigail and our son will always be to me.

My life. My soul. My everything.

The End.

If you have been a victim of sexual abuse, you are not alone. You can contact the Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network at www.rainn.org or 1-800-656-HOPE

If you're outside the borders of the USA, please reach out to a crisis center near you.

You don't have to face your trauma alone.

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