

Cruel
VOVWS

SOVEREIGN BROTHERHOOD TRILOGY

JO McCALL

Cruel Vows

SOVEREIGN BROTHERHOOD BK 1

JO MCCALL

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Jo McCall

Cruel Vows: The Sovereign Brotherhood BK 1

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Cruel Vows
❧

M AFIA/FORCED MARRIAGE/ALPHAHOLE

**BOOK 1. INTERCONNECTED STANDALONE IN THE
SOVEREIGN BROTHERHOOD TRILOGY**

THIS BOOK CAN BE READ as a complete standalone.

Acknowledgements

The reception for this book has been huge! I am so grateful and thankful to those who help make it possible. You- the reader- help make my writing grow. Thank you so much for supporting me along my author journey, it wouldn't be here without you.

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Thank you all for reading. Enjoy Adrian and Vanya as much as I have. They wouldn't be here without you.

*Some beasts become prince charming.
Others become a Dark King.*

Warning

Thee content within this book is DARK and may be triggering to some

INCLUDING:

Physical Abuse

Graphic Violence

Dubious Consent

Gun Play

18+ Only

Please read responsibly.

Full list of triggers for this particular book go to

jomccallauthor.com

<https://jomccallauthor.com/cruelvows/>

One



“Come out, come out wherever you are,” the voice taunts, echoing after the heavy footsteps sounding like the beat of an executioner’s drum. My hands fly to my mouth, stifling the sob that threatens to tear itself from my chest. My family prepared me for a moment like this.

A moment I never thought would come.

Now it has, and I am all alone.

And afraid.

“Trust me, *princess*,” the man utters the moniker as if it burns his tongue. Like it is an unpleasant taste in his mouth. “If you make me hunt you down, I will make you beg for death after I get my hands on you, and I still won’t give you mercy.”

My breath quickens, threatening to give me away.

“Just give in and come out so we can get this over with,” he sneers. “Death to all Castellanos scum.”

A tear slips down my cheek. I hold back a snuffle, the lump in my throat tightening to the point that it feels as if I cannot breathe.

Please god. Don’t let him find me.

The room is small and cramped. It is hidden behind one of the many portraits that adorn the main hallway leading toward my grandfather’s office. There is one in each hallway. All made specifically for me. Because when you are the daughter of a mafia king, you are a target.

A weakness.

A liability.

I’d woken to screaming. The sharp cut of sound rang through the house like broken glass. In my sleepy haze, it took me a moment to realize that it

had been my mother screaming my name.

A warning.

“Please,” my grandfather’s frail voice seeps through the layers of wood and metal. “She’s just a child.”

The intruder snorts. “No matter.” This man is callous and cold. Heartless. An assassin. I know men like him, but even they have lines they draw. “A job is a job and I’m being well rewarded to wipe your sad excuse for a family off this earth. Including her.”

There’s a sharp snap, like bone breaking, followed by a painful grunt from my grandfather. My stomach churns dangerously at the sound. “I know you’re here,” the intruder roars, obviously out of patience. “Come on out and I’ll make his death far less painful than I’d planned.”

“Don’t you dare, Vanya,” my grandfather hisses before a scream rips through him. My hands go to cover my ears, but they are useless in drowning out the sound.

Please...

How much more must I pray before it is heard?

When we are all dead?

“Come on out, little Vanya,” the intruder orders. “Let’s get this over and done with.”

Dahlias.

Roses.

Sweet Pea.

It wasn’t enough. My mind refuses to focus, even with an aid. I am being pulled under, the fog welling up, threatening to drown what little control I have left.

Another agonized cry.

Why?

“Do you know how painful it is to be cut just enough that you won’t die right away, but slowly bleed out?”

No, I do not, and honestly, I never had plans to find out.

“They call it ‘death by a thousand cuts,’” he continues causally, heartlessly. “None of the cuts are ever deep enough to kill, but together, the victim slowly fades into unconsciousness and eventually bleeds out. But I’ve got something far better than that. The blade I just nicked your grandfather with is poison-tipped. It’s a rare venom that will slowly begin to paralyze him. He won’t be able to breathe, the blood in his body will be unable to clot

and it will start seeping out of his eyes, nose, ears... you get my point.”

He pauses.

“But if you come out now,” he says. “Give yourself to me, and I will make sure he won’t suffer such a horrible death. I’ll make it quick. Just like yours.”

I can hear my grandfather warning me not to do it. Not to give in. But soon he begins to cough and splutter. I can’t ignore that. I can’t ignore the pain.

Slowly, I unfold myself in the small area and push on the door. It swings open, catching and attaching to the large portrait and dragging it open with it. The scream I was holding onto rips through me as calloused hands grab at my hair and drag me from the safety of the hidden space.

“Fucking little bitch,” the man hisses as he pulls my frightened, trembling body toward him.

“Please...” My fingernails claw the skin of his wrist, the one attached to the hand in my hair. “Don’t...”

Agony shoots through me as I’m thrown backward onto the floor. It ricochets up my spine and through my neck, my head hitting the opposite wall. My feet struggle to gain purchase as I attempt to stand.

I look down, regretting the action immediately.

My stomach churns again, bilious and sour as my bare feet slip through my grandfather’s blood. He’s dead. His throat slit open from ear to ear. The man hadn’t lied about giving him a quick death. However, I doubt there was any poison.

From the predatory look in his eye, he isn’t about to give me the same courtesy.

“How about we have some fun?” The man’s eyes light up as he steps toward me, a blood-covered knife in his hand. He is tall and broad, but I can see the slight limp in his right leg and the fresh blood soaking through his blue shirt.

The man is injured.

“Fuck you,” I sneer. Holding onto the wall for support, I manage to climb to my feet.

“Oh, I’m planning on fucking you,” he smirks. “All over your dead family’s bodies before I slit your throat as I come inside of you.”

I will not be sticking around for that.

Another step.

Then another.

Finally, he is just within reach. He doesn't have his defenses up. Is it because he thinks I am weak? Nothing more than a princess in a tower? He is going to regret how wrong he is.

Sort of.

The man swings at me with his empty fist. It's sloppy. The hit is wide and leaves his entire middle open to attack. An attack he doesn't see coming. I throw myself off the wall and surge forward, digging my knee into his groin.

He hisses, the knife in his hand clattering to the ground as he drops to his knees.

Shit. That actually worked.

Take that motherfucker.

Whoops.

A low growl surges through him.

Time to go.

I make a break for it, my blood-covered feet slapping against the wooden floor, leaving prints in their wake. It doesn't matter.

A roar shatters the air, a *bang* rattling my senses just seconds before pain cuts through my side.

Fuck.

Clenching my teeth, I pump my legs faster, dodging the bodies strewn across my path.

Don't look.

Don't look.

I mutter the mantra as I run through the house toward the bookcase with the hidden stairwell behind it. The house had been built above a series of old tunnels that were once used to run moonshine through Nevada during Prohibition.

Grunting, I tug on the heavy bookcase, letting it open just enough so I can slip inside. Once I'm through, I pull it closed and slide the bolt through the lock. He won't be able to get in.

Now, I just need to find my way out of the dark.

Alone.

Two


Vanya

Pain is the only thing keeping me going.

It burns through my side, etching its way through my body. My hand is clasped over the wound, barely stifling the bleeding, but for now, it is enough. The streets of the suburb are dead this early in the morning. The stars are still twinkling innocently above me, and vestiges of pink and orange hues are just beginning to creep up over the desert mountains. I dash along the street, my bare feet pushing me on. I make sure to keep to the shadows, so no one spots me.

Where was I going to go?

My body is moving on autopilot, my brain simply telling it to keep going forward.

But forward to where?

Someone had put a hit on my family. Was it an enemy? An ally? It isn't unheard of for alliances to shift in our world. The problem is, I know so little about it. My father's plans never included for me to inherit his throne. He said women were too soft for this business.

I hadn't minded. There were other things I longed to pursue. But I hadn't been allowed that either. It wasn't in my father's cards for me to attend college or travel the world. No. I was better suited to build him an alliance through marriage. A man who would inherit what I never would.

My lower lip trembles as the cold seeps into my bones and fear settles in my gut as I stare up at the entrance to the long, paved road that will take me to *him*. Of all the places I could have gone, this is where I ended up? My father has, I gulp back a fresh wave of tears, *had*, many enemies and this man was the worst of them.

A wave of nausea turns my stomach. What if it is him? Has his hate for my family finally caused him to cross the line? Especially if my father provoked him.

Licking my dry lips, I pause just outside the darkened entrance of his driveway that leads, like a snake, up to his house. I can only hope I'm wrong.

Otherwise, I'm no better than a mouse walking into a nest of vipers looking for cheese.

My feet falter as I stumble up the driveway. Cars litter the circular drive, stretching up into the back pasture that is often used as a parking lot for parties. Ignoring the pain in my side that trickles down over my skin, I gather every ounce of courage I have and stride toward the front door, which is open.

Sloppy.

This is a man that rules over most of Sin City. His hand is in nearly every casino and most of the brothels. Drugs, guns, you name it. If it's illegal, he controls it. Him and his Brothers.

Music sweeps through the doorway, and the soft lilt of an angelic voice drifts through the air. It's sensual, evoking an image of lust and desire. Which is exactly what I step into.

A Roman orgy of lust and debauchery.

The lighting is low, hues of color shimmering over the promiscuous bodies that move in tandem. Waitresses in barely-there lingerie mill about the room carrying assorted refreshments while the people around them mash together like animals. Moans filter over the music. Men grunt out their pleasure as women service them on their knees with their hands, lips... *oh...*

I duck my head, melding myself into the crowd of bodies that are moving sensually to the music. None of them seem to notice a half-naked, bloody girl slipping through the room. None of them can help me anyway. There is only one man who can.

Adrian Volkov.

Even thinking his name sends a shiver of fear racing up my spine. It has been almost six years since I last saw him. I doubt he looks much different today than he did then. Fancy suit, perfectly coiffed black hair, and crystalline blue eyes that look like cut sapphires on his jaggedly handsome face.

I step through another doorway and into one of the dens.

Speak of the devil.

With rounded eyes, I stare at the scene of carnage before me. My core flutters as I watch a naked brunette, her hands tied behind her back, suck him off as if her life depends on it. And maybe it does. I'm not sure how this kind of thing works, but I'm positive poor service equals a lesser tip.

I would work hard too.

Another man I don't recognize has his hands on her hips, roughly railing into her from behind, his ass flexing as he pistons in and out of her ass.

Adrian doesn't notice me. His head is tilted back against the chair, eyes closed as if in prayer. One hand is in the brunette's hair, controlling her speed. The woman moans around his cock when the man taking her from behind circles his hand around to her clit. He's muttering under his breath, no doubt encouraging her from the looks of it.

"Adrian Volkov," I call out his name, my voice hoarse but steady. The hand in the girl's hair stills as his eyes open and his head shoots forward.

Crystal blue, just like I remember.

"Shit," the man fucking the girl grunts as he pulls out and quickly tugs her to her feet. She doesn't complain, just shoots me a nasty look as the man yanks her from the room.

Don't worry, honey, you can have the monster.

Silence settles around us. The calm before the storm.

He doesn't bother to fix himself, just sits back in his chair with his cock hanging out. It takes every ounce of control I have not to sneak a peek. I don't have the energy to worry about the size of his cock anyway. Now the edges of my vision are beginning to blur.

"You don't belong here, Castellanos," he sneers, his lips turning up at the edge dangerously. A surge of dizziness washes over me. Lights dance across my eyes.

"I need your help." I sway on my feet. Just a little, but it's enough to have his gaze shifting to my bloodied body. Something flashes in his eyes beyond the cold dismissal. Was it worry? Or hope that I would die before his eyes and justice would be served?

"Please..." I whisper as the darkness closes in on me. "They're all gone. I need..."

Blood loss is a bitch.

Three



Her body hits the floor, a low groan falling from her lips at the impact. I don't move. Choosing to simply stare down at her in shock. I haven't seen her in nearly six years and now, here she is, in my house, her blood seeping into my expensive Persian rug.

She is soaked in it. Her nightgown is torn and saturated. My gaze roams over her unconscious form and I have to tuck myself back into my pants before my dick gets any ideas. She's beautiful. Far from the underdeveloped, troublemaking best friend of my late wife.

My jaw clenches as thoughts of Ada fill my head.

I should have my men throw her out on the streets and let whoever started this finish it for good. The Castellanos family is nothing but scum. Traitors to their own people. I would be doing the world a favor if I threw her out into the night with nothing to protect her.

Except I'm an idiot.

Instead of throwing out the trash, I stride toward her and lift her lithe frame into my arms. She groans again, instinctively turning into my chest, seeking my warmth. Vanya looks innocent in my arms. Her long lashes dust against her pale cheeks as her eyes dance behind her closed eyelids.

Effortlessly, I carry her up the stairs. I mean to put her in one of the guest rooms, but my feet keep going and I find myself laying her bloodied body on my dark satin sheets. She barely stirs, her breathing shallow, face pale.

"Anton," I call, knowing my second isn't far from my side. He no doubt got word the moment she entered the house.

His head pokes into the room, a worried frown creating lines across his forehead.

“What’s up?” His eyes round when he sees Vanya in my bed. “*Blyad*’. What do you need?”

“Take some men over to the Castellanos’s house,” I tell him. “I want to know what happened there. Page Madsen while you are at it.” Anton nods as he takes out his phone to dial the doctor. Without another word, he’s gone, and I’m left waiting.

Again.

Just like I was six years ago.

The hospital smells like bleach and rotting flesh. An odd combination, even for a hospital, but it’s all I can seem to smell. I pace the length of the waiting room, Anton at my side, both of us nervous as fuck. His leg bounces uncontrollably as he bites his thumb anxiously. Everything about this situation is fucked up. He knows it. I know it.

“Mr. Volkov?” the doctor calls my name from the double doors that are marked ‘no admittance’. Even I wasn’t able to wedge myself behind the scenes. The small nurse I had threatened had pushed back with a mighty roar.

I cease pacing and stride toward the doctor. He is still wearing his surgeon’s cap, his mask hanging loosely around his neck. Unease crosses his face when he sees me. It’s quickly covered with an air of professionalism he no doubt uses daily. He isn’t the only one to have this reaction to me. My name is notorious around the city. My reputation precedes me.

“My wife?” I question, trying not to let my nerves show. “How is she?” Anton’s leg stops bouncing against the floor as he listens in.

The doctor clears his throat. “Unfortunately, we were unable to save her.” His expression saddens with a shake of his head. “Or the baby. Your wife was very... thorough. She knew what she was doing.”

Of course, she did. It was her plan all along. Of that, I have no doubt. My poor traitorous wife. If she hadn’t killed herself, I would have gladly done it for her. I don’t suffer disloyalty lightly and once the baby was born she would have been buried six feet under alongside that traitorous friend of hers.

“I need you to run a DNA test,” I tell the doctor.

His brow furrows in confusion.

“On your wife?”

I shake my head. “On the baby.”

One more traitorous secret to uncover and a few million to go.

“Adrian,” Dr. Madsen nods at me respectively as he enters the room, carrying a large suitcase. His assistant follows behind with a wheeled refrigerator. Six years ago, he failed to save my wife’s life. Two months later, I hired him to become my family’s personal physician. He often has to work odd hours, but I pay him more than the hospital ever could and he doesn’t have to worry about a board of directors or coloring inside the medical ethics line. He also has more time to be with his wife and children.

“Eric,” I greet him with a curt nod. He approaches the bed, his gaze rolling over Vanya, assessing her with his eyes before he grabs a pair of scissors from his coat pocket and cuts away at her dressing gown. I help him peel away the fabric from her body. It sticks to her skin. I hiss as he removes the fabric from her side, revealing a bullet wound.

The bullet looks as if it ran along her flank. She is lucky. A little more to the left and it would have taken a decent chunk out of her side, possibly even penetrating an organ. As it stands right now, it is a fairly benign wound. She just lost a lot of blood.

The only other wounds I see are superficial bruises and a few abrasions on the soles of her feet. She must have walked barefoot because the soles hold a few deep gashes that will make walking painful for the next few days. I clench my jaw as my heart tightens into a familiar feeling that resembles something akin to pity.

Fuck that. I won’t feel pity for her. Or sadness. This is the life we live. The risk of being born into the mafia. Death comes for us all, and she is no exception.

Madsen takes a syringe from his assistant. The girl is becoming restless, and the more he examines her, the more restless she becomes. He uncaps the needle and pushes it into the meaty part of her shoulder.

“Midazolam,” he tells me. “This will keep her sedated while I take care of her wounds.” I’m not sure why he feels the need to keep me informed until I realize my fists are tightly clenched at my side, and I’ve taken a step toward them. I don’t answer him. Stepping back, I loosen my fist, letting the blood pump back into the digits as I watch him remove several instruments from his luggage case. His assistant is in the corner prepping a bag of blood.

My gaze slides over Vanya’s naked, bloodied body.

She’s grown in the last six years. The awkward, braces-wearing girl I once knew is gone. Replaced by a woman with full breasts and hips. Her skin

is pale, a stark contrast against her raven hair and pouty red lips. She has the face of an angel. Almost fragile looking, but her toned muscles and abdomen say that she's not as breakable as she looks.

Artemis. The Greek Goddess of the Hunt. That is who she reminds me of. A fiery juxtaposition of fierce and vulnerable. She'd been my wife's best friend since childhood. They'd grown up together in her house. But Vanya was a mafia princess, bred for royalty. Ada had been her playmate.

I'd been naïve to think that marrying outside of the mafia meant I wouldn't have to worry about my wife having an ulterior motive. Mafia princesses are snakes in the grass. Greedy reptiles ready to strike out whenever they can. They all have agendas. If not for themselves then for their families. All they care about is the ladder they need to climb. I thought Ada had been different. I'd believed she truly loved me.

She was just another disappointment.

My phone rings, pushing me from my bitter memories.

"Yeah," I answer gruffly.

"You will not believe this shit, *sobrat*," Anton sighs. "They're all dead."

The way he says *they're* turns my stomach. "Her entire family?"

Anton snorts mirthlessly. "The entire household," he says. "Everyone who lives on the premises. The guards, the maids, the cooks... everyone."

Who the hell kills an entire household of people?

"It's a trained hit, too," he continues. "This isn't some bullshit amateur. The servants' quarters look as if whoever did this released a cyanide capsule and locked them in the lower levels."

Khristos.

"Everyone else either had their throat slashed or was gunned down," he says. "Must have used a silencer because there was no police chatter."

"Fucking hell," I curse as I step out into the hall so Eric can continue to work without interruption.

"That's not the worst part." Anton coughs uncomfortably.

"Do I want to know?"

"Four of them are missing their heads."

"Their heads?" I ask, dumbfounded.

"Yep," Anton confirms. "We would need the girl to confirm, but I have a sneaking suspicion it's her parents and grandfather."

"And the last one?" I ask curiously.

"Hillary."

Blyad'. Fuck me. Hillary was one of ours.

"Why take the heads?" he wonders aloud.

"It's possible the hitman took them," I tell him, the wheels in my head turning. With the Castellanos family wiped out, there are a lot of new avenues open to take. Their territory is one of the biggest in the city. If I get my hands on their casinos, I could have a large monopoly on the Vegas Strip. "Maybe he took them as proof of death."

"But Hillary?" he questions. "Why her?"

That is a good question. No one knew Hillary was my spy in the Castellanos household and that fact wouldn't matter to a hitman. I peek through the open door of my room, my eyes falling on the raven-haired beauty in my bed. It is a miracle she escaped, and I wonder how that was possible. She has no training that I know of to defend herself against a drunken frat boy at the bar, let alone a hitman.

Vanya Castellanos should be dead with the rest of her family.

That's it.

"She's a double," I tell him. "He took her head because he failed to kill Vanya. Whoever took out the hit probably has no idea what she looks like. Hillary looks just enough like the Castellanoses that the hitman probably thought he could pass her off as Vanya."

"That's desperate."

"Agreed." Something was still bothering me. "But why kill the rest of the household? No hitman is going to kill that many people unless he's being paid to do it."

Anton clicked his tongue. "Not unless he's unhinged," he huffs a laugh. "But I have a feeling that by tomorrow morning, everyone on the Castellanos's payroll is going to be found dead."

"Why do you say that?" Now he has me curious.

"If we go off the assumption that the hitman was paid to take out the entire household, it would stand to reason that he would take out everyone affiliated with their business so that no one was left to claim it."

"That's a shit ton of money and a lot of egos to believe that they could just take over without anyone else fighting back."

"Do we know anyone with that much arrogance?"

Unfortunately, we knew too many people.

"Have the cleaners take care of everything," I tell him. "Have them take pictures first. I want it documented and then find me who ordered that hit."

Anton groaned. “You know Persephone isn’t going to give up that information.”

My lips turn up in a cold sneer. “Then go around her if you have to. I want that information one way or another. Whoever ordered that hit is going against *the Sovereign Alliance* by taking territory out from under us. Vegas belongs to us, and so do the Castellanos’s assets.”

I’ll be dead in my grave before I let anyone take what is mine.

Four



I am floating on an endless bed of clouds. The feeling of security wraps around me like a cozy winter blanket. Shielding and protecting me from the outside world. It's nice here. In this world of make-believe where everything feels safe. It's a ruse. I've never felt secure. Not since I learned who my family truly was and the lengths they would go to in order to stay in power.

My eyes are heavy. Concrete bricks that refuse to budge even as a low murmur of voices penetrate my haze. I feel hands on my skin, prodding at my side. It hurts like hell, a stinging burn igniting the fire within my veins. I scream, flailing blindly. Someone grunts when my foot connects with solid matter and the sound of shattering glass fills my ears.

"Fucking hell," a man grunts, his voice distorted as if he was speaking underwater. Strong hands grab at me, holding me down. "Get the fucking doctor."

I scream again as the powerful hands pin me down to the soft surface beneath me. Wisps of sandalwood and lime wash over me, teasing my senses. I know that scent, but I can't place it. Not with my brain in overdrive. I gasp as the sound of clinking metal fills the surrounding air.

No, I can't die this way.

I won't.

Thrashing wildly against my captor, images of my family's slaughter flash through my mind, unbidden. There were things I never wanted to be a part of. I'd lost a large amount of respect for my parents and grandfather when I'd learned their secrets—but they were still my family.

They were all I had after Ada's death.

Now I am all alone.

“Enough, Vanya,” a harsh voice roars above my screams. It is infused with so much dominance that my body freezes without my control. My eyes shoot open to meet the dark gaze of an all too familiar man. He’s inches from my face, a hand around my throat. It’s not squeezing, just keeping me in place. My hands wrap around his wrist, nails digging into the skin.

Someone shuffles behind him, and my gaze is drawn to the movement. I feel like I know him. Like I’ve seen him before, but I can’t place where. He’s busy scowling at me, hunched over, and grabbing his family jewels.

Whoops.

“Are you going to calm down?” the demon above me asks with one brow raised as he stares down at me with his stupidly handsome face. It’s unfair for someone as demonic as him to have such a perfect fucking mug. I squirm against his hold, my nails digging further into the skin of his wrist, but he simply tightens his grip on my neck, eyes darkening. That sends a jolt of something hot to my core, desire unfurling deep inside of me.

Well, shit.

I will not be unpacking that reaction anytime soon.

“Boss,” another familiar voice cuts through the room like a warning. My gaze shifts to him. Anton, Adrian’s right-hand man, and my best friend’s former bodyguard. “Doc’s here.”

Adrian’s grip doesn’t lessen. For a moment, we’re caught in each other’s gaze. Then, suddenly, he lets go as if I burned him. He stands, wiping his hand on his suit pants like he was worried he’d caught something.

“Who knew the little mouse was such a fighter,” he sneers, backing up slightly as another gentleman approaches the bed. This one is older, with greying hair. He doesn’t look kind. His face is stern, eyes hard, as he reaches out to grab me. I slap his hand away with a scowl, causing Anton to bark out a laugh.

“She’s definitely got claws.”

The man, who I assume is the one they called Doc, shoots me a glare that can melt the polar ice caps. “I need to check your wound.”

My eyes don’t leave his for several moments. “And you need to check your bedside manners.” I clench my jaw and after a moment, I give him a curt nod to proceed. My gaze finds Adrian and I focus on him as the doctor shifts the sheet that is covering me out of the way. I’m naked beneath the sheet, I can feel it. The doctor only reveals my side, but it is still enough

vulnerability to have heat suffusing my cheeks.

Unable to hold his intense gaze, I lower my eyes to watch the doctor, but not before noticing the smirk that traces up the corners of Adrian's mouth. *Asshole*. He thinks he won something, but he hasn't.

"Doesn't look like you opened any of your stitches during your little tantrum." He presses two fingers along the wound, and I hiss. Tantrum my ass. If he woke up in a strange room after being shot, he would throw a *tantrum* too. Still, not wanting to stir trouble, I remain petulantly silent as the doctor continues to look over my wounds.

"Jonah," he orders the man who is sulking in the corner. He's a wiry one, with a long, but rounded face and beady eyes. "Grab my stethoscope and the pills, please." So, the man I kicked in the balls has a name. Good to know since the death glare he has focused on me could give me third-degree burns.

The doctor turns his attention back to me. "You lost a lot of blood, but luckily the wound was fairly superficial." I remain still as the surly man listens to my heart and lungs. When it appears that he is satisfied that I am in no danger of dying from those two organs, he places two pill bottles on the table beside the bed.

"Take the antibiotic twice a day with food," he orders. "The Tramadol as needed for pain. There is only enough in there for a few days. Make sure to keep the area clean and dry. No lifting anything above your head or picking anything up heavier than twenty pounds. At least for the first couple of days."

Blah. Blah. Blah.

"Keep an eye out for swelling, fever, or redness around the wound," he turns to tell Adrian. "Contact me immediately if she has any of those signs. It means she has an infection." Adrian nods at the doctor, his eyes skating back to mine before his attention is stolen away again.

This is a mistake. I shouldn't have come here, but I had nowhere else to go. My brain had been foggy with adrenaline and fear.

The doctor turns back to me.

"You're lucky, young lady," he tells me seriously. "A few inches more and it would have pierced your spleen."

I snort. Rather unladylike but I couldn't find it in myself to care. "I'll be sure to pass that along to the man who shot me."

"Thanks, Eric." Adrian clears his throat and the doctor, who looks as if he is about to say something snarky to me, closes his mouth. He bobs his head a few times as he stows away his equipment and beckons his creepy assistant

out of the room.

Our gazes meet, and again it feels as if I know him somehow. Have I met him somewhere before? If I have, I can't place where it was. After Ada's unfortunate death six years ago, my father had me under lock and key. Every freedom I had worked so hard to gain was gone in an instant.

"Anton," Adrian narrows his eyes at his second in command. Without any further instruction, Anton shoots his boss a knowing smile and strides from the room, closing the door softly behind him.

Leaving me alone with the devil himself.

Five



I swallow past the lump in my throat, my tongue coming out to wet my bottom lip. The simple move catches Adrian's attention and his eyes drift.

"I'm surprised you saved me."

A flash of annoyance streams across his face. "Would you rather I let you die?" he mocks. "Say the word, Vanya, and I'll end you right now."

"That's—that's not what I meant," I stutter. A beat of silence hangs in the air between us before I utter, "Thank you. For saving my life."

He chuckles mirthlessly. "Don't thank me yet, little mouse," he tells me. "There's still a chance I could kill you. But before I make my decision—tell me what happened."

There's a beating drum in my chest when he demands that I tell him what had transpired. It's knocking against my rib cage, pounding faster and faster till I think it'll burst through. Ice seizes my lungs, making it hard to breathe, as flashes of the night keep coming back to me.

"They're all dead," I whisper. "I woke to my grandfather's scream. He was screaming my name and telling me to run."

"How did you escape?" There is no missing the suspicion coating his words. Does he think I am some kind of spy or assassin sent to gain his trust and kill him? "Tell me, Vanya. How did an untrained mafia princess escape a highly trained hitman when no one else did?"

My jaw trembles, the lump in my throat growing bigger as tears gather behind my eyes. I can feel the wetness on my lashes, but I learned a long time ago to control my tears. Crying is a weakness. A vulnerability. One I will not give this monster. He's already seen enough of my vulnerability. He can't have this.

“I hid,” I admit shamefully. “I slipped behind one of the paintings my grandfather designed to be a hiding place. They’re just big enough for someone to crouch in. Fits one person. I hid there until the man dragged my grandfather down the hallway. He said he poisoned him. That soon he’d choke on his own blood and be in pain for hours and I would have to listen. He said if I came out he’d make it a quick death and wouldn’t let him suffer...” I let my voice trail.

Adrian scoffs. “And you believed him.”

I drag in a breath. “I did believe him. Not that it mattered. He did make it quick. In fact, he killed him before I even agreed to anything. Cut his throat to make it sound like he was suffering.” Flashes of my grandfather’s slit throat press against my mind. Bile rises up my throat. I falter over my words, and for a second, I’m not able to go on. I can still hear my father’s cries, begging for his life. I can’t remember hearing any gunshots besides the one that tore through my side. I can see all the faces of the bodies I encountered on my way to the hidden door. Their eyes had been wide open, lying in a pool of their own blood.

“What happened next?” Cold and unfeeling. The bastard. I had witnessed my entire family being murdered and he couldn’t dredge up an ounce of sadness or pity? Maybe some compassion? We’d never been close when he was married to Ada. I think he saw me as more of an annoying little sister than her best friend. She was a few years older than me, but that never mattered, even as a child. I’ve always been older than my age. In my family, innocence and naivety died young.

Too young.

I had tried to protect Ada from my world, but by the time I’d learned the truth it was already too late. My family’s dark proclivities had already sunk their claws in too deep. I’d been relieved when she’d met Adrian. I thought she was too innocent for him. I’d been wrong and that cost me everything.

“Vanya.” Adrian snaps my train of thought. Shaking my head, I inhale deeply before letting it out. The action was grounding.

“We have a secret passage that runs beneath the house. I managed to catch the man off guard just long enough to make a mad dash for the entrance,” I recount. “Somewhere along the way, he shot me.”

“He didn’t follow you through the passage?” Another note of suspicion vibrates off his tone. I shake my head.

“There is an interior lock,” I say. “Once it’s locked, the only way you can

unlock it is with a passcode from inside the house or manually from inside the tunnel.”

He nods his head, his mouth pursing slightly as he takes that in.

“Then you came straight here?”

I shrug a shoulder. “I think so... Everything is a bit blurry.” He doesn’t say anything, just stares at me for longer than is comfortable before nodding his head as if he decided something important.

“You came to me.” It’s not a question. “You think I’ll protect you.” Again, not a question. He knows why I’m here. We both do. He is the only one who can protect me. If he isn’t the one trying to kill me. Then again, he probably would have just let me bleed to death if that was the case.

“I don’t—” I take a deep breath. “There isn’t anyone else.”

There’s that cruel laugh. The one he’d given me when I asked to attend Ada’s funeral. It is cold, freezing like the tundra. I can feel the hope in my chest sinking like the Titanic after it hit that stupid iceberg. Without his help, I would drown in the icy depths of what my family left behind.

“What about your fiancé?” His brow raises in question. I can feel the blood drain from my face. “Peter Spiridakos, if I’m not mistaken.”

I remain quiet.

“You two are quite the power couple.” He smirks. “Two reigning Greek mafia families merging through marriage is a power move not many expected.” He pauses. “Especially since up until a few years ago you were all cutting each other’s throats in the streets.”

My jaw clenches as bile rises, burning through my chest and up my throat. Shit, it is hot in here.

“You can’t—” I stumble over my words. Why can’t I breathe?

“Can’t what?” he mocks disdainfully. “Tell me, little mouse. Why did you run into the viper’s nest instead of the safety of another mouse?”

I couldn’t run to Peter. I wouldn’t.

“He could have been the one to put the hit on us,” I manage to get the words out fairly calmly. His dubious expression says he doesn’t believe a word I just said.

“You really shouldn’t lie, mouse,” he tuts. “I’m not,” I snapped, moving my hands beneath the sheet so he wouldn’t see them trembling. If he hands me over to Peter, I am a deep-fried Thanksgiving turkey with all the fixings. My *fiancé* is not a kind man, but that hadn’t mattered to my father. What mattered was the army Peter brought with him from Greece. The one he

planned on using to take down Adrian and the Sovereign Brotherhood.

“Touchy. Touchy.” His smirk deepens. “It appears that not everything is perfect in paradise, hmm. Is he that terrible in bed, little mouse?” He steps toward the bed, pupils dilating as he licks his luscious lips like a predator ready to devour its next meal.

Luscious?

Fuck no.

Delicious.

Shit, not delicious. *Not* delicious.

Damn that part of my brain that just, straight up, reads porn. Now I’m romanticizing the man I hate. The one who let my best friend die. He took the one thing that mattered most to me in the world and stomped out her light.

“Does he make you feel dirty things between those thick, lush thighs of yours?” he croons at me. Adrian places his knee on the edge of the bed and leans over me, one hand braced above me on the headboard. “Do you play with yourself at night? Run those fingers over that plump little clit of yours while you think sordid thoughts of him?”

Yeah, definitely not.

“My sex life is none of your business,” I hiss, shifting away from his closeness. Another dark smirk.

“Can’t be that good if it’s not worth sharing.” He shrugs a shoulder. “Oh, well. Guess I’ll just have him come pick up the garbage.”

I wince at the last word. *Garbage*. Isn’t the first time I’ve been called that by a man.

“You can’t,” I tell him urgently.

“Can’t what?” He tilts his head slightly. “Call him? I assure you I can, and I will.”

“And if he’s the one that called the hit?”

Adrian snorts derisively. “By marrying you and sinking his dick into your mousy little cunt, he would have been handed the keys to your entire empire with no one batting an eye,” he tells me. “Why would he go through all the trouble of killing your entire family, including all the staff? It wouldn’t have benefited him to lose all of those soldiers.”

The man has a point.

Still, if he hands me over to Peter, my life is over. I’d slit my own throat before I let that man have me. My father had seen the docile, meek daughter he’d forced into submission. What he hadn’t seen was the planning and the

plotting beneath the surface. The first time Peter had hit me, I'd gone to him. Know what he told me? If I hadn't upset him, he wouldn't feel the need to keep me in line.

My own father.

It was at that moment that I knew I'd made a grave mistake. That everything I'd been told had been true. The rose-colored glasses had shattered, and all I was left with was guilt and regret for what I had done.

"He can't know I'm here," I plead with him desperately shoving myself up to sit against the pillows, showing a moment of pure vulnerability. Adrian bites his lower lip, and he peers at me with lowered lashes. It is almost seductive if I didn't see the snake lurking beneath the surface, ready to strike. He lowers his head until his face is only inches from mine. I can feel his breath cascading over my skin, the warmth sending chills over my cooled skin.

"Don't worry, little mouse," he whispers. "I won't let him have you."

"You'll protect me?" Now I am the one who is suspicious.

Adrian chuckles darkly.

"Oh, Vanya." He pushes himself off the bed and straightens his suit before he turns to walk out of the room. He pauses at the door and turns back to where I sit dazed and confused. Is he going to send me to Peter? Ask for a reward? "I'm not going to protect you. I'm going to sell you."

"Wait—" But it's too late. He's shut the door. A low moan of distress leaves my lips when I hear the lock on the door click.

I should never have come here.

He might have saved my life, but now he owns my soul.

And he's selling it to the highest bidder.

Six



Her scream of frustration seeps through the closed door and I smile in wicked satisfaction, the sound making my cock hard. My little mouse has no idea what is coming for her. A familiar twinge pulls at my chest, but I ignore it. There is no room for pity or regret. Not when I have her right where I need her.

For years, I have been looking for a way to take down the Castellanos family. They thought they could place a Trojan horse in my house and get away with it. I'd slowly been dismantling parts of their operation for years. I didn't want to draw attention too fast. If they caught on to what was happening before I was ready, the entire plan would fall apart.

Now, a new plan is forming in my head, and Vanya is smack dab in the center.

The plan takes shape as I sit in my office, poring over the photos Anton had taken of the crime scene. Something about the scene is eerily familiar. Most hitmen have a signature. It is either in the form of something left behind that is easily identifiable in the underground or it could be in the way they carry out their hits.

There are no coins in the eyes or mouth. No symbols or insignias. The hitman's kill tactic is all over the place. The servants on the lower levels were killed with poison or gas. Most likely cyanide. Those who lingered on the grounds or in the house were shot with a 9mm equipped with a silencer. He'd been quick and efficient.

Until it came to the family.

They all had their throats slits. Theo Castellanos, Vanya's grandfather, had his Achilles' tendons cut. This no doubt stopped him from fighting

against the hitman when he used him as bait for Vanya.

Stupid girl.

Caring for another is a weakness.

Why take the heads? I surmise it was so he could show proof of his kills, but I'm wondering if that is indeed his signature. My watch beeps at me, reminding me I have things to do. Sighing, I set the photos down on the desk and head out of the office. It is time to get some work done.

"Boss." Anton falls in step beside me, handing me my *Beretta 80x Cheetah*. It came straight off the factory line at the beginning of the year and has essentially replaced my other daily carry. I tuck it into my shoulder holster and then pull on the suit jacket he hands me. We may have the police in our pockets, but it does no good to stir up trouble while we're out. The locals in Vegas know how it works, but there are always those well-meaning tourists who butt their noses in where they don't belong.

Unfortunately, it is those tourists that bring in the money I am so well accustomed to. Mostly. I also run a lot of unsavory-type businesses in the Underground.

"What are you planning on doing with the girl?" he asks, holding the car door open for me. I slide in the front seat, waiting for him to close it and come around to the driver's side before responding.

"She's going to go for a pretty penny out on the market," I tell him. "Last remaining heir to the Castellanos's family fortune. Whoever takes her will have control of their entire empire."

Anton frowns as he pulls out of the driveway.

"I thought you wanted control of the Castellanos's empire?"

I pull out my cell phone, texting one of my men to meet me at the warehouse I own on the edge of the city. I've spent the last two days watching over Vanya, and now it is time to get back to work. Someone has been taking potshots at my territory and it was time to pay the piper.

"This will be so much more lucrative," I tell him. "Trust me when I tell you that. The virginal Castellanos daughter will go for millions."

My second-in-command chuckles.

"You think whoever ordered the hit will bid on her and out himself," he clarifies. I grit my teeth. If he wasn't my best friend, I would break his neck and feed him to the desert coyotes for daring to question what I told him.

But he is my best friend.

And he is right.

“Don’t tell her that,” I smirk. “I liked the scared, doe-eyed look on her face when I told her I was selling her.”

“Have you talked to the Sovereigns?” he asks. My mouth thins, giving him the answer. I haven’t talked to my Brothers yet. They were busy with their own empires to run, and if I am being honest, they are still miffed about finding out I hadn’t detected a mole in my operation and put us all at risk. No, this is my mess to clean up.

It takes twenty minutes to get to the outskirts of my city, where my men wait patiently for me. They had been tasked with finding and detaining two men from one of the rival gangs in the city. My text had been to let them know it was time for their interrogation.

“Boss,” Sasha, one of my enforcers, greets me as I step out of the car.

“They’re here?” I question him, slipping off my jacket and laying it on the seat I just vacated. He nods.

“They were both caught red-handed by Mesa.”

Anton lets out a low whistle. Mesa isn’t someone you want to mess with. She’s been in this business since my father took over from the old dynasty. Mesa is a cutthroat gangster who runs a few of my brothels that are just off the Strip. The men call it the *Dirty South* because it is where all the cheapskates go to get laid. The women, although all consenting, often need to be reminded of the rules.

No drugs. No STDs. No filming. No taking extra money on the side.

The girls we use at our hotels on the Strip are more refined. Pampered, is what I call it. They service our most reputable and deep-pocketed clients and guests.

“Did they give anything up?” I ask. Sasha shakes his head.

“But we haven’t laid into them,” he says. “Too much risk where we had them tied up.”

Good. I don’t like my men taking risks when they don’t need to. They know I would bail them out at a second's notice if shit went down, but they also know when to risk it and when to wait. Sasha has always had a sound mind when it comes to knowing when to cross the line.

These dirtbags aren’t worth the jail time.

“Let’s go see what they give us then, shall we?” Sasha smirks, cracking his knuckles. He’s one of the larger men in my outfit. Russian-born and American-raised. Most of my men are first generation. Their parents came over to serve my father when he defected from the Tkachenko *Bratva* to

expand into America with Tomas Ivankov, another defector.

Once the east coast operation had been settled and territories drawn out, my father took his men and came to Vegas, spreading his reach down through Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana. Our operations had been spread too thin, and we had lost territory. When I took over for my father, I became one-third of the Sovereign Brotherhood. The other parts of the triad were the men I trusted with my life. Men who'd had my back my entire life.

Vitali De Luca and Kenzo Nakamura.

Together, we run everything from Nevada and down into the south toward Florida. There are no cutting corners or having to deal with outsiders as often. We all have our niche and help each other run one another's businesses. All of our men intermingle and work together toward a common goal.

Making money.

Vitali hates interacting with people, so he runs our money laundering through our legit businesses. The casinos, clubs, restaurants, and brothels we run legally here in Vegas. He's always been better with numbers. Kenzo prefers to get his hands dirty, so he runs our illegal brothels and escort services as well as our gun and drug deals. His dealings involve meeting with some shady individuals. Meanwhile, I run the casinos, start new business ventures, and take care of the legal side of our businesses. My men also provide support and act as our response team.

Our unity makes us three of the most powerful men in America.

"Do you know why you're here?" I ask the two men on their knees in front of me.

Of course, they do. I can see their fear as they stare up at me through swollen, bloodshot eyes. The question is somewhat rhetorical. There isn't a need for them to answer.

Their teeth are chattering so hard I doubt they could anyway.

Keeping my voice level, I squat in front of them calmly. "Which one of you is going to tell me who you work for? Who dared to sell in *my* territory?"

Simple questions, really.

Silence.

I wait.

They know the consequences of dealing in my territory. If you want to deal in Vegas, you have to go through me and there are a few things I don't

allow to be sold on *my* streets. These assholes had enough angel dust in their possession to start an epidemic.

We don't do that here.

My mouth contorts, head bobbing when they remain silent. I purse my lips and withdraw my gun from its holster. Cocking it, I place the barrel on the crotch of the first pathetic asshole in front of me. His body shakes, teeth continuing to chatter in fear. His pulse is beating like a fervent drum against the side of his neck, eyes rounding.

"You want to tell me what I want to know?" I ask, pushing the barrel further against his jean-clad little wiener. "Or do you say goodbye to the only thing that makes you a man?"

He visibly swallows. "Don't kill us..." he trails off, tears running down his cheeks. *Pathetic*. The number of times I've seen grown men cry will astound most people. They think they're invincible until they find themselves in the devil's den.

"Tell me what I want to know, and I won't," I promise him. "I just want to know who the fuck has the balls to send you to sell this shit in my territory. They're the ones at fault here. Not you. You... well, you're just doing what you're told. Right?"

Both men nod enthusiastically.

"Th—that's right," the one I don't have my gun trained on stutters. "We just follow orders." Their bodies both relax when I give them a friendly smile. As if everything will be just fine for them.

"Exactly," I tell them. "Why would *I* kill the messengers? Unless, of course, you don't tell me what I want to know."

That gets them going.

"We don't know who runs it—" states the man whose balls I'm ready to blow off.

"But we get our orders from Theo Kalogeras," the second one finished.

I recognize that name. Theo Kalogeras is the cousin of Peter Spiridakos. That's an interesting development. Especially since the Spiridakos family doesn't deal in drugs. That I am aware of.

"Who's the supplier?"

Both men shake their heads. *Great*.

"Well..." The man sighs in relief when I remove my gun from his crotch. "Thank you so much for your cooperation."

The second man screams when his friend's body jerks back, landing on

the floor next to him with a bullet between his eyes. Sasha is an amazing shot.

“Wait. Wait.” The second man panics. “You said you wouldn’t kill us if we gave you the information.”

“You’re right,” I tell him with a dark smile. “I told you *I* wouldn’t kill you. I said nothing about my men.”

“No—” Another shot. Another dead man.

Why do they always plead? They knew the consequences of selling in my territory.

Death.

Holstering my gun, I walk out toward the car. Anton already has it idling.

“Kalogeras works for Spiridakos.” Fucker states the obvious.

“Yep.” I nod as I slide into the passenger seat.

“What the hell are the Spiridakoses doing in the drug industry?”

Sighing, I pull out my cell phone and hit the number five speed dial. “Fuck if I know.” The line rings.

“*Da?*” answers the voice on the other end.

“Matthias,” I greet him. “*Kak voy, brat?*”

“*Khoroshiy. Khoroshiy. Ava beremenna.*”

“Congrats,” I tell him in English. “How far along?”

“Eight weeks.”

“I’ll be sure to tell the Brotherhood,” I say. “Expect a ton of gifts.”

Matthias laughs. “You should see what my men have already bought for the baby. I suggest sending items meant for a five- or six-year-old.” Another laugh.

It doesn’t surprise me. Matthias’s men are loyal and like family to him. When Tomas sent him to become *Pahkan* in Seattle, we offered him a spot in our ranks. He’d politely declined. It didn’t surprise me. Matthias has spent his whole life under, or part of, someone else’s organization. He wanted to do the work himself.

And he had.

“I know you aren’t just calling to ask me how I am doing.”

I sigh. “I need a favor.”

“Okay.”

That is it. He never asks questions when it comes to me asking favors. Not that I have asked him for many. But when the time comes, I know he’ll never turn me down. Just as I would never turn him down. We are brothers in

the *Bratva*. Leaders who trust each other implicitly.

“Rumor has it that the Kavanaughs have a hacker who puts together crime scenes and can find patterns no one else can.”

“Is this about the Castellanos massacre?”

Of course, he already knew.

“Yes.”

“I have no problem forwarding you what Bridgett finds,” he says. “But can I ask why? I thought you would be happy over their deaths?”

“Vanya Castellanos showed up at my door.”

He lets out a long huff. “That explains it.”

My brow furrows. “Explains what?”

“You’ve been obsessed with that girl since you met her,” he snorts.

“I married her best friend,” I deadpan.

“And the only one you ever complained about, whenever things were brought up, was Vanya.”

Matthias chuckles when I mutter lowly how wrong he is. I’ve never been obsessed with Vanya Castellanos. Just taking down her family. “You keep living in that bubble of denial and I’ll call you when I have more information.”

“*Speciba, brat.*” Thank you, brother.

“*Vsgeda.*” Always.

Seven



I need to get out of here.

Fast.

An untouched tray of food sits on the nightstand next to the luxurious king-size bed, but I'm in no mood for food. My stomach is still churning. Rampant images of blood and death rush through my mind, making me ill. My body still has splatters of blood on it. Now dry. Dirt and debris cling to my unwashed hair and skin. The only parts of me completely clean are the areas around the bullet wound and the soles of my feet.

Coming here was a mistake.

I should have known he would take advantage of the situation. Part of me can't believe that he hates me enough to sell me. A shiver crawls up my body. What's in it for him? Whomever he sells me to would gain access to the entire Castellanos empire. An empire he's been after long before he married Ada. I'd seen proof. Proof I'd shown my best friend who couldn't stand the betrayal.

She killed herself when she'd learned of Adrian's treachery. He'd been using her. Manipulating her. Still, it was my fault. If I hadn't shown her the evidence...

There is no use lingering on that now.

Not when I need to escape.

The windows are bolted shut. From the looks of it, those bolts are brand new. He must have had them put on while I was unconscious. Same with the door. It locks from the outside. He'd made me a luxurious cage. Not that it matters much. I have no clothes except the sheet I'm currently wearing toga style and no weapon. With a wince, I lie down on the bed, facing the door in

case someone comes in. The jaunt around the room exhausted me. The gunshot took more of a toll than I expected it would.

Even if the window was unlocked, there is no way I am escaping in my condition. Especially from the second story. I could potentially deal without having clothes or a weapon, but I'd be a sitting duck if I pass out or reinjure myself.

The lock on the door snicks, and I wince as I scurry to sit up, pressing myself against the headboard, making sure the sheet covers my body fully. Adrian saunters into the room, closing the door behind him. I have half a mind to make a run for it, but I'm not an idiot. I won't make it.

His gaze wanders the room casually before coming to rest on me.

I jut my chin out, meeting his hardened gaze head on. He doesn't get to see the fear currently raking through me. Adrenaline is pumping through my veins, feeding my fight-or-flight response one tick at a time.

Adrian stalks toward me like a predator coming for his prey. He stops at the edge of the mattress, just inches away from me. He's studying me. I take the time to do the same to him. He's leaner than I remember. His muscles are more pronounced beneath the stretched fabric of his collared shirt. His hair is longer. He used to always keep it short. New tattoos stretch down onto his scarred hands and peek from beneath the top undone button of his shirt.

His entire body vibrates with dangerous energy. Adrian shifts, sitting on the edge of the mattress. Fear clings to me like dollar-store perfume. Cloying. Suffocating. Can he smell it? Predators can always smell fear.

"Don't get all shy now, little mouse," he smirks, his hand gripping my ankle when I try to scoot away from him to the other side of the massive bed. His grip isn't hard, just resting. Warning. He doesn't attempt to pull me toward him.

"Where are my parents?" I whisper.

Adrian snorts. "They're dead, remember?" He doesn't have to say it so callous and cold. The glint in his eyes tells me he knows that isn't what I meant.

"What did you do with their bodies, Adrian?" I ask, unable to contain the rising fury in my tone.

He shrugs nonchalantly, as if we aren't talking about human beings, but animals and products.

"Burned them."

My eyes darken at his blunt statement. I don't think of the consequences

when I lean forward, my arm reaching out to slap the smug look off his face. Adrian sees this coming a mile away and easily grabs my wrist in an iron grip. He shifts on the bed, sitting further back on the mattress. I don't have time to contemplate the consequences of my action before he uses his grip on my ankle and wrist to hurl me toward him.

One moment I'm sitting on the bed and the next I'm splayed belly down over his right knee, the left scissored over my legs, preventing me from kicking out. My hands grip his pant legs, no longer the smooth feel of the trousers he was wearing before, but rough denim. I hiss through clenched teeth as his thigh presses against the skin of my wound as he maneuvers me away from his body slightly. I don't have to wonder what he is doing. I hear the jangle of his belt buckle, it's nearly deafening in the quiet room, the leather zipping through the belt loops.

"Lift up the sheet, Vanya," he orders.

I shake my head, tears escaping from under my lashes, wetting my cheeks.

"I won't ask you again," he snarls. "Lift the sheet or I will do it for you. And if I do it, this punishment will go very differently.

"I'm not yours to punish, asshole." I attempt to kick my feet out, but he only tightens his left leg down on mine, the pressure creating a throbbing pain around my bruised legs. My throat burns and my side has begun to ache from being spread over his knee.

"Don't make this worse for yourself, *malen'kaya mysh'*."

"*Pígaine na gamítheis ton eaftó sou,*" I hiss at him, telling him to fuck himself.

His hand darts to my hair, wrapping around my thick curls, pulling my head back, and arching my body until it feels as if it will snap. He leans toward my face, eyes narrowed into dark slits.

"I'm the one in charge here, little mouse," he warns. "I'm the one who controls your fate. I gave you a command, and you're going to follow it, or I will make the belting I planned to give you seem like child's play."

"Please... just let me go."

Adrian smiles, looking more like the Joker than the handsome man I've known for so long. He brings the loop of the belt up and runs it down my throat like a gentle caress.

"Now why would I do that?" he asks. "When I have everything I want right here." He pauses dramatically, running his belt against my throat one

last time before releasing my hair. My body slumps over, the fight leaving me as quickly as it had come. “Lift the sheet, Vanya. Now.”

Burying my face in the jean material covering his calf, I reach back and gather up the sheet, gathering it to my waist. The belt jangles in his hand and I shiver.

“Please,” I beg one more time.

“Your pleas don’t work here.” He touches the small of my back, pushing my stomach further into his knee, holding me down. I tense, aware the belt will strike my bare flesh at any moment. I’ve never been spanked. My parents never put their hands on me. They never needed to. I’d always been a well-behaved daughter, knowing what was expected of me. Even in the times I sought to rebel, there was never a hand or voice raised. Instead, I was isolated. My freedom was snatched from under me.

There is a whistle through the air and then sudden blinding pain. His belt strikes against both of my ass cheeks. I’m frozen, the air stuck in my lungs, refusing to move as his belt crashes against my skin again and again. Heat blooms with each stripe he lays on me.

I keep still, tears streaming down my cheeks as I take each strike, afraid to move. My body shakes as the quiet tears turn to soft, hiccupping sobs. Over and over, the belt comes down hard on my ass until each stripe of pain blends in with the next, and a warmth trickles through me.

Then, suddenly, he stops.

Adrian’s knees widen and his body slackens. I wipe my tears using a corner of the sheet that wraps around my shoulder. Warm hands land on my shoulder, sending a current of awareness through me. He gently guides me to stand and then reaches for the knot that holds the toga together. I reach to stop him, but his narrowed eyes are filled with a dark warning that makes me stop.

The sheet pools around my feet. Standing, Adrian abandons his belt on the bed as he circles me like a lion, ready to pounce. His rough knuckles graze the soft skin of my back, causing goosebumps to erupt.

“Good girl,” he purrs. Those two words, even from him, cause my lady bits to dance. *Traitor. You know he’s going to sell us, right?* “This is the obedience I want. Quiet. Submissive.”

I really want to bash his skull in now. Maybe strangle him with that belt while I’m at it. It’s a fleeting fantasy since I’m barely 5’5 and he stands at least 6’2. Such a good dream, though. One I’ll be sure to imagine every time

I get off.

Fingers dance across my hip, then the back of my thighs. The touch is gentle, like the caress of a lover.

“You’ve become quite the woman, Vanya. A gorgeous creature.”

His gaze traces my body, hands following as he makes a long line down both sides of my breast to my soft stomach, stopping at the apex of my thighs, just above the mound of curls.

“Tell me what you did with everyone’s bodies?”

Adrian comes to a halt in front of me, his gaze searching mine. “I’m about to sell you to the highest bidder and you want to know about dead bodies?”

“They don’t deserve to be burned, Adrian,” I tell him softly. “They’re my family.”

He snorts mirthlessly. “They were your gardeners and maids and what-all,” he sighs. “Why does the spoiled princess care about them?”

Is he for real?

“They were loyal members of the Castellanos family.” I shake my head sadly. “They all deserve a proper burial.”

“Do you honestly expect my men to dig all those graves?” he asks.

Cold. Callous. A Sovereign Brother to the core.

“I’ll do it if you’re not man enough to,” I hiss. He smiles at that.

“Oh, little mouse,” he smirks, his fingers dipping into the soft curls on my mound. “I’m man enough to do a lot of things. Tell me, are you still a virgin?”

“I’m not answering that,” I growl, heat sweeping up my neck.

Another pompous smirk. “Tell me the truth and I’ll tell you what I did with all those bodies.”

I grit my teeth, unease settling over me. With a snarl, I shove his wandering hand away from my body. He surges forward, pressing his body against mine so tightly I can’t move. I can feel him against me. All of him.

Adrian glares at me, before shoving me away. I stumble, my feet catching in the sheet. A cry leaves my lips as my throbbing ass hits the carpeted floor. I grit my teeth against the sharp zing of pain that shoots up my side. Fuck, the asshole better not have opened that wound. I do not want another visit from the doctor with no bedside manners.

I have never seen this side of Adrian before. The boundless cruelty. When he was married to Ada I don’t remember him being the warmest person, but

he was tolerable. Not kind but he'd never been cruel.

All I see before me now is a bully and a monster.

“Never stop me from touching you, do you understand?” Standing, I nod my head frantically, eyes wide as fear seeps through me. His eyes soften slightly before hardening again. Was it a trick of the light? “Now, tell me, are you a virgin?”

I want to tell him the truth, but everything inside of me is frozen in fear. Chaos runs through my mind preventing me from answering. I should lie to him, tell him I'd fucked plenty of men, but my tongue won't move. The lump in my throat swells as I struggle to swallow past it.

When I don't answer, he strikes. One hand buries itself in my hair while the other delves between my legs, cupping my vagina. My body tenses as I stare into his eyes, praying he won't go looking for the answer.

“Should I part these pretty thighs of yours and find out for myself?”

I tremble in his hold, my naked body pressed against his fully clothed one. The brush of his shirt against my nipples causes them to harden and an ache to spread through me. It isn't pain I'm feeling, I know that but I'm too afraid to name it.

Just tell him the truth.

Why won't my mouth move?

“Don't...” is all I manage to whimper as his fingers delve deeper.

Eight



“Don’t...”

Her soft plea is music to my ears, the blood rushing straight to my cock at the gentle, almost dulcet tone of her voice. There is a war raging between her mind and body. The clench of her jaw tells me she is fighting against the sensations roiling through her. The tension that is causing her nipples to harden and the sweet scent of her arousal to permeate the air between us.

“Don’t what?” I mock as I gently slip my fingers between her lips. I almost groan at the feeling of her arousal slipping over my digits. “Don’t shove my fingers inside of you and watch you come apart for me? You’re wet, Vanya. You’re wet and I haven’t even done a thing to you yet. Such a little slut.”

I don’t miss her flinching at my calling her a slut.

Interesting.

She attempts to jerk away from me when I slide my index finger slowly inside her wet channel. *Shit*. She’s tight and hot, her inner muscles squeezing hard against the intrusion. A soft whimper falls from her luscious lips. If her glare could kill, I’d be a dead man.

It’s a show of my power, mostly. I know she’s a virgin. There was no way in hell Castellanos would have let someone deflower his only daughter before fetching a good price for her virginal hand. Sick fucker.

Not that I am any better.

I especially like to watch her squirm.

After a few moments, just to show her I am in control, I pull my finger from inside of her. Then I watch as her eyes round as I bring it to my mouth

and lick her arousal clean. “You taste so good, *malen’kaya mysh’*. So warm and tight. I’ll have no problem selling you.”

Her throat bobs, and she moves away from me. I let her. Her nearness is messing with my fucking mind. Guilt twinges inside of my chest, but I ignore it as I stare down at her, a scowl plastered on my face. She’s a Castellanos and a problem I need to get rid of before my cock gets any more ideas.

Reaching into my pocket, I remove my phone.

“What... what are you doing?” Her voice pitches slightly.

“I’m going to take some pictures for the auction,” I tell her simply.

“No.”

“You don’t get to say no, little mouse,” I smirk. “You’re the one who walked into my lion’s den.”

“You think because you saved my life that gives you the right to take perverted pictures of me so you can sell me?” she asks in disbelief. Now she’s getting it.

“Yes,” I chuckle. “I do.”

“You’re sick.”

I casually shrug a shoulder. It’s funny to see her all worked up after the docility she’s been showing. It’s sinking in that I am a man of my word and I’ll do exactly what I promised. Her hands clench at her sides, her face turning red.

“If you want those pictures, you’ll have to make me,” she snarls but it’s as weak as a kitten’s growl. “Because I won’t be posing for you.”

My phone is tucked back into my pocket. I do love a challenge.

“If you insist.”

Her eyes widen and she spins to run from the room, no doubt thinking she can hide in the bathroom. She’s too slow in her current condition and I catch her easily, my hand wrapping around the back of her neck to halt her. I wrench her into my chest.

“This will be so much more fun, little mouse,” I whisper in her ear, my tongue coming out to lick the shell before nipping at her earlobe.

“No!”

Vanya’s cries are useless and fall on deaf ears. I can smell her fear and revel in the scent of her.

“We could have done this the easy way.”

She wrestles in my grip, attempting to get loose as I haul her toward the nearest bedpost. Reaching down between the mattress and the bed frame I

snatch a pair of leather cuffs I keep there, which isn't easy with a wriggling woman in my grasp.

I put her body with mine against the post ignoring the whimper of pain from her as the wood digs into her chest and abdomen. She wanted the hard way, and I will give it to her.

Once her wrists are secure in the cuffs, I drag her arms up and secure her arms into one of the hooks on the post. Now she is stretched out before me, her body on full display.

“Stop!” she cries, tears wetting her cheeks. “Please stop.”

“We could have done this the nice way, Vanya,” I remind her. “But you didn't want to.”

I take out my phone and snap a few photos. The auction house clients are going to love her reddened ass.

“*Básterdos*,” she hisses. “You are a monster. I hate you.”

Ignoring her jibes, I turn her body toward me, the cuffs' chains twisting with the movement. My camera snaps one photo after another as she cowers away from me. *Good*. Men on the Hades Market love it when the photos show fear and tears. It gets them hard. Shit, seeing her like this is getting me hard and I'm nowhere near as depraved as the men I plan on selling her to.

Tears cling to her long lashes and the fear in her eyes has my body surging with dark, perverse pleasure. Sweet little Vanya doesn't know the lion's den she walked into, and I am more than happy to show her. I won't let my dick distract me. Not again.

“I wonder how much I'll get for your virgin pussy?” I sneer as I place my phone back in my pocket and release her from the cuffs. I double-check her abdomen to make sure none of her sutures have come undone. They are fine.

Her jaw clenches but she doesn't respond. After a moment of silence, I decide to add insult to injury. Just for the hell of it. “But no one will pay for you in this state,” I dismiss her. “Go take a fucking shower. You smell like death and piss.”

Red creeps up her body, her chest becoming a flushed pink color that makes her look absolutely ravishing. I want to see her turn that color as I make her orgasm on my tongue, my name a screamed prayer on her luscious lips.

The corner of my mouth lifts in a snarl at the unbidden thoughts seeping through my mind. I abruptly turn on my heel and stalk out of the room, slamming and locking the door behind me.

It isn't a scream of frustration I hear this time as I wait at the door.

Instead, it's a series of choked sobs. My blood freezes when I hear her repeat a phrase in Greek several times over.

"Makári na me eíche na petháno." I wish he would have let me die.



THE TASTE of her is still on my tongue as I watch her like a pervert from my office, the security feed spread across my laptop. After a few moments, she picks herself up from the floor and staggers into the bathroom. I don't need the sound to know she is taking a shower. The steam can be seen seeping between the cracks of the door.

She's in there for nearly half an hour and when she comes back out, all she is wrapped in is a towel. I groan at the sight of her petite body wrapped up in the short cloth. It had taken everything in me not to react to her naked body when I'd forced her to drop the sheet earlier.

Vanya has a body built for sex.

I watch as she looks around the room, no doubt looking for some kind of clothing to cover herself with. She won't find any. When she finds nothing, her shoulders slump and she reluctantly picks up the discarded sheet from earlier and wraps it around her lithe frame. She sits on the edge of the bed, her feet propped up on the frame, clutching the sheet to herself like it is some form of a lifeline. Her shoulders begin to shake, her chest heaving, and I have no doubt she is crying again.

The poor little princess.

What does she think crying will achieve? I doubt she knows there is a camera in the room, I'd hidden it well, but one can never be too careful. The women who come from the Castellanos family are nothing but devious manipulators. It could all be a ploy to get me to feel sorry for her.

It won't work.

Even now, my cock is half-hard from watching her painful tears. They do nothing but fuel the dark, sinister side of me. A side she will become achingly familiar with soon enough.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" Anton voices from the doorway of my office. He's the only fucker allowed to simply waltz in, and he knows it. Anyone else would get beaten for the familiarity and he knows

that too. It's why he takes advantage of it. "You don't know that she had anything to do with Ada's manipulation."

I snort derisively.

"They were best friends, *bratan*," I sneer. "You don't think she knew what my wife was plotting in the shadows?"

Anton sighs. "Still. Selling her isn't going to change anything," he cautions me.

"It'll make me richer." I shrug nonchalantly.

Now it's his turn to snort. "A drop in the pond compared to what you already have," he reminds me. "Not to mention you'll lose out on being able to take over the Castellanos empire. Something you've been working hard to gain for the last several years.

Turning my eyes from the screen, I gaze up at my *Sovietnik*. My second in command. My best friend.

"I'll make a contingent in the clause to whoever I sell her to," I tell him coldly. I'm well aware he has a history with Vanya. As Ada's former bodyguard, he spent a fair amount of time with her. I won't have whatever misguided feelings he has toward her stand in my way. "I'll get a portion of the Castellanos empire. They get the rest, plus Vanya. That way, I get what I want and rid myself of a pest at the same time. Win-win."

"This is going to backfire on you," he warns me.

I narrow my eyes at him. "I'll take that under consideration." Anton throws up his hands in mock surrender and slinks from the room with a shake of his head. The fucker's disappointment still lingers in the room like a bad smell.

Rewinding the footage, I creep through the past couple of hours while I was away. I'd left her alone for a large portion of the day to see what she would do. Vanya didn't disappoint. She spent a large portion of her time searching for a way to escape. Not that she will ever find one. The rest of the footage is a bore fest. She picks at the food she's brought, cries some, sleeps some, and then rinses and repeats until I arrive.

Shaking my head, I swipe away from the feed and focus on what I had come in here for. It takes very little time to log in to my account on the Hades Market. This will be the first time I've ever put anything up to be sold. It is no doubt going to stir up gossip in the underground. There is one thing the Sovereign Brotherhood doesn't deal in and that is flesh.

But desperate times call for desperate measures.

Nine



At some point last night, during all the sobbing and wallowing, I fell asleep. It was surprisingly blissful considering the situation I find myself in. Locked in an overly luxurious room with nothing but a sheet and no way to escape.

I shiver, goosebumps trailing up my skin as I remember what it felt like to have Adrian's eyes on my naked body, his fingers between...

Nope.

Nope.

Hell fucking nope.

That is a yellow brick road I will not be following anytime soon. Never, in fact. Over my dead body, which at the moment is preferable to what he has planned for me. He should have just let me die because the moment he hands me off, I'm done. There is no way in hell I'm going to be some pervert's sex slave.

Hell sounds like a much better place and I have no problem traveling there.

No matter the cost.

The door opens without a knock. I scramble up against the headboard, making sure the sheet fully covers me. There is not going to be a repeat of last night, that is for sure. I won't let him manipulate me and use me for his own gain.

Instead of Adrian's imposing form, one of the maids enters carrying a tray of food. She sets the tray down on the small table near the large window on the other side of the room and promptly leaves. I don't bother trying the door, the click of the lock was nearly deafening in the silence that surrounds

me.

My stomach rumbles as the smell of bacon, eggs, and fresh coffee reaches my senses. But I'm too nauseous to eat. I may have slept well, but the moment I woke, the knot in my stomach returned.

The fucker is going to sell me.

And I am powerless to do anything but let him.

I hate him. Adrian Volkov is more of a monster than I thought. And here I thought what my father and grandfather had told me about him was false. Slander. Even with the evidence against him, I thought... I don't know what I thought.

Sighing, I roll flat on my back and stare up at the ceiling. At least he didn't stick me in some rotting cell. It's ironic how much he says he despises my family, yet he is just like them. Drugs, guns—sex trafficking. They are all men who make their money off the backs and suffering of others.

Pale light washes through the gauzy curtains of the large window that overlooks a small garden. It's only seven in the morning, yet it feels as if I have been laying here all day. Today will be the same routine as the day before.

Hopefully without a visit from the devil himself.

Anxiety creeps up my spine and I feel my heart beginning to race as thoughts of Adrian's return haunt my mind. Shaking it off, I bundle the sheet around my body and scoot off the bed. I'm in desperate need of another shower.

I flick on the lights of the bathroom as I walk in, my bare feet smacking against the cold tiled floor. I noticed last night that it was stocked with supplies.

Men's supplies.

Is this Adrian's room?

Padding back into the bedroom, I let my gaze wander around the room. There is no dresser. No door for a closet. There are no personal traces of him at all in this space. Not one photo or stray accessory. The walls are bare except for a few long odd rectangles that stand out against the wall. They are the exact color of the wall, blending in nearly seamlessly.

I wonder—

Pressing my hand against one of the rectangles, I watch with rounded eyes as it slowly slides out from inside the wall to reveal an assortment of folded pants and t-shirts, along with a few other miscellaneous clothing

items.

Jackpot.

I snatch a pair of light gray joggers and a white t-shirt from the shelves and gently push the closet door back into the wall before sneaking back into the bathroom. Steam fills the bathroom, the heated water flowing from a golden rain shower above me. It's heavenly and I can almost forget that I am being held captive by a flesh-trafficking jackass.

Almost.

The water nearly runs cold before I step out of the shower and back into the unfortunate circumstance I find myself in. I dry off, pulling on the clothes I'd pilfered from the wardrobe. A gentle sigh teases through my lips as the fabric glides over my skin. It feels good to be wearing something other than a sheet.

When I'm done, I toss the sheet and towel into the laundry bin below the sink and open the door to the room. Then I walk straight into a wall of muscle.

I really should learn to watch where I'm going.

Strong hands reach out and grab my shoulders, steadying me. I don't need to look to know who those hands belong to. I'd dreamed about them on my skin all through the night.

Stupid vagina hasn't gotten the message that he's the enemy.

"Who said you get to wear any clothes, *malen'kaya mysh*?"

I hate that snarky, arrogant, pompous fucking voice and wonder idly how hard it would be to cut out his voice box with the plastic spoon I was given with breakfast.

Down psycho bitch.

That got dark really fast.

Still... if I could just knock him out for a bit.

My eyes wander over his muscled body that was obvious even beneath the stuffy suit he is wearing.

Yep, not happening.

"You expect me to just wrap myself up in a dirty sheet again?" I ask, tilting my head slightly to stare up at him better. Fucker is tall.

"I expect you to wear what you are given," he tells me.

"Which was nothing," I deadpan.

He smirks. "Exactly." He lifts his chin toward the uneaten tray of food. "You didn't eat."

“I’m not hungry.” I try to push past him, but his large body doesn’t budge, keeping me pinned in the small bathroom. Small isn’t the right word, it is enormous, but there is less space to escape his touch. I’m a sitting duck in the closed area.

“Eating isn’t a choice.”

I grind my teeth and straighten my shoulders, building up any mental fortitude I have left by remembering that he can’t touch me if he wants to sell me unspoiled. “Move.”

Another dark smirk. Is that the only thing his mouth knows how to do? Smirk and sneer? Adrian catches me off guard by moving aside enough for me to edge past him.

“You need to eat, Vanya.”

“Why?” I snark as I make my way toward the small sitting place by the window, perching myself on the edge of the chair so he won’t see my legs tremble. “So my new owner doesn’t break me on the first go around? I’d rather starve.”

“If you behave—” His voice turns playful, but there’s an edge to it. A sharp, deadly edge. “Maybe I’ll make sure you go to a nice, new owner who will pet you and take care of you.”

“Or maybe I’ll slit your throat and escape,” I hiss.

His face falls, eyes turning so dark they look nearly black.

Stuck my foot in it this time.

There is barely any time to scream. Adrian moves that fast. His grip is tight on my throat as he practically lifts me from the chair, setting me on his lap as he takes my place on the high-backed chair. With one hand, I push fruitlessly at the hand wrapped around my neck, the other pushing against his chest.

“Be still, Vanya.”

My body stills at the ominous edge that taints his command. His hand presses tighter against my neck, bowing my back until I’m stretched out across his lap, completely vulnerable. I let my muscles relax, sinking into him submissively as I curse him out in my head.

He grips my jaw in the other large, calloused hand, forcing me to look into his deadly gaze. “Don’t make threats you won’t follow through on, mouse,” he purrs. “Making idle threats leads to little girls getting punished.” His tongue comes out to wet his bottom lip.

The lump in my throat keeps growing until it becomes overwhelming.

Tears spill down my cheeks as I nod my head. He holds on for a few seconds longer, his eyes searching my face for a moment, before loosening his grip on my chin.

His fingers, wrapped around my neck, loosen slightly. I feel his thumb caressing my pulse point, no doubt relishing in each staccato beat of fear.

“Can I...” It’s hard to speak against that ever-growing lump of unease. “Can I see my family?”

He scoffs. “Your dead family? You want death so badly?”

Adrian is baiting me, deliberately prodding at my open wound, but I won’t take the bait. He wants another excuse to hurt me. Punish me. Demean me. I won’t give it to him. He knows what I mean. I don’t need to explain myself.

“You want me to take you to where I threw their rotten bodies?” he whispers so softly in my ear that I barely hear him, but I feel the caress of his breath along the shell of my ear. “Want me to show you the carnage? Maybe I’ll fuck you on the exact spot your grandfather bled out before making you blow me in the spot your parents were gutted like pigs. What do you think about that?”

More tears rise to the surface, but I refuse to let them fall. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of my fear—my loss—my sudden desire. I gasp when I suddenly find myself lifted into his arms before he drops me, belly first on the bed. My heart thunders in my chest, blood rushing to my ears as I try to scramble away, but he’s too quick.

Lightning fast, he snatches my ankle and pulls me toward him until my stomach is pressing against the edge of the bed.

“Good girl, Vanya.” His praise for my sudden stillness and refusal to fight does something to me deep inside. Something I don’t want to analyze anytime soon. “I’ll make you a little deal. Do you want to make a deal with me, little mouse?”

Do I have a choice?

No, I don’t, so I nod my head meekly, face buried in the comforter bunched in front of me. It smells like him, sandalwood and lime with a hint of flower. Fear uncoils in my gut, and I tremble and quake, my breath coming out in shallow pants when I hear the scrape of metal against metal.

He’s undoing his belt.

Is he going to...?

No, he wouldn’t. He needs me to be *pure* for his fucking auction.

Right?

Don't be an idiot, Van. There are plenty of other places he can fuck you without disturbing your virginity. My inner voice is condescending and unfortunately, she is right. My teeth chatter and my body shakes as he drags the joggers I stole from him down my legs, letting them pool at my ankles.

I'm too afraid to move. My muscles are frozen, locked in place as fear courses through my veins. His fingers grip my hips tightly. No doubt there will be bruises there later. A sob rips up my throat, but I manage to stifle it, the weight sinking into my chest, threatening to make a reappearance.

He gently presses his hard cock along the seam of my ass, sliding the crown downward between my clenched thighs to my pussy. My inner walls clench and an odd sensation washes over me. Something else for future Vanya to unpack. His weight against my body is stifling, my muscles tightening as he slides his cock between the natural curve of my body.

I bite back a moan as the head of his cock bumps my clit.

No. No. No. This can't be happening.

He repeats the motion several more times, my body tightening and bowing with each electrifying bump of my bundle of nerves. Shame hits me as I feel my body growing wet at his ministrations.

"This is mine, little mouse," he whispers in my ear. "Mine until I give you to the next man. I'll own every bit of you." His words are cold and callous, but his touch is a soft, warm caress. The two colliding forces confuse my mind and body, overwhelming my senses.

A soft sob leaves my lips as he surges forward repeatedly, causing my body to melt against him with each thrust. It doesn't take him long to find his rhythm and soon he's increasing his pace, squeezing my ass, kneading the flesh with his large hands.

My breaths come fast and shallow, my silent tears staining the bedding beneath me. It isn't what he is doing that forces the liquid from my eyes, but how my body reacts to him. Like it wants him. Like he owns it. Fire licks at my skin, and magma races through my lungs.

Adrian grunts as he steps back, spinning me around to face him. I clench my eyes closed, refusing to look at him. He doesn't seem to care. Instead, I hear flesh moving before a warm liquid spreads over my pussy. My eyes snap open to find Adrian with his cock in hand, head thrown back as ropes of pearly white liquid unload onto my heated skin.

When he's done, he opens his eyes. They're burning, the blue of his irises

nearly drowned out by the approaching darkness of desire. Then, it's gone, replaced with cold apathy. He steps back, cleaning himself off with a handkerchief from his pocket before pulling his trousers back up. It is like a switch has been flipped and suddenly he is all business while I'm spread eagle on the edge of the bed, too afraid to move.

Too ashamed.

Then he leaves without a word. His sudden departure is a slap to the face. Shit, I think I'd rather he had slapped me than left me as if I'm nothing more than a two-cent whore he'd purchased from the streets.

Another wave of shame washes over me as the ache between my legs grows.

My mind sure as hell doesn't want anything to do with Adrian Volkov.

If only my vagina would get the message.

With a sigh, I make my way to the bathroom for another hot shower knowing that no matter how hard I scrub, I'll never be able to remove the feel of his touch from my body.

Or the mark he left on my soul.

Ten



Blyad'. Blyad.' Blyad.'

I shouldn't have touched her. I know this. No matter how much her sweet innocence and naivety call out to me, ready to be crushed, I know better. She is nothing more than a means to an end and I have to remember that.

No matter how tempting the fruit.

I collapse into the chair at my desk, digging into the drawer on the right and grabbing the bottle of whiskey I keep there. I pour myself a glass, throw it back, and then repeat this action more times than I care to admit.

Now I'm buzzed watching as the girl in my room hugs one of my pillows to her chest, her body shaking. Jesus, she's crying again.

And I'm the cause.

I brush the errant moment of pity from my mind. Of course, I am the cause. Just like she is the cause of all my heartbreak. Her and her despicable family. At least they are dead and no longer a problem. Now all I have to deal with is her.

Vanya. The girl currently haunting my dreams.

No, not girl.

Woman.

Fuck. Even after the orgasm I took for myself, it still isn't enough. My body still desires her. Desires to sink my cock deep inside of her sweet, wet pussy. I want to taste her on my tongue and force my dick down her throat until she's begging me for air.

And now I'm hard again.

But it will have to wait because more pressing matters are calling my

attention.

Theo Kalogeras.

While I'd been sating my urges with Vanya, my men dug up exactly what I have been looking for since I'd learned he is involved with the sudden rampant selling of drugs in my territory. Drugs I don't allow.

Meth? Have at it. Heroin and crack? Feel free. But PCP is something I don't allow and never will. I also don't allow people to sell in my territory that haven't paid their dues. And Theo Kalogeras? He doesn't belong in my territory but he's about to pay his dues.

"We've got a location." Anton pokes his head in, jangling the keys in his hand. "Do you want me to take a few men to pick him up?"

I grin. "And miss out on all the fun?" I shake my head in amusement as I stand. "Not on your life." Anton smiles and nods his head before backing out of the office. I leave my jacket, knowing that the afternoon sun in March can still be stifling, and head out of my office.

Anton is sitting idly in the black SUV at the front of the house. One of my men opens the passenger door for me before shutting it once I'm in and climbing in the back. I can feel how tense Anton is next to me, his left leg bouncing slightly giving away the anxiety that is coursing through him. He's been my best friend for longer than I can remember. He's the one who stood by my side when my father was murdered, gunned down in the streets like an animal.

I was thirteen.

Anton's father helped me run the business for several years until I was old enough to take over. A few years later, he passed away from cancer. I was there for Anton every step of the way as he had been for me. We were brothers in every sense of the word, blood or not. I learned from a young age that family is what you make it and not what you are born into.

Which is how I know that something is bothering him.

"Theo Kalogeras is twenty-eight years old," he recites the information from memory. "His mother, Mia Kalogeras is the sister of Stavros Spiridakos, Peter's father."

This is information we already know.

"What I want to know is why he thinks he can sell in my territory?" I growl. "Did the Spiridakos family suddenly grow some balls?"

Cassian, the man in the back, snorts.

"I don't know about growing any balls, boss," he says. "But whoever is

backing them surely has a pair.”

I turn slightly in my seat to get a better look at him. “You don’t think the Spirdakoses are working alone?”

Cassian shakes his head. “They’ve never had the kind of money or power to push into our territory before,” he tells me. “Nor the manpower. They’ve always been a small family, even with merging their assets with the Castellanos family, they still wouldn’t be able to make this kind of push.”

“It would explain how they managed to get their hands on such premium product,” I muse. “But who could be backing them?”

“I’m guessing it’s whoever took out the Castellanoses,” Anton shrugs a shoulder.

“That doesn’t make sense,” I point out. “Why take out a potential ally? The two families were bonding through marriage. It would have meant more money and backing. A larger territory.”

“Unless they didn’t want to share.”

And there it is.

The cold hard simple truth.

Greed.

Vanya might be right in her assumption that Peter could have ordered the hit on her family. With the Castellanos family out of the way, there would be no need to share the wealth. They can just take it. There would be no one left alive to stop them.

Except that Vanya is still alive.

And why take the heads?

This is becoming more complicated by the moment and giving me a fucking headache I don’t need.

“The men are on standby,” Cassian tells me. “We’ve confirmed he’s on site.”

“Good.” I take a deep breath. “Time to get some answers.”

Anton parks the SUV a few houses down in the back alley so that Kalogeras doesn’t see us coming. Not that it matters much. The house is completely unprotected. No guards. No security measures. Nothing. Did he think he was untouchable? Or is it some kind of trap? I’m prepared for the latter if it is.

It’s quiet. Too quiet.

“Duck,” Cassian hollers from ahead of me. I curse when I hear a sudden pop and see his body jolt and fall to the ground. I can see his chest still rising

and falling, and hear a small groan leave his lips. A knot in my chest eases. These men are mine. My family. My friends. Losing one of them is like losing a limb.

“Backup’s coming,” Anton assures me as we move in. It’s a slow approach and I listen for how many shots are going off. It’s just one man. One man trying to be Wyatt Earp by shooting off two guns at once.

Idiot.

“Men are breaching in three...two...” Anton smirks when we both hear the sound of broken glass and the pop of a smoke grenade bursting inside the house. A few shots are fired as we advance and then the back door of the house is swinging open.

“Drop the guns, Kalogeras,” I order him, my own gun trained on his chest. One wrong move and he will go down fast, before he can get a shot of his own off. Kalogeras stops a few feet away from us and drops the guns he’s holding in his hands, fear etched tightly across his face.

“They’ll kill me,” he mutters. “They’ll kill me.” He isn’t speaking to me, but to himself. He repeats the phrase repeatedly, his head shaking back and forth. Someone’s been testing the product.

A shot rings out as I take a step toward the disheveled man. The sound is similar to a firework bursting in the distance. The pop just before the fizzle of lights.

A sniper shot.

Anton’s at my back, pulling me to the ground, covering my body with his. He knows I fucking hate it when he does that. Motherfucker is just as important as I am.

“All clear,” one of my men calls a few moments later as he exits the house. I stand, shoving Anton away from me, looking at him askance. Fucker just smiles. Putting my gun back in its holster, I stroll up to Theo’s body. Whoever is behind that scope is no amateur. There is a bullet hole right between his eyes. And he’d been shaking his head.

That’s skill.

“Sergio is following the path. We’ll find out where the fucker built his nest,” Anton relays.

He’s referring to a sniper’s nest. The space they set up to take the shot. How long was he camped out before I brought him exactly what he wanted? A silent Kalogeras. Dead bitches can’t snitch.

“Fuck,” I curse. “Give me a sitrep.”

Voices sound off.

“We’re good, boss,” Anton says. “Cassian is hit in the shoulder. I’ll have the men take him to Doc to get looked at.”

I nod. “Make sure he gets a bonus.” I take care of my men and their families. Cassian put his life on the line for mine today and could have been killed for it. That is something I don’t take lightly. “Give him a trip to Vibrance if he wants one.”

The men around me chuckle as they haul Cassian to their SUV. He’s out of it, but not enough that he didn’t hear the offer I laid out on the table.

“Happy to oblige that trip boss,” he grins stupidly. “Happy to oblige.”

“Now what?” Anton asks.

Sighing I say, “Now we go dig through a dead man’s life.”



It’s near midnight when I return to the house. Opening the large wooden door, I step inside to the warm muted lights of the entry hall that are often kept lit for safety. Hanging my holster on the stand near the door, I slip out of my shoes and groan. Fuck, it feels good to be able to relax. I am not looking forward to another night spent in the guest room, but I can’t drag myself to sleep beside the raven-haired vixen currently locked in my room.

I’ve gone to such lengths to avoid her. Even going as far as to purchase new clothes instead of simply going to my closet. The temptation to take Vanya and ravage her is too great. That smart mouth of hers drives my cock fucking wild.

“Sir,” Anna, the keeper of the house, tentatively calls to me from the doorway of the kitchen as I pass by on my way to my office.

“Anna,” I chuckle lightly. “How many times have I told you to call me Adrian?”

The older housekeeper worries her bottom lip. It’s been something I’ve been working on with all the staff. My father was a great man, but he had exacting rules and regulations for his staff. Ones I did not particularly care for.

“Of course,” she hesitates before looking me in the eye. “Adrian.”

I smile gently at her. Anna has been with our family longer than any of the other staff. She started as a kitchen aide when my father first came to

Vegas. Now she runs the entire house.

“What can I help you with?” I enquire. She seems reticent to speak her question.

“It’s about the girl—” she starts. My spine stiffens. Anna is well aware of what I do. What my family has done for generations, she’s never had any qualms before now. Then again, in all her years of service, no one has ever held a woman hostage before. At least, not in the house.

“What about her?” I ask, my voice sharper than I intend.

“Well, she’s not eating,” Anna starts. “And she’s got this look in her eyes. I’ve seen that look before sir—Adrian. It’s not a good one to have.”

“And what am I supposed to do about that?” *Khristos*, this is too much work. Maybe I should just get rid of her and be done with it.

“Give her some reading material,” Anna advises. “Let her go for walks out in the garden. She isn’t unsupervised here. Maybe even let her see her family.”

“They’re dead,” I deadpan.

Anna rolls her eyes. “Their graves. Let her get some closure. Maybe even take her back home for some of her own things.”

“Why?” I ask. “She won’t be my problem in a week.”

My housekeeper shrugs a shoulder but gives me a knowing look. “If you say so,” she says, making her way back into the kitchen. She stops and turns back to me once more. “Just think about what I said. Don’t be like the person who took her family from her. I don’t think she’s the enemy you think she is.”

I snort derisively as she leaves the room.

Not the enemy I think she is? Vanya is exactly that.

Still, I think about Anna’s words as I head toward my office. Maybe she is right. A little effort might go a long way in making Vanya more malleable. Less annoying.

Maybe then she’ll tell me the secret she’s been keeping all these years.

The secret as to why my wife truly killed herself.

Eleven



Can a person die of boredom?

I am starting to think it is a possibility.

It's been three days since Adrian stormed out of his own room after leaving me bent over his king-size bed, his sweats around my ankles, my body thrumming from the near orgasm that was never completed. I wanted him to bring me pleasure. Still do, if I'm honest, but that doesn't stop the shame from coursing through my body.

He is my best friend's husband.

Even if she is long gone.

He also betrayed her and my family.

What does it say about me that I want nothing more than for him to rush in here and finish what he started the other morning? My family would be ashamed of me.

And Ada? She would be disgusted.

Sighing, I lean back in the cozy patterned wing-back chair and watch the flowers in the garden gently blow in the breeze. Occasionally, a guard will pass through on an hourly inspection, but otherwise, this is what my life has been reduced to.

Sitting with anxiety and waiting for the axe to drop wondering if today is the day he sells me off to the highest bidder. Another tray lies uneaten on the small table in front of me. Nausea worries my gut, and the thought of eating makes it worse. I've always been like this. Whenever I'm nervous or stressed I can never seem to hold down food. Even when I'm starving.

Like now.

My stomach rumbles and begs for nutrients but even the thought of eating

has me retching in the toilet. Food is just unpalatable. It doesn't help that I can't open a window or go for a walk. There is nothing but the stilted and stifling walls that are slowly encroaching on my sanity.

I tense at the sound of the door unlocking. Adrian hasn't come to torture me in a few days, but my luck seems to be rather empty at the moment. The door opens and I turn slightly to see who it is, letting out a relieved breath when all I see is Anna, the head of the house.

"Good morning, Miss Castellanos." She smiles at me as she brushes into the room carrying a stack of books. There are a few maids following behind her, their arms full of bags.

Eyeing Anna cautiously, I ask, "What is all this?"

The housekeeper shoos out the other girls as she carefully arranges the stack of books on one of the end tables. Adrian doesn't have bookshelves to place them on. A waste really. Books are the key to our imagination.

"Master Volkov has approved some reading materials for you." She grins as she starts unloading the bags on the bed. Jesus, what the hell did he buy? I sneak a peek at the labels. Alexander McQueen? Oscar de la Renta? Louboutin?

"That's a lot of nice stuff for a woman he's about to sell," I point out with a little more snark than planned. It isn't Anna's fault her *master* is such an asshole.

Unperturbed, she simply keeps unloading the bags before pulling out the hidden doors that reveal his closet. Then she begins hanging my clothes right alongside his. Among the horde of embarrassingly lacy and see-through undergarments that I will never be wearing, are two black cocktail dresses, a few summer dresses, black and cream slacks, a variety of blouses along with some jeans and t-shirts.

Then she begins unloading the shoes.

What the hell is going on?

"Here." Anna sets some undergarments, a pair of blue jeans, and a cream silk blouse out on the bed. "Put this on."

Why bother?

Apparently, she can sense my reluctance because she adds, "If you want to go for a walk outside, you need clothes that aren't Master Adrian's."

Wait, what?

A walk?

A small smile etches the corners of her mouth when I launch myself from

the chair and grab up the clothes. I hurry into the bathroom, closing the door behind me. Quickly disrobing from Adrian's clothes, I hop in the shower to rinse off. When I'm done, I dry myself off and slip into the nude lace underwear and bra before putting on the jeans.

Damn, they are soft.

And perfectly sized.

Pervert must have measured me.

Ignoring that thought, I toss on the muted cream blouse and run a brush through my hair. It's lackluster and somewhat frizzy. Not wanting to deal with it, I toss it up in a bun with the only hair tie I have. It's definitely seen better days.

By the time I step out of the bathroom, Anna has finished unloading the clothes and is waiting expectantly for me, a pair of beige flats in her hand. Her gaze wanders over me as I put on the shoes and appearing satisfied with how I look, she nods and motions for me to follow her.

The hallway is quiet as we step out of the room. There is a guard by my door, but as we move down the corridor, he doesn't follow. Hope spurs inside of me until I realize that there is a guard in every single room and most of the hallways.

There goes my escape plan.

Anna leads me through the house, which is sparsely decorated except for a few paintings on the wall and well-placed furniture. The walls are a dull white and the furniture black. It looks more like a mausoleum than a home.

There are no trinkets, nothing of sentimental value. I barely recognize the home that I once visited Ada in. When they'd been married it had been light and airy. Full of color, and exactly the way I had always envisioned my own home. Adrian had hired a special interior designer to make the house into a dream for her.

Only, it was never Ada's dream.

It had been mine.

Just like this house had been.

There were only two people I had ever confided in about wanting this house. About my dream of decorating it full of color and filling it with the smell of freshly baked goods. I'd always dreamed of a house full of love and laughter. Something that didn't exist in my house growing up. My mother was always drunk, and my father was always working when he wasn't screwing a maid or two.

Ada had been one of those people and the other was a boy I never had the chance to get to know. He'd texted the wrong number. That's how we got started. We did this for years, texting and leaving messages in a small alcove of a tree that bordered my property. The only weak link in my father's security. Years later, when he found out I was to be married off, we made plans to meet. Only, he never showed, and I never heard from him again.

Such is life, I guess.

"You'll get one half-hour outside, twice a day," Anna's voice interrupts my morose thoughts. I hadn't thought about the boy, Adrik, in a long time. If he even was a boy. We'd only discussed ages once and wonder if that is part of the reason he never showed that night. Maybe he saw me and thought I was too young. I was twenty at the time. He didn't speak like a boy who was younger than me. More like a man.

"Okay," I murmured as I stepped out onto the patio. The sun is shining, as it usually does in Vegas. The fact that it is the beginning of March doesn't matter. The weather is warm, with a slight cooling breeze that makes it the perfect temperature for a walk. Without wasting any time, I slowly make my way around the large bountiful backyard.

This is the only place that hasn't changed. In the six years since Ada's death, the garden still thrives. Unlike everything else around it. I stroll past honeysuckle and desert marigolds. Canna Lilies and Tall Bearded Irises soak up the warm rays in one corner of the garden where they surround a small white iron bench.

"DOES HE TREAT YOU DECENTLY, ADA?" I ask her as we sit on the small wrought iron bench with our coffees in hand. I've been worried about her being married to Volkov. He's volatile, my father says. My best friend smiles like she is holding on to a secret.

"He treats me so well." She winks, and I can't help but blush at her innuendo. Unlike Ada, I will go into my marriage as a virgin. Not by my choice. In my world, mafia princesses are worth more if their virginity is intact. Makes for a better bargaining chip. The whole thing makes me sick, but without it, I am useless to my family. They will disown me, and I have nowhere to go.

"It must be nice," I sigh wistfully. "To have someone who cares for you and that you care for. But... is it worth it? The heartache that no doubt will

inevitably follow...” Like it always does. My parents are a prime example of that.

“It’s always worth taking something from someone,” she smiles but there is something malicious behind it when she looks at me. “Living on the happiness meant for another is the best high there is.”

“I don’t...” A rustle from the patio halts my question.

“Girls,” Adrian calls. “Dinner is ready.”

As I follow after Ada, I can’t help but wonder what she meant. I stop and look back at the garden, my feet poised at the entrance to the kitchen. It was a fairytale place I never want to leave and the one I’d envisioned in my dreams. Why was Ada the one to be gifted something I have always wanted? Down to the exact placement of flowers. Sighing, I shake off the unwanted thoughts.

Ada is my friend and I want her to be happy. It isn’t like she knew of my fairytale garden. I’d only shown the drawing to one person and that person certainly wasn’t Adrian. His rough and curt demeanor is nothing like Adrik’s. Not that I had ever heard him speak. But the cadence of his messages was soft and caring. All Adrian seems to care about is work.

But none of that matters. Adrik is gone and Adrian isn’t mine to worry over.

I’m a mafia princess. A Castellanos. We don’t get fairytale endings.

Twelve



“Are you enjoying yourself, little mouse?” The obvious disdain dripping from his voice makes it obvious that the intruder in my space is Adrian. I don’t have to look up from my book to know that he is scowling down at me. Obviously not amused by the spot I’ve chosen as my own for my allotted outdoor time.

It’s been nearly a week since I’d been allowed some freedoms. Freedoms that even inmates in prison are granted naturally. Me? Apparently, I had to look close to death for Adrian to be willing to offer me such decencies.

“I was,” I snark, not looking up from the book Anna had let me bring out to the garden. It is a romance about a Highlander and a runaway duchess. My favorite. A strong man who knows how to treat a woman. Not whatever this fucker in front of me is. Adrian’s more like a sullen toad who croaks all over women.

“Hey!” The book is ripped from my hands and clumsily tossed aside onto the grass. “You don’t have to be so rude.” I go to stand and collect my book, but firm hands keep me from rising from the bench.

“I think all of this freedom has made you forget who is in charge here, *malen’kaya mysh’*,” he snarls, grasping my chin in his hand when I try to look away. “I am. And when I talk to you, I want your full and undivided attention. Is that understood?”

A sneer curls up the corner of my lip, but I manage out a low, “Understood.”

Adrian smiles but it’s cruel, dark. “Good.”

There’s a beat of silence between us. It’s awkward and drags on. I’m waiting for him to say something, too afraid to speak myself in case he

decides to take away the small freedoms he has given me. I don't think I could stand being locked in his room anymore.

"Let's go." He dips down to pick up the book and then grabs my hand, dragging me along behind him. I struggle to keep up with his long stride as we make our way into the house and toward the front door.

"You don't have to drag me," I grouch at him. "I'll come with you. Not like I can go anywhere else."

He pretends like he doesn't hear me and keeps walking, his strides long and fast. I pull back a little hoping he will loosen his grip or slow down, but he doesn't.

"Will you please..."

Adrian stops suddenly and I crash straight into his back, making a small 'oomph' sound. The only reason I am not flat on my ass is because of his hold on my hand.

"Do you want to see your family or not?" he questions, aggravation coating every word. "Because I can just take you straight back upstairs if you want."

Asshole.

My gaze lowers to my feet and I nod my head mumbling a petulant, "Yes."

"Then stop being a goddamn princess and fucking do as you're told," he snaps. I don't say anything, just meekly nod my head because I do want to see my family. Dead or not. I wonder what he did with their bodies. Are they all thrown into one mass grave? Jesus, what about the household? Who is going to pay for their funeral expenses and take care of their families?

Maybe I can convince Adrian to take me to my father's office. His safe has at least a million dollars stashed away, and I can get more from the accounts. Maybe he will let me pay for the funerals of the staff and then I can buy him off. If I give him enough, he won't need to sell me for money.

Not that he *needs* to. He's plenty rich. Adrian just *wants* to sell me because he can.

My body is on autopilot as he manhandles me into the car. I don't say a word, too afraid to anger him into canceling the trip. Even if this is all some kind of elaborate ruse, I still want to go. Their bodies could be lining the backyard, rotting in the heat, and I would still want to see them.

Once the doors are closed, we take off. It's my first time leaving the grounds. Adrian sits beside me, scrolling idly on his phone while Anton sits

in the passenger seat. His gaze is focused on the road, eyes ever watchful while a man I'm not familiar with drives.

Jesus, he's built like a tank with biceps bigger than my legs. He's taller than Adrian with blonde hair and light skin. Every inch of him is covered in tattoos. He's physically intimidating in a way that Adrian isn't. Sure, Adrian is scary as hell, but until he turns his gaze on you, there is no way to know that there is a deadly snake beneath the suit.

The man who's got a death grip on the steering wheel looks like the Hulk's brother.

Or the Juggernaut.

Block by block, Adrian's North Vegas territory begins to fade away into the Centennial neighborhood my family has controlled since before the expansion. It's a small suburb that bumps right up to the Strip, which is divided ownership, meaning that no one family owns the entire region. It certainly isn't neutral territory, but everyone has an understanding that legal businesses are treated differently.

Not that people don't get murdered for legitimate business. Peter had killed several men over the last year when he was trying to expand one of his casinos. After the third death, the permits office practically paid *him* for the right to expand.

"We're here," the driver announces as he pulls through the open iron gate. Tears push at the back of my eyes as the car slowly makes its way down the driveway. It's quiet. The grounds of the house have never been this quiet. There is always someone tending to the flowers or patrolling the grounds. This time of year, the windows would be open, curtains billowing in the breeze as the maid's spring cleaned and my mother redecorated.

The car comes to a halt and the driver shuts off the engine. Adrian hauls me from the car, but the minute my feet hit the gravel driveway, he lets go.

I look around, despair filling my chest at seeing my family home empty and dying. The grass is already dulling, with patches of brown milling around the yard. The flowers that I had helped Lonnie, our gardener, plant, are wilting.

"This way," Adrian's voice is detached, cold. That's fine with me. It's better than cruel and sneering. I want to say something snarky about him leading me around *my* house, but he is the one who knows where the bodies are buried. Literally, in this case.

He leads me down a cobblestone path that runs along one side of the

house. My jaw clenches tighter and tighter the further we travel. It doesn't take long to get to his intended destination. My family's mausoleum. Did he really bury them there, or is he having a laugh at my expense? Is he going to say 'gotcha' and then show me the pit where he heaped them all together?

"They're all inside," he whispers somewhat softly. "Go on."

The heavy wooden door stands ominously before me like a giant guarding the gates to hell. If I don't go in, then it isn't real. Right?

"You're not afraid I'm going to run?" It's a stupid thing to say but part of me is hoping it'll piss him off and he'll march me away. All this time I've been wanting to see them. Say one last goodbye so that I can properly mourn them. But now that I am standing at the doors to the crypt, I want nothing more than for him to take me away and back to the solitude of his castle, locked away like Rapunzel.

"There's nowhere for you to go, little mouse," he growls, but there is very little bite to his tone. "Even if you did manage to slip my guard, I will always find you. I'd hunt you to the ends of the earth and when I caught up to you, I will show you pain like no other."

The shivers that ripple down my spine aren't from fear.

Swallowing back the lump in my throat, I take three deep breaths to calm the sea of anxiety welling within me. I place my hand on the door and push.

Here goes nothing.

My free hand waves waspily in the air at the dust assaulting me. Even with the recent activity, the mausoleum is still old as fuck and easily recollects the disturbed dust and debris. A cough yanks itself from my chest but I don't let it deter me. I step into the darkness, flipping on the light that lies just before the first step.

Even with the light, the graves of my family still dauntingly tower above me. There are generations of Castellanos bodies buried within these walls, some whose legacy of blood far outweighs that of my father's reign. A small sigh escapes when I see their caskets nestled into the wall, the covering of their tomb laid gently against the wall below them.

Adrian must have had his men leave it off so that I could see for myself. Next to my parents' tomb is my grandparents'. It, too, is open. It is hard to reconcile the love I have for my family against the evil things I know they did over their lifetime. Not just my father or grandfather.

But also my mother. Aunts. Uncles.

All of whom are also dead in the war they waged for money and power.

Prestige.

They had all grown up surrounded by glitter and gold and they did everything they could to remain that way. Now they are nothing more than rotting corpses inside a stone prison. They may have grown up with wealth, but they all rot exactly like everyone else.

Death doesn't discriminate.

That's odd.

My gaze wanders to another tomb in the corner, hidden at the bottom.

The breath in my lungs hitches and stutters when I try to take a breath.

Messily etched into the old stone is my name and from the way the tomb is sealed, it's already occupied.

Thirteen



There's a churning in my gut I can't seem to get rid of. Vanya has barely been in the mausoleum for five minutes but suddenly she is rushing back out, her face pale, as if she'd seen a ghost. Her hands are trembling at her side, eyes brimming with tears.

"What's wrong?" I ask her, concern bleeding into my tone. I'd been sure to have everything in her family's tomb put together properly. Even made sure to leave the stone coverings off so she could see the coffins inside and know that I hadn't tricked her in any way.

I hadn't been joking about burning her family's bodies. It was what I had intended to do, but her large doe-filled eyes when I had told her kept the monster at bay.

Barely.

"Nothing," she pants. "It's just—" She shakes her head as if clearing it. "It's creepy in there."

Her eyelashes flutter. She's lying, but I will let it go. For now. I'll be sure to double-check everything in the mausoleum before having it sealed shut. She's the last living Castellanos and I'll make sure she isn't buried in that tomb.

There are far worse places for her to go.

At least that is what I tell myself.

"Umm—" she hesitates like she is afraid she'll anger me if she speaks too much. Rightly so. I'd threatened to end this field trip before it started if she didn't behave and shut the hell up. There is a piece of me that is regretting that now. "Can I see where you buried the staff, please?"

I frown, my eyes narrowing on her.

“Why?” From what I’ve been told, she doesn’t give two shits about the staff. Vanya Castellanos is nothing more than a sheltered, spoiled princess whose idea of fun is spiking her daddy’s credit card limit.

Well, that *was* her idea of fun. She won’t be spiking her daddy’s anything now.

“Because I want to see where you buried them and pay my respects.” The look in her eyes tells me she’s sincere. Tilting my head, I lead her away from her family’s tomb and through the small graveyard. Anton and my men had needed to create an entirely new section to accommodate the sixty employees who had died. There hadn’t been enough room for all of them in the main section and since we had no way to identify them at the moment, we couldn’t reach out to their families.

A small sob leaves the girl beside me, her chest heaving as tears spill down her pale cheeks. It’s an odd reaction, but a real one. Curious. Vanya hadn’t shown any hint of having cried for her own parents, yet here she was sobbing over the help.

“Why are all the stones blank?” she hiccups.

“We haven’t been able to identify them yet,” I tell her. “Anton took photos of their faces so that we can run a search. We’ll add the names to those we are able to identify. I am assuming your father kept records of whom he hired. That is where we will start.”

Vanya sniffs, her throat visibly bobbing as she wipes away the tears.

“You don’t need the files,” she says. “Where are the photos?”

“What?” I’m looking down at her dumbfounded.

Her head turns to look up at me. “Where are the photos?” She’s speaking to me like I’m dumb. Her words are slow and punctuated.

I snort. “You don’t honestly expect me to think you can identify all of these people?” I question her, disbelief written all over my face.

“I know every single one of them.” She’s confident that she can identify them. Even Ada, who’d worked for the Castellanoses as a maid for a short time before marrying me, didn’t know the names of all of my staff and I have considerably less in my house.

“Anton,” I call to him. He’s been the one in charge of ensuring the bodies were buried and cataloged. My second in command jogs over from where he was talking with one of the men who’d dug the graves.

“Yeah, boss?” he asks, looking between the two of us.

“Do you have those photos of the staff,” I question. “Princess here thinks

she can identify all of the staff for us from their pictures.”

Anton looks over at my little captive skeptically. He’s heard the same thing about her that I have. She’s spoiled. Entitled. Wouldn’t know a broom if it hit her in the face, let alone the name of a servant.

“Sure.” He digs in his pocket and pulls out the Polaroids he took of all the staff. “They’re in order.” Anton points to the row of graves. “Straight down and then they head back this way.”

My little mouse nods as she stares at the first photo, tears making her eyes shine. What is she so upset about?

“If you can’t identify them, little mouse,” I mock her, “just say so. We all know what a spoiled little princess you are.”

The fire in her eyes as she looks up at me has my cock stiffening. Her hazel eyes narrow on me, her face flushed red with anger. Fuck, she’s beautiful.

Not that it matters. Soon she won’t be my problem.

“If your definition of spoiled means that I spent my time in the kitchens and the gardens being raised by the very people you’ve just buried, then yes, I am spoiled,” she hisses. Her arm sweeps out, motioning to the graves around us. “These were the people who raised me when my family was too busy partying to care that they left their four-year-old daughter home by herself. These were the people who hugged me. The people who held me when I cried. They were my family more than the dead bodies in that mausoleum ever were. If that makes me spoiled, so be it.”

My little mouse has a backbone after all. She storms over the first grave. Anton and I follow.

Vanya hands the first photo to Anton.

“Lonnie Anderson, fifty-four,” she tells him. “Head gardener. He used to let me help him plant the flowers. Taught me everything I know about gardening. Used to let me pick the flowers from a special area when I was sad.”

Another photo.

“Celia Santorini,” she continues. “She was a baker in the kitchen. Taught me how to make bread and used to sneak me cupcakes when my mother wouldn’t allow me to eat.” Another photo. “Cal Dunn. Head butler. Used to play board games with me and tucked me into bed when my parents were out at the club or too drunk to take care of me. His wife, Mel, used to help me bathe and dress when I was younger because my parents never cared to help

me learn.”

On and on she goes. All sixty of them. She knows every single name and occupation, adding in something special they used to do for her. *Khristos*. Vanya Castellanos is nothing like the spoiled princess I believed her to be. That I had been led to believe.

Another lie to add to the ever-growing list.

“I’ll be sure to get their files and mark their graves accordingly,” Anton assures her gently. Vanya nods, the tears spilling down her cheeks. Something pulls at my chest, but I ignore it.

“Come,” I order her, my voice gruff. “I need you to show me to your father’s office and then you can grab some of your things from your room.”

Vanya shakes her head.

“I don’t want to go back in there,” she whispers, voice broken, body shivering. Too bad for her, I don’t care.

“We’re going,” I growl. “You can either follow directions like a good girl or I can take you over my knee right here and you will still be going inside. Just with a raw ass.” Her lips part into a beautiful *O*, eyes wide. Such innocence. Her throat bobs and I can see the gears turning in that gorgeous head of hers. Vanya isn’t stupid. Mouthy and reckless, yes. But not stupid.

After a moment, the shock fades into frustration. Her tiny hands fist at her side and she nearly stomps her foot before muttering a small, “Fine,” and marching toward the back entrance of the house.

Smart girl.

I will need to adjust that attitude though.

A little voice niggles at the back of my mind. *Who are you kidding? You love that fire and defiance.*

It isn’t wrong. Her fiery eyes and pushback get me harder than granite. I’ve spent a few nights in the shower with my hand wrapped around my cock thinking of all the times she attempted to fight back at me.

There weren’t many, but fuck, her defiance was almost better than her naïve submission.

Almost

Anton and I follow leisurely behind her as she storms across the long yard.

“Something isn’t right,” Anton whispers low enough so that she can’t overhear. I know what he means. Vanya is nothing like I imagined. There had only been a handful of times when the two of us had been in a room together

for more than a few moments. The rehearsal dinner and wedding and a few dinners here and there that were for Ada's birthdays.

That was it.

I never paid much attention to her. She was always rather quiet when I was in the room, the complete opposite of my late wife who enjoyed being the center of attention. At the time, I'd never thought much of it, but now, the more I think back on my time married to her, the more I begin to realize she was nothing like she had portrayed prior to our marriage.

Ada was nothing like the girl I thought she was.

Nothing like the girl I'd spent so much time thinking of when I was growing up. I am beginning to wonder if they were ever the same person or if it had been a con all along.

"I know," I tell him. "I just can't put my finger on what it is."

Anton gives me a knowing look. "You know what it is, you just don't want to accept it."

He is right of course. He always is.

"Isn't going to change anything," I say truthfully. "Vanya is still a Castellanos." My best friend shakes his head. It's almost like he's disappointed in me.

Let him be.

I won't let a woman nearly destroy us again.

Vanya can never be anything more than a tool for me to use.

Fourteen



The house is cold.
Empty.

There is no life in it anymore. It had been snuffed out. Something I don't entirely understand. Why kill the staff? What purpose did it serve? The back door opens into the kitchen. My favorite room in the entire house. Here I was free to be myself. To laugh and bake alongside the staff without a care in the world.

My bottom lip trembles as I take in the state of the place I once called a sanctuary. Bowls are spread half-smashed on the tiled floor. Spilled flour is mixed with the dark red of spilled blood.

Innocent blood.

Ignoring the hushed whispers behind me, I straighten my shoulders and hold my head high as I stride through the massacred room and into the dining area. I keep my eyes up and ahead, refusing to look down at the carnage surrounding me. If I do, I will break down and the last thing I want to give the asshole behind me is my tears.

He's had enough of those already.

I stop in front of my father's office door. It's just off the living room. He liked to be close to the tunnels beneath the house in case of an emergency. Not that it helped him any when death came calling.

A moment of longing washes over me when I open the door and my father's scent hits me. I loved my family. How could I not? They were all I had besides Ada. They never hit me or raised their voices at me. If they had, it might be easier to let them go.

Instead, they simply neglected me until I was old enough to be useful.

When Ada's mother died, they only kept her so that I would have a playmate to keep me entertained. She had simply been another tool they crafted to control me.

When I misbehaved, they would lock us away from one another. If I refused something, they starved her. I became meek and docile in their presence because I learned that being defiant meant my friend, my sister, became the target.

We used to dream of running away together. Meeting our prince charming.

Until one day, she met him. Married him. Died because of him.

Sighing, I step into the opulent room, scrunching my nose in distaste. I've always hated this room. My father believed that grandeur and opulence portrayed wealth and power. All it did was telegraph how much he was compensating for his lack of power.

The Castellanoses weren't as powerful under my father's rule as they had been with generations prior. Mostly because he liked gambling and whores and my mother loved to shop. Not that any of that mattered any longer. The Castellanos family died with my father.

And soon our name will cease to exist altogether.

"Show me his safe, little mouse," Adrian's gruff voice interrupts my thoughts. I stay quiet, afraid to speak. My emotions are bouncing around inside of me and I'm not sure which one I will release. Sadness? Anger? Frustration? Murder?

Yep. That is an emotion all right.

Homicidal rage, get it on sale now for the low, low price of being irritated by an asshole.

I walk to the large bar my father had installed in the office and pull out one of the large drawers. The two men meet my expectant stare with befuddled looks. Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I point at the drawer.

"Clever," Anton murmurs as he comes to stand over the drawer. "Not somewhere a thief would look for a safe."

"Indeed," Adrian agrees. His gaze shifts to me. "What's the passcode?"

I shrug. "I don't know," I tell him honestly. "I was never allowed to know the inner workings of the business. The only reason I know it's there is because I saw the plans for the customization on his laptop one day. He'd left it open at the dinner table."

"It's moveable," Anton grunts as he tries to lift it out of the drawer, but

it's solid steel and welded into the side. "Maybe not."

"Great," Anton mutters. "See if Jakub can crack it." Anton nods before pulling out his cell phone. He begins to type away furiously, no doubt texting whomever the hell Jakub is.

"Where's your room?" Adrian asks me.

"Other side of the house."

He nods. "Let's go." He places his large hand on the small of my back and leads me from the office. I lead him down several hallways to the room I'd spent my life in. Opening the door, I don't miss the surprise on Adrian's face as he takes in my room. What is he expecting? The royal quarters at Buckingham Palace?

I may have grown up around wealth, but very little of it had been afforded to me. My grandfather had been the only one to truly care for me, but even his love had its limits. My parents gave me the appearance of wealth. I have a closet full of designer clothes and accessories, but they were only pulled out when I was required to for an event. Otherwise, my clothes were plain, and I was given barely anything of sentimental value.

To my parents, I was nothing more than a pretty prop that would one day be sold into a profitable marriage. That was my only true value to them.

And it isn't any different with Adrian.

The man who will sell my virginity for a pretty penny just to stick it to my dead family.

"What the hell is this?" the devil asks as he takes in the small, cramped quarters of my domain. There is a twin-size bed in one corner, a desk, and bookshelf with a few strewn books and school supplies, a chair for reading, and a small, open closet.

That is it.

"My room, jackass," I hiss. Shaking my head, I head to the closet, pull out a small duffel bag and begin to shove my clothes into it at breakneck speed. I don't need him judging what I wear on top of everything else. Adrian is rooted to the door. He looks apoplectic as he continues to sneer at the only place of comfort I have ever known.

"This isn't a room," he sneers. "It's a closet."

I shrug and grab a few books I want to bring with me. "What did you expect?"

"This is the maid's quarters..."

Cue eye roll.

“And you call me a princess.” Pretentious asshole. Just because I’ve never swept a floor or vacuumed a carpet doesn’t mean I am spoiled. I learned to cook and bake. To care for living things. I may have been expected to learn etiquette and manners, but that doesn’t make me a princess or spoiled. Just because I didn’t know anything about my family’s finances or the everyday going-ons, doesn’t make me naïve or sheltered. I’m not blind to what my family did, I was just never allowed to participate.

Not that I ever wanted to. My family dealt in far worse things than drugs and guns. They dealt in flesh and sex.

Adrian is apparently no different. I always hoped he was. Sighing at his silence, I brush past him and grab up the small leather journal I keep under my pillow.

Shoot.

Tossing the journal in my bag, I reach down for the photo that fell out onto the floor. Quicker fingers snatch it up before I can grab it.

“Who is this?” Adrian asks as he stares down at the photo.

“That’s Ada and me when she first came to live here,” I tell him. There isn’t a reason to lie.

“I know that,” he snarks. “I’m talking about the woman with her arm around Ada.”

My brow furrows. How does he not know who she is? Ada would have shown him pictures, I’m sure of it.

“That’s Ada’s mother.” Is he for real? “Cora.”

He shoots me a befuddled look. “No, it’s not,” he growls. “I’ve met Ada’s mother, and this is not her.”

He what now?

“Unless you held a séance,” I mock, “I doubt it. She died when Ada was fifteen. Car accident.”

Adrian advances on me. “Don’t lie to me, little mouse,” he snarls in my face, hand coming up to wrap around my throat.

“Why would I lie to you?” I push at his arm frantically because this time he isn’t just holding me still, he’s squeezing. Hard.

“Ada introduced me to her mother just after the wedding,” he tells me. “She is very much alive.”

“I don’t know who you met,” I pant through the hold he has on my windpipe. “But it wasn’t Ada’s mother.”

Snarling, he releases my throat and pockets the photo.

“You better pray you aren’t lying.”

I look at him in disbelief.

“Why would I lie about something like that?” I ask, my words raspy. Motherfucking, son of a whore, disease-ridden, stupid twatwaffle.

“I can hear you.”

Oops.

Apparently, my inside thoughts weren’t as inside as I thought they were.

Oh well. What is he going to do?

Humiliate me?

Sell me?

He’s already done both of those things so the man can go fuck himself.

“If this is Ada’s mother,” he holds the photo out for me to see like I haven’t owned it nearly my entire life. “Who is the woman I met?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know?” I shoot him a look of confusion. “I’m not even sure why she would lie in the first place. She loved her mother. I don’t see her being ashamed of her.”

“Seeing as how your friend lied to me our entire marriage,” he hisses, “I’m not really surprised.”

Huh?

The only liar here is him. He lied and manipulated her into spying on my family. She had been crushed by his betrayal. When she’d learned that he had used her to spy and gain access to the family’s business, she lost it. It had been too much for her to bear.

“The only liar here is you,” I spit out at him, anger surging through my veins. His brow furrows at my sudden vehemence. I hope he sees the raw hatred burning through my gaze. He may have saved my life, but I wouldn’t play the docile captive any longer. Ada was the victim. Not him. I won’t let him twist my memories of my friend like he twisted her.

He can bend me all he likes, but I won’t break.

Adrian calls me *little mouse* because he thinks I am docile and weak.

But I am not a mouse. Far from it.

I’m a viper and if he isn’t careful, he’ll get bit.

And he won’t see it coming.

Fifteen



Vanya's words echo in my mind as we exit the house and head back to the car. Anton is already waiting, the phone in his hand. He's frowning, his thumb scrolling. Something is up. My little captive ignores me as she scoots into the back seat, duffle bag on her lap as if that will protect her from me.

Red marks score her neck from where I had wrapped my fingers around her pretty little throat. She is lying, she has to be. I'd met Ada's mother a few days after the wedding. She'd been unable to make it due to poor timing. I never thought anything of it because Ada had told me that she never had a good relationship with her mother. It didn't bother her not to have her at our ceremony, so it hadn't bothered me.

Now I am beginning to think that there is more to it than I originally thought.

Vanya is right. She has no reason to lie to me about Ada's parentage. But what did Ada have to gain from lying? She could have simply told me her mother was dead, I never would have questioned it. Something isn't adding up.

Sliding into the back seat, I turn to Vanya and ask, "What do you mean when you say Ada came to live with you?"

Vanya grimaces as if she is somehow betraying a secret. "Ada and Cora came to live with us when I was ten. My father hired her as a maid and Ada became my playmate. When I look back at it, Ada was just another way for my parents to control me."

I narrow my eyes at her. "What do you mean?"

She shrugs. "My parents never truly raised me," she began, staring out the window at the house, lost in thought. "They say it takes a village to raise a

child—well, the staff was my village. Most of them anyway. When Ada came to live with us, everything was fine at first. It took a few years for me to realize it. I was fourteen, maybe fifteen when it dawned on me exactly how they had been conditioning me over the years.

“One wrong word. One slip-up and Ada was easily taken away. They let us grow attached to one another and then would rip the carpet out from under us. They never hurt her. One day she’d be my playmate and the next my father would take her away. I hated being alone and they knew that. He would leave me locked in my room, only allowing for food. After a few days, he’d bring her back, but she was never really the same. She never spoke of where she went, but wherever it was, it took a piece of her each time. As we grew older, it became less and less. But one day she was no longer my playmate. My father placed her in the kitchens after her mother died. Said I was too old for a playmate. That I needed to grow up.”

“So, you abandoned her?” I hiss, unsure of why it bothers me. My late wife was a traitor. Vanya shook her head morosely.

“Never,” she assures me. “I would sneak down to the kitchen to help her with her work. She’d sneak into my room. Every night we discussed how we would escape. Only—it never happened because...” She shrugs nonchalantly but I can see the sorrow lining her eyes.

Because she married me.

“Boss,” Anton slides into the driver’s seat, closing the door behind him. He turns to me and hands me his phone, a dark look in his eyes. “You’re going to want to see this.”

I take the phone from his hand and snort when I see the notification. Vanya’s bid has ended, and the highest bidder is something of a surprise. It isn’t who I expected it to be.

Smiling, I confirm the sale and set up a time for collection.

This is going to be interesting.

I hand the phone back to Anton and nod. It’s only mid-afternoon and the meeting won’t be until later tonight. “Take us home.” Taking his phone, he nods and starts the engine.

Vanya doesn’t say a word, but I can feel her gaze on me, glaring. It is hot and she is no doubt wondering what I am so gleeful about.

Poor little mouse is about to find out just how hungry the cat is.



IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG to get back to the house. Traffic had eased since this morning. My pretty little captive shoves the door open the moment Anton puts the car in park and stomps toward the door with her duffel bag. Rolling my eyes, I step out onto the driveway and follow her inside. The sun is in full swing and beating down on me. It is that time of year that has the mornings cool but by afternoon it begins to heat up.

Luckily in March it hardly gets past eighty degrees. It's the summer months you have to worry about. When the sun is so hot that it melts your shoes to the sidewalk. Those are the months I spend at my penthouse in the city. It's more convenient and I don't have to travel as much.

"Vanya," I call to her, but she just keeps walking. I know the minx hears me. She's just choosing to be a brat. "Don't take another step, Vanya." The order goes unheeded.

This is not what I need.

Shucking off my jacket, I lay it over the back of the couch and trail after her. I'm in no particular hurry. My little mouse has nowhere to go. I harden my footsteps on the stairs, so she knows I am coming. If she wants to play games, I'll be sure to show her who the winner will be.

Spoiler. It's not her.

"Boss," Sasha calls from behind me. Fuck. I forgot about the meeting with him. Vanya is already out of my sight, and I hear the door to the room slam shut. I clench my jaw, eyes narrowing. Soon she won't be my problem.

Taking a solid breath, I abandon my plans for her and make my way back down the stairs.

She's lucky this time. If this meeting could be rescheduled, I would be up there tanning her pretty little ass. I love seeing how red it gets with my belt, her bubbly cheeks bouncing with each strike.

Vanya will soon find out that prey should never turn their back on a predator.

Sixteen



Slamming the bedroom door shut, I lean back with a sigh against the cold wood. His footsteps on the stairs were like a beating death drum. The countdown to my execution. When they retreated, the hitch in my chest finally relaxed.

Something had called him away and I couldn't be more grateful.

Digging through my duffel, I pull out the leather-bound journal. It isn't my only one, but it is the most current. I've been keeping a journal since I learned to write. A way to cope with the loneliness. Even after Ada came to live with us, I still wrote diligently nearly every day.

Hopes.

Fears.

Dreams.

It's also where I keep Adrik's letters. The ones he wrote back to me. Once a week, instead of texting, we used to leave letters in the old, knotted tree by the bridged pond on the borders of my father's property which ran alongside a public park. Every Sunday I would take his letter and leave one of my own. This went on for four years, until my twentieth birthday. That was the day everything changed, and Adrik disappeared, leaving my heart shattered in pieces.

That's what you get for believing in fairy tales.

Dredging myself from the depths of my pity party I make my way over to the small table where Anna had graciously left me lunch and a bottled water. It is a few hours past lunch and I am grateful for the kind gesture.

I perch myself on the edge of the chair that looks out the window and nibble on the fruits and cheeses on the plate as I dig through my journal. My

stomach is still churning from the mausoleum. The tomb has my name on it. My name, my birthday, and a date of death set the same as the day of my birth.

If I wasn't one hundred percent positive my parents were, indeed, my parents, I might suspect I am adopted. Except I have irrefutable proof they are. When they announced my engagement to Peter Spiridakos, I was forced to go through a paternity test to ensure that I was a blood heir. That had been the only non-humiliating test I was forced to do that day.

I shiver. Thinking of what I had been forced to endure for that engagement still makes me sick.

A lump forms in my throat as I open the last letter I received from Adrik. It had been his response to my upcoming engagement.

MOYA MALEN'KAYA I'VITSA,

THE NEWS of your engagement is troubling, and I am working on a plan to make it right.

I won't let you become another man's possession.

Every first you have will be mine and mine alone.

Do not worry about your family, they are no match for the power I hold behind me.

Soon you will see.

I look forward to the moment my lips glide over your soft skin as my hands toy with your perfect breasts.

I'm hard at just the thought of seeing you naked beneath me, begging for my cock.

I'll cherish the moment you scream my name in ecstasy.

Meet me on your birthday at our spot.

I promise to take you away from all this.

ALL MY LOVE.

Adrik

IF ONLY HE'D SHOWN.

That was the night I learned just how sinister my new fiancé was. My parents may have never laid a hand on me, but Peter didn't have the same reservations. He is a monster. A savage, but even I know he is nothing compared to Adrian Volkov.

Although Adrian hasn't hurt me. Just humiliated me by using my body against me.

It wants him.

Craves him.

A long breath escapes me as I tuck the letters back into my journal and bury the book beneath the cushion of the chair. Adrian is never in here long enough to sit, so I doubt he will find it. My gaze moves to the window. There's a flurry of activity outside and I sit up straighter to get a better view. Adrian's men are dragging a man across the yard kicking and screaming. He's beaten and bloody, hands tied behind his back. His eyes are covered and he's begging... no, pleading for mercy.

Shaking the image from my mind, I abandon the chair for the bed. I let my eyes drift shut and wait for sleep. Maybe this time I won't dream of the monster keeping me captive in this room.



I DON'T SLEEP for very long, but it was long enough that the sun was already setting behind the Nevada mountains. Something had roused me from my sleep, and it takes me a minute to realize that it was the sound of the shower running in the bathroom.

"Looks like the princess is finally awake," Adrian mocks as he steps out of the bathroom with only a towel around his waist. With a small gasp, I cover my eyes and look away. The bastard chuckles like it's funny. "No need for such modesty, *malen'kaya mysh'*. You've already felt every inch of me."

"Doesn't mean I want to see it," I gripe, making sure to keep my head turned away and my eyes closed. Just in case. He chuckles again and I hear the familiar sound of the closet opening to my right. I hear some rustling and then the sound of the closet closing.

"You can open your eyes now, little virgin," he laughs. "I'm dressed."

I slowly turn my head, cracking open one eye just in case he is lying to

me. A sigh of relief escapes when I see him fully dressed in suit trousers and a white button-down. He turns to grab something from the dresser and then dumps it on the bed in front of me.

“Get dressed,” he orders me, the amusement at my perceived prudishness fading. “We’re going out.”

If that isn’t a red flag, I don’t know what is. My hand hovers over the box, uncertain and afraid.

“Out?” I ask. “Where?”

He scoffs as he puts on his tie.

“Do you honestly believe that I owe you some kind of explanation, Vanya?” he sneers arrogantly. I don’t push any further because I can see the unhinged look in his eyes that is just begging to punish me again. Grinding my teeth, I lean forward and pull off the lid and pull back the black tissue paper inside.

My eyes round as I stare at the dress inside.

If you can call it a dress.

It’s blood red, thin, and so short it resembles more of a top than a dress. Oh, hell no. There is no fucking way I am wearing this. I pick it up, the fabric feels cheap in my hands. Beneath the dress is a pair of black heels that look as if they will crack my ankles the moment I put them on.

What the fuck?

“I’m not wearing this,” I tell him, dropping the items back into the box. “If you want a hooker, I recommend heading down to the Strip. They’re a dime a dozen and certainly more your speed.”

Adrian tilts his head and studies me. His face is blank, unreadable until suddenly he is pulling me from the bed by my hair. I claw and scratch at his hand as I attempt to kick him, but my feet are tied up in the blankets.

Once my feet are firmly on the ground he yanks my head back, his hand grasping my chin and forcing my gaze to his. I can see the fire slowly building within the black depths. His touch sends electricity skating up my skin.

Fucking hussy. He is selling us, remember?

My body and vagina don’t seem to give a shit.

“You either wear the dress,” he threatens with a low growl, enunciating every word. “Or I can walk you out of this house naked. Either way is good with me.”

Seriously?

I'm half tempted to call his bluff, but the thing with Adrian is this—he doesn't bluff. I know him well enough to know he will follow through on his threat and enjoy every moment of my discomfort and humiliation.

Biting back my pride, I jerk my head in a nod and he lets go of my hair.

“Good girl.”

Ugh, fuck that phrase, and fuck my body for responding to it. I need a shit ton of therapy.

Grabbing the box, I scoot around him to go into the bathroom to change. Adrian has other plans.

“You can change right here, little mouse,” he orders. “I'll give you five minutes before I put you in that dress myself and if I do, I'll be expecting something for my troubles.”

Tyrant.

Dictator.

He's phrasing it like I have a choice, but there is no real choice here. They're nothing but thinly veiled threats tied up in a pretty bow. Fine. He wants a show, I'll give him a show.

Tossing the box to the floor, I slip the sundress I am wearing over my head and throw it at him. He just smirks, holding the fabric to his nose and sniffing like a pervert. Another thing my body responds to. Great.

I keep my eyes on his as I lean down and grab the scrap of fabric in the box. It slides over my skin like a glove, hugging tight to every curve of my body.

“Shoes,” he orders.

His face has gone blank again, but I can see the tenseness riding along the edge of his jaw as he watches me. So, the monster isn't unaffected by me as he seems. I can't figure out if that is a good thing or a bad thing.

Then again... an idea forms in my head and I position my body away from him as I bend over to put on the four-inch heels. I can hear a low hiss from behind me when I do. The man is no doubt getting a completely exposed view of my pussy and ass in the white, lace thong I am wearing.

“What are you doing, mouse?” he asks, the words tight and controlled.

“Just putting my shoes on,” I tell him nonchalantly. Then I wiggle my ass a bit as I step into one of the shoes, acting like it's a tight fit. It's not. The shoe is like butter on my foot which is surprising since it looks like something a cheap hooker would wear.

Unable to keep up the charade for long, I stand up and turn around,

rearranging my tits in the dress as I do.

“Come here, Vanya,” he growls once I’m finished. With what I hope is a sultry smile, I saunter over to him, making sure to move my body sensually. I’m pretty sure I look like a newborn deer trying to walk because damn these heels.

When I’m in reach, he grabs my arms and pulls me toward him. His other hand digs into his pocket and pulls out a capped syringe.

Nope.

“Stay still,” he reprimands me when I push away from him. Spoiler alert: it doesn’t work. He’s like a fucking wall.

“What is it?” I glare up at him. Even in heels I barely reach his shoulder.

“Birth control,” he tells me as he pulls off the cap.

“No.” I attempt to pull away again, but he pins me with his muscled arm against his chest. “Let go of me. I don’t want that. I don’t...”

“You’d rather your new owner get you pregnant?”

I still at his words.

New owner?

He’s sold me. I know he said he would but that had been weeks ago, and I thought... I don’t know what I thought. Taking the opportunity, he injects the needle into the flesh of my upper arm. I wince at the slight sting, followed by mild burning, but my mind is too far gone to register anything completely.

“Good little mouse,” he praises me. The tilt of his lips sends fear cascading down my spine. “Now,” he reaches down beneath my skirt and tugs at my panties. “Remove these.”

My heart is racing, my lungs burning, as my mind struggles to comprehend exactly what is going to happen to me. He raises the hem of my dress, so it bunches at my waist and pushes the white lace panties to pool around my ankles. I go to step out of them, but he stops me with a hand on my inner thigh.

“What are you...”

He shushes me as he eases his hand up my inner thigh to cup my mound. I start to tremble, wobbling precariously in my heels. When a finger runs up my center, I rear back, but he is too fast for me and snags my waist, pulling me flush against his chest, his hand between us.

“I can either make you feel good,” he whispers in my ear. “Or I can make it hurt. Just relax, little mouse.”

Easy for him to say. He wasn’t the one who had to worry about his

fiancée's parent demanding proof of his virginity.

My core clenches as he slowly parts my folds and slips two fingers inside of me. Goosebumps erupt, pebbling my skin when his thumb glides over my clit. His touch is gentle but forceful. There is no build up or anticipation. The foreign sensation overwhelms me and my muscles tense at the continued intrusion.

His fingers aren't soft or slow. With every thrust of his fingers, lightning erupts threatening to fry every sensual neuron inside of me. I close my eyes, tipping my forehead to rest against his shoulder. Everything else around me is forgotten in the fog that overwhelms my mind.

Adrian shifts slightly, his arm leaving my waist. He's no longer holding me to his chest. Instead, I'm clinging to him, silently begging for just a little more. I feel his arm shift again before it comes down on the bare skin of my ass, a loud crack filling the air between us.

A small yelp rushes from my lips at the sharp, burning pain. But soon that pain melds into pleasure as he continues to fuck me with his fingers. Another slap. My body jolts forward when it hits the same tender spot as before. He rubs this one out before landing another blow. The pain and pleasure mold together like a river rushing into the sea. I can feel the current sweep through me as I ride his hand, reveling in the way he rubs my clit.

Something unfamiliar tightens within me but just as I'm about to let go, he stops.

"Can't have you enjoying it too much," he smirks as he pulls away. His fingers drag along my sensitive bundle of nerves as he removes his hand. I cry out as he pinches it between his fingers. My knees buckle beneath me and without him holding me up, I collapse onto the carpet at his feet.

"But not until I get what I want."

Seventeen



I stare down at her. Her big hazel eyes are rounded in fear and lust as she stares up at me from her place at my feet. If my cock could get any harder, it would. It's already harder than granite from shoving my fingers into her tight cunt.

Unzipping my pants, I free my hardened length from the confines of my boxers and grin smugly. I move toward her until my dick is right in front of her face. I snake my booted foot between her legs and push down on her shoulder until I can feel her pussy against the leather.

“You're going to ride my boot while you wrap those pretty lips around my cock,” I tell her as I run my thumb over her plump bottom lip. “This is how you will come for me. Argue, and I will fuck your throat and then whip you raw while leaving you a quivering mess. Understood?”

Vanya freezes, her lips falling open slightly. Tears gather at the corner of her eyes, and she wipes them away with the back of her hand. Something twists inside of me at seeing them. They irritate the fuck out of me.

“You have five seconds to decide your fate, little mouse,” I warn her. “If you don't decide, then I will, and it won't be the pleasant option.” Well, it won't be pleasant for her.

She blinks up at me and her throat bobs. I can see the defiance in her eyes, threatening to spill over, but she knows to keep it to herself if she doesn't want to face the consequences. I can see the moment she makes the decision, a small barely perceptible nod. But that's all I need.

I snatch a fistful of her hair, yanking her forward until she's perfectly positioned. Her head leans back on a moan as I wiggle my foot and then hit the small device in my pocket. A wanton moan shoves its way out of Vanya's

throat as the vibrations hit her clit. I'd modulated a panty vibrator on the top of my boot earlier when she hadn't been looking. It is black and easily blends in.

"Open wide, *malen'kaya mysh'*," I order her in a rough voice. The authority in my voice has her obeying immediately. "Good girl." She parts her lips wide and sticks out her tongue. A smile tilts my lips. "Have you ever had a cock in your mouth before?" I'm curious if she's ever given a man a blowjob before. Sex is one thing, she would know that her parents would check for her intact cherry, but there is no way for them to check if she's ever swallowed a cock.

Her mouth widens at my brazen question, and I take that moment to edge into her mouth. I'm bigger than most and I can see her readjusting herself to take me. Biting my lip to keep from coming at the sight of her on her knees before me with my cock in her mouth, I thrust forward, touching the back of her throat.

She sputters at my sudden action. I pull back slightly, not wanting to scare her just yet. I give her a few more shallow thrusts and let her accommodate my size and width before I can't hold back any longer.

Using her hair as a tool, I yank her down my shaft until her nose touches the soft curls at the base. Vanya pushes frantically against my thighs as I hold her there, but a few wiggles of my foot have her losing her composure. The vibrations of her moan travel up my cock, making my balls tighten. Her mouth is wet and warm, I doubt I'm going to last long.

She coughs and gags as I shove myself down her throat repeatedly. God, I can only imagine what her pussy will feel like. Spit pools at the corner of her mouth. I pull back, allowing her to gasp for air before yanking her head back again and again.

"Inhale through your nose," I instruct her as I readjust my stance to better grind my foot into her clit. She moans, her eyes rolling back in her head as she rides the vibrator. "That's it, little mouse. Fuck yourself with my boot." Her hips swivel as she does what I tell her. What a good obedient little slut she is for me.

Blyad'.

I watch, fascinated, as her body tenses and she screams her release around my cock. I grunt as I tank her face down my length, pressing my boot harder into her clit as she rides out the waves of her orgasm.

With a roar, I come down her slender throat. It overwhelms her. She

pushes at my thighs again, trying to push me away.

“Swallow all of it, slut,” I growl as the last ropes of cum shoot down her throat. When I’m done, I hold her there for a moment, catching my breath before I pull out of her succulent mouth. My cum is running down her chin. I wipe it up with my thumb and push it into her mouth. “All of it.”

I bite my lip as Vanya sucks on my thumb. “Watch it,” I warn her when her sharp teeth dig into the skin as I pull it out. Stepping back from her, I pull myself together and tuck myself back into my pants. Fuck, she’s so inexperienced, and yet—that was the best fucking blowjob I’d ever been given.

“Go clean yourself up,” I tell her, hardening myself against the sudden lust rearing up inside of me. She looks so beautiful on her knees for me. My little Greek whore. But she can’t be mine. At least, not yet. “You have five minutes.”

Her eyes darken as she stands on shaky legs. She goes to pull her dress down but thinks twice about it because she likely knows her arousal will soil it. Vanya reaches down for her panties, but I shake my head.

“No panties, little mouse,” I tell her. Her jaw tightens as fire rises in her eyes, but she remains quiet. Subdued. Fuck, I should have made her come sooner. Her chin rises indignantly as she makes her way to the bathroom, my laughter following behind her.



THE CAR ROLLS EFFORTLESSLY down the streets of downtown Las Vegas. The original Strip. This is where the darkness comes out to play. Most of the mafia families have major casinos on the Strip, but with all the foot traffic, it is harder to keep the shadows of our organization a secret.

There are five ruling crime families in Vegas. Well, four now that the Castellanos empire has been bumped off the table. Spiridakos will no doubt make a play for the spot, but I won’t let that happen. Volkov, Gallo, Brennan, and Bonetti are the remaining four. For the most part, we play nice. We’ve each carved out our own territory in Vegas, the Strip being the one mutual ground we share.

Until Castellanos sent a spy in my ranks.

A weasel.

Ada had stolen sensitive information that could have crippled my entire empire if it hadn't been for Anton. He'd caught her red-handed in my office. It seemed too easy, but her cowardly death proved she had been the mole.

Vanya sits in the back seat with me while Sasha drives. Anton wanted to accompany us but his reticence in turning over my little mouse would be a hindrance to what I have planned. He'd try to save her, and I don't have time for my second in command turning on me tonight.

"Where are we going?" Vanya asks, her voice trembling, lower lip wobbling. She knows something isn't right.

"I need to run an errand and then I am going to dinner," I tell her, but it doesn't ease the anxiety on her face. I've already filled Sasha in on what is about to go down. My men know I don't normally deal in peddling flesh, but this mouse is the one exception I will make.

I chuckle inwardly at the thought of her coming face-to-face with her new owner. The man who was responsible for killing her entire family. It tickles me to think of how shocking the betrayal will be for her. Maybe he will keep her as a trophy. A testament to his power. He'll most likely kill her if I'm being honest. He won't need her around now that he has what he wants.

"Don't..." It's a soft plea from her lips when she realizes where we are. It's a small empty parking lot at the edge of the Strip. Neutral territory for handoffs like these. The entire area is monitored with CCTV, so if someone betrays another, it's caught on camera.

Too bad those cameras aren't working tonight.

I curse when Vanya's open palm connects with my face. I allow the blow, a small parting gift before I hand her over. When she goes for another, her claws bared this time, I snatch her wrist and yank her toward me.

"Come now, little mouse," I smirk as I pull her against me until my lips are at her ear. "Have you forgotten your use here? You are nothing more than a bargaining chip. A whore on her knees for her master."

"You can't—" she stutters, her voice pitching. "Please, this isn't you."

The corner of my mouth turns up in a sneer. "Isn't me?" I snarl as the car comes to a stop. "You don't know me, Vanya. You never have and you never will. Keep that in mind."

Sasha steps out of the car and opens Vanya's door. She screams at me as he drags her from her seat. In a few smooth motions, he has her arms zip-tied behind her before then dragging her along in front of him.

There is a fire in her eyes despite her sudden stillness. She grimaces when

she moves her arms. The ties are no doubt cutting into her delicate skin. She's plotting my death all right. It's her quiet moments that give me pause. Sure, she blusters and curses up a storm when she's mad, but in her quiet moments, I can see the gears turning.

I'm not the only one strategizing.

Too bad for her it won't matter what she comes up with.

She's done for.

An SUV is parked a few feet away. The doors open to reveal the man who paid top dollar to have Vanya as his whore.

Peter Spiridakos.

He's wearing an Armani-tailored gray suit, his oily hair slicked back to hide how it's thinning. The pretentious fucker is wearing an ascot of all things. Ignoring Vanya's sudden expletive outburst from behind, I smirk as Peter and his three brothers approach, eyes hard.

"You don't look so happy to see me, *ómorfi arravaniastikiá mou*," he smiles at her, his eyes glinting maliciously as they roam over the too-small dress I draped her in. Vanya curses at him in Greek as she fights against Sasha. Not that she will be able to move him. He has one arm firmly around her middle and a hand wrapped around her throat.

"I'm not your beautiful anything you *áthlio skylos*."

I can't help but chuckle at her calling him a wretched dog. She isn't wrong. Peter Spiridakos is the scum of the earth, just like her father. He sells in human flesh. Women, children, men. He doesn't discriminate about age or where they come from. As long as he can make a profit. Most of the families don't agree with the sex trade. The only reason Castellanos was allowed to remain amongst the five families was because of his power and influence in Vegas.

"Careful, Vanya," he snarls at being called a dog. "I can easily remove that tongue when we get home."

"I'd rather slit my wrists," she hisses back at him. This is beginning to become a headache. Sighing, I tilt my head toward Sasha who nods and places the hand around Vanya's throat over her mouth. She screams obscenities from behind his palm and kicks out at the bear of a man in outrage.

There's that fire I love so much.

Not love. It just makes my dick hard.

"Are we going to do this, Volkov?" Peter huffs impatiently, tapping his

foot. I fight the urge to shoot it. He thinks he can dictate my time. Fucker has no clue what I am capable of. “Everything’s been signed and delivered. Five million for the girl and the deeds to the Castellanos’s properties you wanted. They won’t go into effect until I’ve married the little *tsoúla*. But it’s all been signed and notarized.”

I don’t have time to analyze why my jaw clenches hearing him call her a slut.

“Good.” I smile at him but it’s predatory. “I’m glad we were able to do business together.”

I turn, giving him my back as I approach my little mouse. Her eyes are hard, fire burning in them, ready to consume me. She’s no longer fighting Sasha, but the daggers she is sending my way could pierce skin.

“Except—” I stop a few inches away from her and turn back toward Peter. “I’ve changed the conditions of my sale.”

A flash of anger passes over his face, his fists tightening at his sides.

“You can’t change the agreed-upon terms, Volkov,” one of the brothers speaks up. Costas or something. Second in line to the empire. A better choice in my opinion since he often spoke out about his brother’s involvement in sex trafficking.

I smirk. “But I can,” I assure them. “Especially since you never planned on marrying Vanya anyway. Isn’t that right? Castellanos didn’t sell you her hand in marriage, did he?”

Vanya’s gasp is muffled but I’m close enough to hear it. I don’t need to turn back to know her eyes are rounded, no doubt filled with tears at this new information.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Peter spits out, his face taking on a very unattractive red hue.

“But I do.” I grin. “It’s one of the items I found in Theo Castellanos’s safe this morning. A contract between you and him stating that he gets half of the sale you make from her. An intact virgin.” I throw my head back and laugh. “No wonder you were willing to pay five million for her. You would have gotten three times that amount on the market for her.”

“I’ll be getting ten times the amount for her,” he sneers. “What do you want, Volkov? More money? I’ll happily pay you for the bitch.”

Another laugh from me.

“I said you would have gotten that amount for her, Peter.” I step back until I’m directly in front of Vanya. My little mouse has stopped fighting but

now her body is shaking, trembling. Reaching under my coat, I drag out my .22 Ruger Wrangler black revolver. It has a nice long barrel, which is perfect for what I am about to do.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I can see the color drain from his face as he takes in my meaning, but he still must ask. Must confirm.

“You honestly didn’t believe she would last long under my roof as a virgin, did you?” I mock him as I slip my gun beneath the hem of her dress, between her legs. Vanya grunts and tries to move away from the cold metal against her warm thighs, but Sasha holds her steady. Tears fall from her eyes and onto my enforcer’s hand, but he doesn’t budge. He knows what has to be done.

“You’re lying,” Peter hisses. I smirk.

“Tell me, Peter.” I keep my voice nonchalant as I swipe the barrel over her pussy. With no underwear, she is completely exposed to the gun. “Who ordered the hit on the Castellanos? Was it you?”

Vanya releases a moan that blends in synchronized harmony with her sobs. She shakes her head back and forth as I let the tip of my gun play with her clit. I can see her from my peripheral, but my focus is still on Peter whose face has gone a mottled purple.

“I’ll fucking kill you,” he hisses at me, but he doesn’t draw his weapon. None of them do because they know that if they did, they would all be dead.

“She’s a good fuck,” I push him further. “Would have brought you in top dollar.” If there is one thing a Spiridakos doesn’t like losing out on, it’s profit, and Vanya would have been one of his biggest paydays ever.

“You think I care about one little slut?” he seethes. “I’ll find another to take her place.”

Chuckling, I shake my head as I dip the barrel inside Vanya’s pussy. She gasps and her body goes completely still.

“I think that having the last name Castellanos would have erased every single debt you had to the Samaras family back in the home country.” His eyes widen at my statement while his brothers turn to look at him in confusion. “How much do you owe them now for all those bad business ventures? Shit, probably not as much as you owe them for the whores and the gambling debt, am I right?” I laugh as if we are old pals sharing an inside joke.

“Fuck...” I groan as I pump the barrel of the gun in and out of Vanya a couple of times. “This just slides right in, she’s fucking soaked.”

“I’ll still get a better price for her than anyone else,” he snarls. “Virgin or not. She’s the last living Castellanos and there are those out there who will pay for the opportunity to own the mafia heir. Even if she is a fucking slut.”

Technically she isn’t, but I’m not correcting that since I am on a roll.

“Is that why you ordered the hit on her family?” I ask him as I thrust again and again. Vanya’s moans are echoing through the parking lot, her back arching as her orgasm nears. Peter is growing livid, and this is just what I need. He’s distracted by her. By his hate for what I’ve taken from her. By her reaction. “You wanted to make her more of a commodity.”

His face darkens but he doesn’t admit to it.

Because he didn’t do it.

Fuck.

Vanya screams her release around my gun, her orgasm crashing through her, but I don’t have time to focus on that. I wipe her juices off the barrel with the front of her dress and take a step toward Peter.

Peter’s eyes widen further, but he doesn’t make a move. His brothers step toward me, but the anger they see on my face causes them to pause. Good. They may have thought they were playing big when they came here, but the Spiridakos family is nothing but small fish in a shark pond.

“You didn’t do it, did you?” I snarl at him. He shakes his head but there is something in his eyes that causes me to pause. It isn’t remorse, but something else. “You didn’t order the hit, but you know who did.”

Peter’s mouth remains firmly closed and if he doesn’t open it soon, I’m going to make it so that the doctors have to wire his jaw shut for months.

“Peter,” Costas hisses at his brother. “Tell him.”

“Who the hell ordered the hit?” It’s not a roar but I inject enough lethality into it to have the man stepping back with fear glazing his eyes.

“I don’t have a name,” he tells me. “Just a title.”

He doesn’t elaborate. I wave an impatient hand at him. “And…”

His Adam’s apple bobs nervously. “The dark web has been throwing the name around for the last few years. They call them E-Ris and whoever it is, is a ghost. No one has seen them or heard their voice. Nothing.”

“E-Ris,” I roll the name over my tongue. Where have I heard it before? Sighing, I focus back on the man in front of me and smile widely. “Thank you for your cooperation. I’ll be sure to send your brothers an invite to my and Vanya’s wedding. Too bad you won’t be alive to see it.”

Then I raise my gun and fire.

Eighteen



The man has lost his mind. He's gone off the rails. His marbles are all over the floor. He's had too many hits to the head because I'm pretty sure the fucker told Peter he is going to marry me right before he shot him.

Not likely.

He's going to have to drag me down the aisle kicking and screaming before I say 'I do' in front of a priest. I'm more likely to say it over his fucking deathbed at this point.

The man had planned to shove me into Peter's waiting arms like I was some possession he could just pawn off for cash. Adrian is nothing more than a deceitful coward. A spider who ensnares you in his nest with sweet promises before sucking the life out of you.

Now he's talking idly with the behemoth of a driver from the passenger seat, scrolling on his fucking phone as if he didn't just whip out his Judas personality.

Sighing, I rest my chin on my hand as I stare out the window and watch the lights of the Strip whip by. Had my father honestly given me to Peter so the rat bastard could sell me for a bride's price? I didn't need to be involved in my father's business to know what happens to mafia princesses sold on the black market. My father's greatest enemies would have bought me, raped me, and tortured me, before disposing of my broken body and spirit.

My gaze wanders to Adrian.

I still can't believe he shot Peter in cold blood. Part of me wonders why he did it. Peter isn't a threat to his empire. The world is a better place without him, though. Peter Spiridakos was a fucking monster. Even more than Adrian, whose games of humiliation and threats are nothing like what Peter

has done to me.

A sob works its way up my throat at what Adrian revealed.

“Is it true?” I’m ashamed of how my voice trembles. “About the contract?”

“Why?” he mocks with a sneer. “Were you hoping Peter was your prince charming?”

I snort. “He was more of a monster than you.”

A feral grin stretches across Adrian’s face. “Oh, little mouse,” he coos. “I assure you he was not.”

But I know he was. Adrian is a monster, there is no doubt about that, but Peter is something worse. Humiliation and degradation have nothing on what Peter had done to me. I tried to tell my parents, but my mother simply told me I shouldn’t anger him. My father told me it is a wife’s place to be obedient.

That was the day I lost any respect for them. My grandfather was the only one who had fought on my behalf, but he hadn’t been the boss man any longer. His words fell on deaf ears, just like my pleas.

“I won’t marry you,” I whisper but it’s loud enough for him to hear. He laughs but it’s cold and heartless. Just like him.

“Should I put you back up for bid?” he asks. “I had quite a few interested offers. None as good as Spiridakos, but I’m not worried about that. Hell, we can turn around now, and I can hand you over to the brothers instead. I’m sure they will take good care of you.” Except they wouldn’t. I am the reason their brother is dead. No doubt, they will sell me just like Peter planned to.

“That’s what I thought,” Adrian mocks when I remain silent. He looks back at me and licks his lips. “I’m going to enjoy fucking you.”

“Come near me again and I’ll bite your dick off,” I spit.

Another smirk. “Then I’ll tie you to the bed and you can watch me fuck another woman, Vanya. It’s all the same to me.”

I flinch at his words, and he doesn’t miss it. “Why marry me? You were planning on selling me not that long ago. I thought you wanted to get rid of all Castellanos scum?”

“Because, little wife, someone is pulling the strings around us, and I don’t take kindly to those who try to puppet me.” He scowls, his face contorting with rage. “Whoever organized the hit on your family isn’t going to stop with them. They’ll come after all of us, and I won’t stand by and let my empire crumble.” He shrugs. “Plus, I marry you and I inherit everything your family

left behind.”

“You never planned on handing me over, did you?” It shouldn’t shock me. Adrian Volkov is always thinking ten steps ahead. He’s always manipulating, moving the pawns around on the board to fit his need, sacrificing them for his own personal gain.

The grin that spreads across his face tells me everything I need to know. He has been using me as nothing more than a pawn in his twisted game. What he doesn’t realize is that I am more than just a pawn. I’m the motherfucking queen.

Nineteen



So much for dinner.

Rumbling eases from my stomach as we return to Adrian's home. My palms are sweaty but running them along the form-fitting dress does nothing but worsen the anxiety bubbling inside of me. I'm scared and starving, and the combination is making me sick. I step out of the ridiculous shoes he put me in as I enter the foyer sighing with relief when my sore feet hit the carpeted floor.

"Go take a shower and get out of that stupid dress," Adrian orders, his voice dripping with condescension as if I was the one who chose it. "Then, come down for dinner."

I grumble under my breath as I stalk past him. The events of the day are beginning to wear on me. My adrenaline is crashing, the remnants of my orgasm on his gun still surging through me. I can feel my cheeks heat remembering how I got off on it. The last thing I want to do is have dinner with his crazy ass.

A sudden gasp falls from my lips when he grips the back of my neck pulling me back toward him. I crash into his hard muscular chest. Placing my hands on his chest I attempt to push away, but he tightens his hold on me to the point of pain.

"Do you want to be a big girl and tell me what you are grumbling about?" he asks. My jaw clenches tighter as I swallow back the rising fear that burrows up my throat. I've come to learn something in my time with Adrian. He's a demon that feeds on fear and the more you show it, the more power he has over you.

Straightening my shoulder the best I can with the hold he has on me, I

take a long breath, staring him straight in the eyes, and tell him, “Go to hell, Adrian.”

He remains unmoving, unblinking.

Then he laughs.

“Don't worry, dear wife.” He smiles down predatorily at me. “If I go to hell, I'll take you with me. Now be a good little girl and go up to your room and change. You have thirty minutes before I come up and get you and if I do...” He chuckles darkly. “You won't enjoy the consequences like you did earlier.”

I turn crimson at the reminder of what he'd done earlier with his gun. How fucked up do you have to be to like something like that? Immensely, is the answer to that. I am immensely messed up and I can't even fully blame it on my childhood. There is something about this man and the way he takes control that has me submitting to things I never would have in my wildest dreams.

Or in this case nightmare.

“Fine,” I grit out. “Whatever you want, Adrian. There's nothing left that you could take from me, anyway.”

Another predatory smile. I need to learn to keep my mouth shut. Knowing Adrian, he'll see it as a challenge.

“Oh, my little mouse,” he susurrates seductively. “There is always so much more that I can take.”

He releases me from his hold, causing me to stumble slightly. I give him a jerky nod, tears pushing at the back of my eyes as they take him in. This monster. This devil. I should never have come here because now I'm under the thrall of a man without a conscience or a beating heart. Without a second glance, I turn and make my way up the stairs to his bedroom.

Our bedroom.

Lilacs.

Gardenias.

Evergreen.

The familiar words calm my racing heart but do little to ease the ache or the confusion. I can't help but want this man—my late best friend's husband. A man who only uses me for degradation and humiliation and who only sees me as a tool that he can barter with and use. He doesn't care about marrying me. All he cares about is what I can bring him. My family's fortune and businesses.

What's to stop him from killing me the moment I sign the papers declaring myself his wife?

Will he fuck me and then kill me? Or will he just kill me because he doesn't want to waste his time? I take a deep breath as I close the bedroom door behind me and strip off the small piece of fabric he declared was a dress. The heels make their way straight into the bathroom trash without a second thought.

Fog immediately engulfs the bathroom when I turn the knob on the shower as hot as it will go. Maybe I can wash the humiliation down the drain because I'm pretty sure my pride and dignity are already down there. I could use a therapist right now or even a friend, but I have neither. Stepping into the shower and under the hot spray I let the water wash away the dirt and grime of the day.

My mind wanders back to the tomb I saw inside the mausoleum, and I wonder if it's something that I should mention to Adrian. Would he even care? I spend the next half an hour contemplating what to do next. If I push back against the marriage, I do not doubt that Adrian will keep me prisoner here, but maybe, just maybe, if I show him that I am submissive enough he will allow me some freedom. Freedoms which I can use to find out what it is my family was hiding.

When I step out of the shower and back into the room he's there. Dressed in a pair of boxers and nothing else. He's leaned back against the headboard on the side nearest the door. Was he sleeping here tonight? If he is, I don't know how to deal with that. Since my arrival, he hasn't once slept in his own bed.

"Stop thinking. You look constipated," he drawls. He has a book open in front of him and when he catches sight of me exiting the bathroom, he turns down the page corner and closes it, setting it on the nightstand next to him. "Come lay down, little mouse. It's been a long day and I'm not in the mood to spar with you again."

I swallow hard, frozen as I stare at him.

"What about dinner?" I ask. He cocks his head toward the nightstand on my side of the bed. There on the tray sits a sandwich and a bottle of water.

"I had Anna bring you something up here," he tells me. "That neither of us is in the mood to sit down at the dining room table tonight."

I walk around to the other side of the bed, gingerly perching myself on the edge. It's odd being in his presence. Adrian emanates waves of power and

assuredness that seem to disrupt the air around me causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand at attention. Every neuron in my body is awake and alive. My fight-or-flight instincts are at the forefront of my mind. I'm not going to lie, the urge to run away is far greater than the urge to fight.

Because fighting him means breaking down my defenses and leaving myself vulnerable to his attack. Adrian isn't just a predator, he's a hunter, looking for weakness in those around him so that he can take advantage.

Picking up the sandwich I take a bite and then another. Soon the whole thing is devoured and the nausea I felt slowly begins to ebb away. I hadn't realized how famished I truly was. Then again, trauma will do that to a person.

Lifting the covers, I crawl underneath and lay on my side with my back to him. Maybe if I ignore him, he'll go away. At first, it seems as if he won't make a fuss, but then strong arms wrap themselves around me pulling me toward him. I yelp and flail my hands and feet. He tucks me into his side, wrapping an arm around my waist and forcing me to settle my head on his chest. His other hand comes around to grab mine and threads our fingers together. From the outside looking in it seems as if we are the perfect couple, but if I know one thing, there's no such thing as perfect but only one person holds all the power.

“I—” My mouth is hot and dry making it hard to form words. I've never slept beside another man before. Growing up my parents had always been diligent in their efforts to keep me pure for my wedding day. Not that I hadn't tried to lose the cherry between my legs that somehow made me useful. I was fifteen when I first let a boy kiss me. His name was Johnny and he lived down the street. One week later I was attending his funeral after he'd been hit by a car. I'd watched it happen from the passenger seat, powerless to stop my father's second-in-command from murdering him.

It was a kiss.

A simple, innocent kiss.

And now here I am lying next to the most powerful man in Nevada, but it isn't because he loves me. Hell, I wonder if he even finds me attractive. No, the only reason he has an arm wrapped around me now is because he knows it sets me off guard. And just another chess piece. A pawn. Just like I've been my entire life.

“Stop thinking so hard, little wife,” he murmurs, momentarily unraveling his fingers from mine to turn off the light. Darkness settles over us and the

only sound around us is our mingled breaths and our beating hearts. And somehow, even though I'm snuggled against the monster, it feels like the safest place in the world.

And that's a problem for future Vanya to deal with.

And future therapy bills.

Twenty



Reality crashes down around me as my alarm drags me from the safety of my dreams. The one place the cruelty of the world hasn't touched. Yet. Given time, I'm sure my dreams will become just as hellish as my reality.

I roll over and hit the alarm on the clock that Adrian keeps on the nightstand. I've been setting it religiously so that I can enjoy the early morning sun in the garden with my coffee and breakfast. There is something peaceful about that place. A gentle reprieve from a stodgy, cold, and unfeeling house.

Dressing in a simple pair of flowy black cotton pants and a white crop top, I gather my long hair into a messy bun and head down the stairs. It's the weekend, but Adrian is often gone, and that is a breath of relief that I need.

My mind is still reeling over last night when he slept beside me, holding me to his warm, muscular body as if I was something precious.

Pfft.

Definitely my mind conjuring up imaginations due to all the trauma I have suffered. I am nothing, nor will I ever be, something special to Adrian Volkov.

Then again—he didn't sell me like he made me believe.

Why? When had he decided that I was more valuable to him if he didn't sell me? Was it when he came across the contract he'd told Peter about? The one where my own father sold me like a cow at auction. Or was it a spur-of-the-moment decision?

No use dwelling on that at the moment. Trying to get an audience with his majesty is pretty much useless and I doubt he'll be joining me in bed again. Why does the thought of that make my heart clench?

Ugh, stupid body. It's been deprived of affection for so long that it clings to Adrian's actions like a bad date. *News flash—he's no better than Peter. He's a monster. He uses my body like a fucking toy. Stop being so fucking wanton for him.*

Not that it gets the message. My brain and body are at war with one another over how he makes us feel. Nothing Adrian has done has been cruel. Humiliating? Check. Depraved? Sure. But he hasn't hurt or struck me outside of the spankings that stung but also made me wet and wanting for more.

I shut the door to the bedroom and make my way down the stairs, following the smell of sizzling bacon and fresh coffee. That's weird. Anna doesn't usually make a full breakfast for me since I rarely eat it. Usually, she bakes a few scones or muffins. Something I can easily take out to the garden. Today, however, I will welcome the plate of bacon along with whatever else she wants to pile on.

The sandwich last night was filling at the time, but I hadn't eaten much else yesterday, completely having skipped lunch, so a full breakfast will be welcome. I want to do some more exploring of the house. I've done very little in that regard because I've been limited to the garden and the kitchen, but if the Neanderthal is going to make me marry him, I'm not going to be a prisoner any longer. I won't be some trophy wife that is locked up like Rapunzel.

Opening the swinging door to the kitchen, I pause in the doorway when I find Adrian standing over the stove, cracking eggs into a frying pan. My stomach clenches at the sight of him wearing a stretched black t-shirt and a pair of gray sweatpants that hang low on his hips. I've never seen him so dressed down. My cheeks heat. *Except when he's been in nothing but a towel or his boxers in the bedroom.*

"Stop staring," his rough voice commands. "It's rude."

I bite my lip and toe the ground at having been caught ogling the man I'm supposed to hate.

"Where's Anna?" I ask curiously, my eyes roaming the kitchen for any sign of her.

"Today is her day off," he explains, looking over his shoulder at me. "I'm not a monster. I do allow my staff to have downtime."

My father rarely allowed that. It was something he could get away with because most of the staff worked for him because of some debt they owed. There were very few people who had the freedom to come and go.

“That’s debatable,” I mumble beneath my breath. Adrian shoots me a warning look over his shoulder. His hair is loose, and uncombed. A few stray pieces wisp over his forehead as his blue eyes burrow into mine. He almost looks normal. Human.

I giggle to myself. Domesticated.

“Sit your ass down, Vanya,” he growls, but there is very little heat to it. Not wanting to break whatever spell is currently cast over the beast in front of me that is making him nearly docile, I take a seat at the small, rounded table in the breakfast nook where the staff normally eat. A few moments later he’s turning off the burner, plating the eggs, and setting one of them down in front of me.

The heavenly smell envelopes me and I grab my fork to dig in. My stomach growls as I take the first bite of the scrumptious scrambled eggs. They are light and fluffy, and the bacon is mouth-wateringly crisp. I hear the refrigerator door open and close. Adrian sets a glass of orange juice in front of me before taking his own seat across the table.

Trying my best to ignore the beastly man in front of me, I focus on my breakfast. Ada never mentioned that he could cook. Then again, she never really spoke about him when we were together.

It doesn’t take long for me to finish the plate. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until the food was sitting right in front of me. I go to pick up my plate, but Adrian stops me.

“Don’t worry about that now,” he tells me. “Tell me—” he pulls out his phone and turns it toward me. “Do you know this woman?”

I squint my eyes as I look down at the screen. The photo is mildly blurry, but I can make out the older, gray-haired woman sitting across from Ada at some café.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “I’ve never seen her before.” His eyes narrow on me.

“Are you sure?” he asks again. “You’ve never run into her? Ada never introduced you?”

“Introduced me?” I question, tilting my head slightly in confusion. “Who would she introduce me to? Ada may have been allowed to run errands off the property, but she was never allowed to bring anyone back. As far as I know, she had to take a guard everywhere she went, too.”

“Why?”

“My father never trusted any of the staff,” I say before taking a sip of

orange juice. Fresh squeezed. “Most of the staff, like Ada’s mother, owed him a debt. They didn’t work for him willingly.” I look down at the photo again.

“This is after she got engaged to you,” I point out. “She cut her hair just before the wedding.” Adrian picks up the phone and studies the photo. Something odd crosses his face but I can’t decipher what it is.

“Ada wasn’t a maid in your house,” he insists. His tone grows frustrated, jaw clenching. “She said her mother was friends with yours. That your parents were strict about who you spent time with.”

Why would Ada say that? Did she lie to Adrian because she believed that if he knew she was a maid he wouldn’t love her? That didn’t make any sense. I’d told him the truth back at my family’s home. He was obviously still having trouble accepting what I had told him as the truth.

Why would I lie?

“Who is she?” I ask tentatively. “The woman in the photo?”

Adrian grunts, taking his last bite of eggs. “That is the woman Ada introduced as her mother.”

Standing, he takes both our plates to the sink and comes back for the glasses. I am still trying to wrap my head around why Ada would lie. Then again, in the end, there were a lot of things that I didn’t know about Ada. She kept so many secrets from me. Grew distant and cold. I’d thought it had been because of her marriage to Adrian, but when I look back, it began so much sooner.

“Come,” he tells me. “We have a lot to do today to prepare.”

I stand, pushing my chair in, and turn to face him. “Prepare for what?” There is a sinking feeling in my chest that I already know what he is about to say.

“For our wedding.”

Nailed it.

“Isn’t it a little soon?” I’m hoping he’ll see reason. “Why the rush?”

He smirks, dark and devilish. I’m going to need so much therapy to sort through the way my body reacts to him. He steps forward until we’re chest to chest. He’s so close, it’s suffocating. My lungs seize inside of my rib cage and my heart is thumping wildly out of control. Adrian captures my chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing me to stare up at him. We’re so close that the angle causes the muscles at the back of my neck to strain.

I relish the pain. A reminder that it is all he is capable of.

Pain and destruction.

“The sooner we are married, malen’kaya mysh’...” he growls seductively, leaning in to nip at my earlobe. Tingling sensations light up my nether regions. So much therapy. So much. I’m going to be drowning in them by the time this is all over. If I live that long. “The sooner I can sink my cock into that tight virgin pussy of yours.”

Yep. Death by internal combustion.

Twenty-One



Vanya's cheeks are still heated from my earlier comments as I lead her to the basement that houses my medical team. She's going to be turning red for an entirely different reason here in a few seconds. I'm even betting on whether or not she takes a swing at me. No matter. It won't change the outcome of what has to be done.

If anything, she should be grateful that I am keeping such a close eye on her. Hell, she should feel treasured. I never even did this for my late wife. Her comings and goings were her business. Not mine. Everything is different with the Greek princess. Obsession burns in my veins whenever she is out of my sight. When I see her, when she's in my presence, the need to possess her lights a fire in my gut that can't be ignored.

It's why I couldn't give her away.

Well, it's one of the reasons.

"Where are we going?" she asks, her voice unsteady as I pull her along behind me. Jesus, she is always so full of fucking questions. It's a miracle I didn't hand her over. Normally the constant questioning would annoy me. I've killed men for constantly pestering me with inane chatter but when it comes to her, I can't help but feel a little less homicidal.

A little.

"Always questioning," I sneer. "Just do as I say and follow me." I hear her huff behind me, and I smile. She doesn't like being kept in the dark.

We continue in silence until I open the door to the small medical bay that keeps my men and me from taking unnecessary trips to the hospital. I may own most of Vegas but so do my enemies. Not every cop or doctor is on my payroll. All it would take is one paid-off doctor or nurse to slip something

into an IV, make a wrong cut on the operating table, and I'd be done for. One of my men would be done for.

I won't stand for that.

"Boss," Eric greets me as we walk into the open space. It's state of the art. Whether it's the flu, scrapes, diabetes, delivery, you name it, Dr. Madsen has the tools for it. For the most part, he makes house calls for the families of my men. That way none of the family members have to travel here and be in my space unnecessarily. We started that a couple of years ago when one of my men's wives brought her kid in for breaking his finger while one of my men lay spread out on the table with a gunshot wound.

The kid was fascinated. The mother was not.

"Everything ready?" I ask him as I tighten my grip on her wrist. I don't want her to make a run for it. Not that she will get very far. He nods his head and motions for Jonah, his assistant, to roll a tray to the side of one of the examination lounges. I don't miss Jonah's narrowed eyes, but I ignore it. The man has always had a bad attitude. I'm not sure why Eric puts up with him honestly.

"We're all set." His gaze falls on Vanya. "Please come sit over here, Miss Castellanos. I assure you this won't take long."

She pulls back against my hold as predicted, eyes widening. "What won't take long?"

My grip on her doesn't waver as I pull her into my side and lead her struggling form over to the good doctor. "Eric here is going to give you a shot," I tell her. "You will barely feel it." She shakes her head.

"Not until you tell me what it is," she hisses at me, still fighting.

"A tracking device," I deadpan as I force her to sit.

"Fuck you." She lunges to the side, spilling the contents of the tray, sending them clanging to the ground. Her foot shoots out to connect with Eric's thigh. He winces but otherwise remains steadfast.

"Enough, Vanya," I bark, pinning her to the lounge. But she doesn't stop. Her movements grow frantic, and she claws and bites at anything that comes close to her.

Fuck, her teeth are sharp, I think as they bear down on my arm. Doing what needs to be done, I straddle her waist on the lounge. I grasp both her wrists in my left hand and lean over her until her arms are stretched above her head. My free hand comes down on the side of her face, forcing her to look to one side. She's a firecracker and it takes nearly all my strength to keep her

that way until Eric manages to pop the tracker under a layer of sub-dermal skin at the back of her neck.

Vanya whimpers and stills but I don't ease up.

When Eric is done, he slides the needle from her neck and places a small band-aid over the insertion site. "It should already be transmitting," he tells me as he backs away to clean up the mess my soon-to-be wife created in his pristine working environment. He hates messes.

"Thank you, Eric," I say as I release Vanya from my hold. Surprise hits me when her tiny fist connects with the side of my face. Iron floods my mouth with a bitter taste.

"How fucking dare you," she screams at me. Just as I predicted. Fiery and red-faced. "You sorry sack of shit. You fucking bastard, motherfucking asshole. Just who do you think you are?"

I take a deep breath, centering myself, because if I don't, I'm going to fuck her right here and now to show her who the boss is.

Motherfucking me.

"Vanya," I warn her. It's useless. Her tirade of name-calling is just getting started. Reaching out, I snatch a handful of her dark curls in my fist and yank her toward me. Her tiny fists pummel against my chest uselessly. Like a butterfly in a tornado not ready to be swept away by the winds.

"Let go of me you brute," she cries, tears streaming down her face. "Why would you do that? How could you...?" Her rant ends in sobs, her fists losing power as she tires herself out. I wait for her to settle and the ire to leave her body. It doesn't take long and soon she becomes quiet in my hold. She snuffles, eyes downcast as she struggles to regulate her breathing again. I can still hear the little hiccups that are left behind after her tantrum.

It shouldn't bother me, her breakdown, but it does. I wonder about her strong reaction. I expected her to be angry. To curse me. But this is something different. Darker. Deeper. What hidden trauma lies in the depths of her soul just waiting for me to uncover? I lick my lips in anticipation of peeling this princess back layer by layer until I reach her hot, juicy center.

"Look at me, Vanya," I order her. She doesn't obey. Shocker really. Tightening my hold on her hair, I force her head up. Her hazel eyes stare up at me dolefully, wetness makes the golden flakes in her irises shine. Fuck she's beautiful.

"Why?" she snuffles. "Why would you do that to me?"

"You are mine, little mouse," I tell her truthfully. There is no use lying to

her. “My possession. And I keep track of what I own.”

“I’m not a possession for you to own, Adrian,” she hisses at me, but it’s tinged with sadness. It’s a meeting of fire and ice. A beautiful juxtaposition of hot and cold. One thing I’ve noticed about Vanya is how expressive she is. She doesn’t hide much behind a mask. If she hides anything at all. Unlike Ada, who was a constant bundle of secrets. A contrast to whom I believed her to be.

My deceitful late wife once wrote me letters long before we married. We’d started it in secret, never once meeting face-to-face until fate gave us no other choice. I took her away from everything, showering her with love, but she never wanted that. The first year of our marriage I put work on the back burner to try and spend quality time with one another, but she had luncheons and dinners with charity committees. She spent nights out with friends or her mother.

The woman she pretended was her mother.

Another lie.

Another knife in my back.

She was nothing like the woman in the letters that I had fallen in love with. It had all been a lie from the very beginning. I’d been so blinded by her that I nearly lost my entire empire. My father bled for this empire. He died for the men under his command and there is no way in hell I will let anyone take it away from me.

“You are exactly that, my little *zhena*,” I assure her, a seductive purr to my tone. “I own everything. Your pussy. Your ass. Every orgasm you have. Every tear. It’s all mine.”

She stared up at me, mouth agape, taking in my words. I don’t give her time to process or fight back. I simply remove my hand from her hair, moving it to her hand, and pull her along after me.

“No more arguing, Vanya,” I warn her as I hurry us out of the room. “Now come along quietly. We’re already late.”

She snorts derisively. “Going to take me to another parking lot to sell me?”

“Not at all.” I throw a wicked smile. “We’re going wedding dress shopping.”

Twenty-Two



This is hell.

It's got to be or else I did something very wrong in my past life. Shit. Was I some kind of villain in my past life? Maybe I was Mata Hari in my previous life. That will explain all the shitty luck I have. Shitty luck is what I am blaming for ending up in a lush bridal shop in one of Adrian's premier hotels. My gracious fiancé had left me standing awkwardly in the doorway of the shop after barely introducing me to his family.

You heard that right.

The devil has a fucking family.

"I just love planning weddings," Yelena beams at me from beneath her burgundy-colored, wide-brim hat that was amazingly the same exact shade as her sheath dress. I would have suspected that Adrian had hired actors to play his family except it is hard to dispel how eerily alike they all look with their fair skin, deep blue eyes, and soft Russian accents.

Adrian's own Russian lilt is soft, but still prominent enough to recognize while his sister Yelena's accent is barely noticeable except in a few words.

"It's good to finally be included," her mother sniffs somewhat haughtily, her chin tilting up, eyes narrowed down at me. She's a good two inches taller in her stenciled Louboutins and unlike her children, her accent is thick and intimidating.

Now I see where Adrian gets his murderous looks from.

"Yeah," Yelena sighs dejectedly. "It was disappointing that Ada didn't include us in any of her plans. She said you wouldn't feel comfortable around us because of our family's history." I furrow my brow. I was never involved in any of Ada's wedding preparation. All she did was hand me a dress and

shoes the day of and told me where to stand. I barely saw her after that.

“I never did anything for Ada’s wedding,” I tell them honestly. Maybe they are confused. “Maybe she brought someone else?”

“Unless there is another Vanya Castellanos living out there, I doubt it,” the mother, Svetlana, insists. “I may be old, but I’m not senile.”

Fortunately, the bridal consultant interrupts before any of us could go on. I’m not in the mood to argue with a woman who looks as if she came straight out of the Valkyrie homeland. I’m not sure how old she is, but I’m pretty sure no one else her age looks as fit as she does. I’m actually unsure of who I fear more. Adrian or his mom.

Soon the conversation is forgotten, and I am beckoned into the shop with gusto by Mary, the owner. We are all handed glasses of champagne and told to browse the dresses to our heart’s content and let them know if we need anything. Apparently, the shop is closed for the day just for us.

Oh, goody.

Anton stands off to one side, his body facing toward the window while another man stands facing inward. I recognize him as the burly asshole who held me while Adrian nearly fucked me with his gun. I say nearly only because it had been too shallow to actually penetrate the important bits. I’m sure my dearly beloved, soon-to-be husband thinks he’s going to be the one to rid me of my cherry. Well, he can think again.

Arrogant asshole.

“You’re going to be a beautiful bride,” Yelena grins at me while the shop attendant measures every inch of my body.

“Thanks,” I murmur. Are they aware that this isn’t a marriage of choice? Are they involved in that side of Adrian’s life? What did he tell them?

“What kind of dress are you looking for today?” the attendant, Junie, asks.

“Umm, something simple but classy, I guess,” I tell her nervously. “I’m really into the Bohemian lace look.” Junie nods her head and smiles at me.

“Great.” She beams. “I’ll go search some styles out for you and we can go from there. How does that sound?”

I tell her it sounds great and minutes later I find myself down to my underwear and slipping on dress after dress. It only takes a few before my eyes land on the perfect one.

“This is such a good choice,” Yelena whispers when I pick it out from the rack. “Justin Alexander is such an up-and-coming designer. And this is the

perfect desert wedding look.”

She’s right. The dress is everything I imagined my dress to look like when I’d been a little girl dreaming of her prince charming and happily ever after. A piece of me wants to ignore it and go with something else. Something less like my dream because the thought of wearing it in this tainted union seems wrong.

But I can’t seem to let it go.

Might as well get my fairytale wedding if I’m not going to get my fairytale marriage.

Adrian isn’t a prince charming. He’s more of a black knight. A dark king. His moves are precise and calculating, but the moves of the knight are limited, and the king has to be protected. He’ll soon learn that the queen is who dominates the board.

I’m lost in my thoughts as I step out of the dressing room. I hadn’t even bothered to look in the mirror of the dressing room, I’d just stepped out onto the dais where Yelena and Svetlana were waiting.

“You look beautiful, dear,” his mother smiles gently at me, but on her face, it is the smile of a shark. A predator.

Taking a long breath, I turn and face the wall of mirrors behind me.

Shit. This dress is stunning on me.

The pale ivory of the material softens my fair skin. It’s a long, chapel train A-line with a lace bodice that plunges between my breasts. The lace coasts up my collarbones to the edges of my shoulders. The sleeves are long, the lace edges peeking out just over the top of my wrists. The top half of the dress blends seamlessly in with a chiffon skirt that trails out behind me. There are small cutouts of lace running down the back, along the train, giving it a subtle tie-in with the bodice. The back is wide open, exposing my pale flesh.

Junie comes over with a rose gold necklace that drops between my sternum and down my spine. It’s brilliant and everything I ever wanted.

“I love it on you!” Yelena squeals. “Adrian is going to drop dead at the sight of you.”

“One can only hope,” I grumble beneath my breath, but Yelena hears this and giggles while Junie stares at me with rounded eyes.

“Just make sure it’s after you say I do, so you get the assets.” Yelena winks at me and laughs. Even Svetlana cracks a smile that doesn’t appear menacing. Poor Junie must think we’re a bunch of gold-digging psychos.

“Come on. Let’s go find you some shoes and stuff.”

Yelena bounces off with her third glass of champagne while I return to the dressing room and strip off the dress. It’s even the perfect size. At least that is one thing I won’t have to worry about. Adrian hasn’t exactly been open to when the wedding date is supposed to be, so I am working in the dark. Svetlana seems as if she wants to help. Maybe I will let her choose the venue and caterer. She probably knows more than I do about the when.

The door to the shop chimes as I step back out into the main room, a glass of red wine in my hand. I’ve never liked champagne. Too bubbly and sweet for my taste. I look over to see a blonde bombshell of a woman strutting into the shop as if she owns it, a large briefcase in one hand, cell phone in the other.

“Sorry, I’m late.” She doesn’t look up from her cell phone when she offers a half-ass apology to the room. Whoever she is, she looks bored and inconvenienced. Does she work here? Looking up from her phone, she spots Anton by the door and gives him a coquettish smile. One that drips seduction. “Anton,” she practically purrs at him.

Anton barely spares her a glance before turning back to stare out the shop windows. “Celia.”

The woman, Celia, sneers at his dismissal but quickly masks it with a professional smile.

“Celia,” Svetlana stands from the couch and approaches the woman. “Adrian didn’t tell us you were coming.” Brr did someone ask for ice because Adrian’s mother’s voice is nearly frozen as she addresses the newcomer.

The woman’s smile is brittle as she faces Svetlana. Where have I seen her before? She looks eerily familiar and yet, I can’t seem to place her.

“Adrian called this morning,” she says, setting her briefcase down on one of the tables that are dotted around the room. “Said he wants the very best for his new acquisition.” Ouch. Adrian told her I am an acquisition? Then again, he did call me his possession this morning. Acquisition isn’t far off from that.

“I’m not sure how he thinks the outfits’ whore can help.” Celia’s already bitter smile slips at Svetlana’s words. “The only thing my son has ever said you were good for was being on your knees for his men.”

Snap! That’s where I’ve seen her before. The day I was shot she was the one getting railed by one of the guards while she sucked Adrian... now I’m queasy. Celia must see something in my face because she smirks at me. It’s probably because of how green I suddenly look. As far as I know, there

hasn't been another party like the one I witnessed when I first arrived at Adrian's doorstep. That doesn't mean he hasn't gone to other ones like it.

With her.

It shouldn't bother me that he has gone off to have his dick sucked, but it does. True, he just decided we would marry last night, a night he was in his bed with me, but for some reason, the thought of him spending all those nights before with her or someone like her turns my stomach.

Unaware of the tension between us, Junie comes up and asks me if there is anything else I would like to look at before she takes everything up to the checkout.

"Miss Castellanos already has a dress waiting for her here," Celia tells Junie who looks confused.

"I'm sorry?" Junie looks between us. "I don't have an order for Miss Castellanos in the back."

Celia sneers at the woman. "It's under Adrian Volkov," she informs the assistant. "The one who owns the store? He called early this morning to purchase the Valentino."

Junie's mouth gapes open and her cheeks flush red. "I'm sorry," she stammers. "I wasn't aware that dress was intended for this party."

"Apparently." Celia narrows her eyes at Junie when the woman doesn't move. "Go and get it. I don't have all day." The assistant startles before scurrying off to grab whatever heinous dress the lord of the manor picked out for me.

"I've already picked a dress," I tell her.

Celia's gaze zeroes in on me, her face turned up in distaste. "I don't care what you picked out, Miss Castellanos," she hisses. "You'll wear what's expected of you."

This bitch.

"Here it is," Junie pants as she comes to a stop in front of us, a large garish ballroom dress in her arms.

Oh hell no.

Hideous doesn't even begin to describe the monstrosity in Junie's arms. It's large with enough tulle to decorate a barge. The entire bodice is lined with enough Swarovski crystals that it could be seen from the international space station.

"Yeah," I sigh with a shake of my head. "I won't be wearing that."

Celia takes a threatening step forward. "This is what Adrian wants his

little princess to wear,” she growls. “So, you’ll wear it with a smile, or you won’t like the consequences.”

Who is she to think she can threaten me? She’s nothing but a pawn on a chessboard.

And I’m the motherfucking queen.

I look to Junie. “Is this the only one in the store in my size?” I ask her. Confused, Junie nods. “And it’s already bought and paid for?” Another nod.

Good.

“Sorry about this,” I tell Junie before I dump the contents of my wine glass down the front of the dress and watch as the red soaks into the white fabric. Like blood on virgin snow. Somehow it fits.

“You little bitch,” Celia growls as she lunges for me. I see the sloppy move coming from a mile ahead. Reaching my hand out, I snatch the pair of scissors Junie has in her small apron around her waist. My free hand grips the wrist of Celia’s outstretched hand and twists hard to the side. She’s bent down at an awkward angle. Just enough so that I can easily slide the blade of the scissors against her neck.

“Wanna say that again?” I question her, teeth bared.

“Let me go.” She pulls uselessly against me. I tighten my hold. “Anton!” Useless cries. Anton barely looks over when she screams his name before turning back to the window. He knows the score.

“Here’s what’s going to happen, Celia,” I lay out for her. “You’re going to grab your little briefcase and walk the hell out of this store without so much as a backward glance or a muttered sigh. Then, I never want to see your face again, because if I do, I’ll take a nice pair of blunt scissors to those fake lips of yours. And those fake eyelashes. Those horrible extensions and whatever the hell you want to call what’s on your chest, because those sure as hell aren’t breasts. Do you understand me?”

“I’ll tell Adrian about this,” she spews. I laugh.

“Go right ahead.” I shrug a shoulder in nonchalance. “Tell him his wife says hello. Now, come at me again and you won’t like the consequences.”

“What do you think you can do, little girl?”

Well, she did ask. In one swift movement, I swing the scissors away from her neck and back behind her head. Celia winces, but an audible sigh releases moments later when she realizes she isn’t in any pain. Until she notices what she lost.

Her long blonde hair is pooled at her feet, wisps of hair still falling

around her. Tears fall silently down her cheeks. I should feel some sort of remorse, but there is nothing but sweet satisfaction. I lean to whisper in her ear.

“Remember how easily that can be your throat next time you think you can insult me,” I whisper. “My husband isn’t the only one to be feared, sweetheart. Keep that in mind.”

I release her then, letting her stumble back. She catches herself, her throat visibly bobbing before she makes a run for the door, her briefcase forgotten. Well, that takes care of that. Folding the scissors back together, I turn and tuck them back into Junie’s apron. Her eyes are wide, mouth open as she stares at me. In shock? Horror? It will suck if she is afraid of me now, but there is nothing I can do about that.

Clearing my throat, I go to pick up my purse from the couch.

“Dispose of that dress, please,” Svetlana regally tells Junie. “We’ll take everything she picked out on her own today. Someone will come to collect them later this afternoon. Make sure to bill for any damages and cleaning.”

Junie nods her head like a bobble doll, her eyes still fixed on me.

Yelena chuckles and threads her arm through mine, leading me toward the door. “That was the most entertaining thing I have seen in ages,” she giggles. “I like you.”

I can’t help but laugh with her.

At least I have one ally in all of this.

Twenty-Three



Svetlana and Yelena treat me to an afternoon at the spa before taking me to dinner at a local Russian restaurant. The longer I spend with Adrian's mother, the more at ease I become with her. She may be a shark, but she's not all teeth like her son. There's a softer side to her that lies beneath the surface of the rough exterior. A 'fish are friends and not food' mentality.

When the waiter comes to take our order, she rattles off a list in Russian that I have no hope of understanding. I've learned a little over the years but nothing to write home about. A few minutes later the waiter comes back with three glasses, setting one in front of each of us.

"Try it," Yelena urges as she takes a sip of hers and sighs. "You'll like it. Promise."

I pick up the glass, which is warm in my hands, and study the contents. The liquid is a pale orange. The scent of baked apples and pears washes over me, and I take a sip. It's fruity, with hints of cloves and honey. Delicious. I let the warmth travel through me and wash away the weariness from my soul.

"It's called *Vzvar*," she explains to me as she takes a sip of her own. "A Russian drink made of dried fruits, herbs, and spices. This one is especially good, but I do love a pear and lavender one."

"It's amazing," I tell her before taking another sip.

"I used to make this every Christmas for Adrian and his father." There's a sad look in Svetlana's eyes at the mention of her late husband. I'd never had the chance to meet him before he died. I can't even remember what happened at this point, but I know he died at the hands of a rival gang.

"I can't wait to try it." It's the honest truth. I never had a relationship with my mother. She never cooked or took me out to lunch. Ada had been my only

companion and I wonder if she ever resented it. We remained close when my father removed her as my companion, but it never felt the same. There was a look in my friend's eyes that unsettled me. She'd go on about how lucky I was to be a Castellanos and a mafia princess. An heir. I still wonder why she thought my life was some kind of fairytale when she saw firsthand how it was.

Lonely.

Painful.

"I'd like that," Svetlana smiles softly at me. Yelena excuses herself from the table to use the restroom. Her absence is followed by silence as I sip my drink and Svetlana sips hers.

"He's not so bad, you know." she speaks up after a few seconds. "Adrian."

I beg to differ. "I'm sure you see it that way," I say. "But you're his mother."

"And you are to be his wife."

"Not by choice."

"And what other choice did you have?" she counters. "My son may not fully keep me in the loop, but I have my eyes and ears everywhere, *radnaya*. Your father sold you to Spiridakos to be sold at auction where he would have made hundreds of millions of dollars for your virginity and last name. Would you rather have that or safety and security?"

"Neither." I lift my chin at her. "I'd rather be free. To leave behind the name I carry. It means nothing to me. Not now and not ever."

There's pity in her gaze as she stares at me. I hate pity.

"After everything you have endured." She shakes her head. "You cannot be that naïve to believe that you can escape who you are."

"And who is that?" I snap. "An unloved daughter? A forgotten child? An orphan? A captive? A pawn? Those are the names your son has given me. The ones he uses to remind me of my place."

"Then show him that you don't belong to those names."

"And what names belong to me?" I ask her, tears pushing at the back of my eyes.

Her face lights up at my question, her gaze determined. "Queen."

"Not sure that's how your son sees me."

"No matter your rocky start, Vanya." She leans in and takes my hand in hers. "You are to be his wife and he will treat you with the respect that title

deserves.”

Okay.

“Like he did today?” I cock my head to the side and stare at her. “That is the respect the wife of a Volkov deserves? The party cock blower planning the wedding? Picking out my dress without consulting me? If that’s your idea of respect, you should see a therapist.”

I expect her to be mad at my words. To glare at me, maybe even slap me for disrespecting her opinion. Maybe she will tear me down like my mother used to with her drunken words. Instead, she smiles brighter. There is a twinkle in her eyes that sets me on edge.

“Did you think that maybe he just likes to rile you up?”

“That’s stupid,” I deadpan. “What are we? In the third grade? If he pulls my hair does that mean he likes me?” I can feel my cheeks heating at those words. He has pulled my hair. Many times. And I enjoyed it.

A knowing look spreads across her face. She looks as if she is about to say something, but luck is on my side because Yelena chooses that time to waltz back to the table with the waiter not far behind her.

Soon we are too busy stuffing our faces to talk, which is a welcome reprieve. I don’t want to talk about Adrian or the upcoming wedding that I still don’t have a date for. I also don’t want to think about what it means to be his wife because it sure as hell wasn’t fun being his captive.

That’s not entirely true, but I digress.

Instead, I savor the scrumptious meal in front of me. The table is laden with several varieties of pelmeni, a Russian dumpling, and Shaslik, kebabs. There is soup and blinis and piroshkies followed by coffee and honey cake. By the time we are heading out the door, I am so full I feel as if I will burst.

The short drive to their house is filled with laughter and show tunes as Yelena shows off her talent for music. Svetlana remains silent, but I see her smiling at her daughter like she is the sun. A lump forms in my throat. My mother never once smiled at me like that. Like I meant something to her.

Sensing my gaze, Svetlana’s eyes drift to me and she gives me a soft, reassuring smile. A mother’s smile and it takes everything within me not to start bawling. I’ve never had this before. A sense of belonging and family. It comforts me to know that at least something good will come of this marriage.

I say goodbye to Svetlana and Yelena with promises that I will see them soon. Patiently, I wait inside the SUV while Anton walks them to their door. Sasha, the big burly asshole from the parking garage, is busy scrolling on his

phone. Not that I want to make conversation with him.

He intimidates me.

Sighing, I stare out the window at the sidewalk and watch as people walk by without a care in the world. No one can see my suffering or heartache. No one can hear my cries. Even if they could, the world is a cold place. They will simply turn a blind eye.

Then, something catches my attention.

A girl.

She's at least ten years old with blonde hair and a cute button nose. Pulling her along behind him is a scrawny man in a business suit. He looks to be in a hurry, but the girl could care less because she keeps stopping to gaze at flowers or the occasional store window front.

Ada?

"Wait," I call as I push the door to the SUV open in a hurry, ignoring Sasha's cursing as I follow after them. They'd ducked into a kid's clothing boutique a few doors down. "Wait."

The man stops and turns around, his face drawn in confusion.

"Can I help you?" he questions, his tone suspicious. He's looking around wildly as if he is afraid someone will jump out at him.

"Well... I..." I look down at the girl as I stammer my words. She's a carbon copy of Ada when she was this age. Young. Carefree. Innocent.

"Look, lady," the man steps back, fear filling his eyes. "I don't know what you want but..."

My gaze catches on the hand he's holding. The little girl has a small mark on her right wrist.

"Where did she get that scar?" I ask him curiously.

"Wh... what?" He's caught off guard.

I point at the girl's wrist. "That scar. Where did she get it?" My pulse is racing as I wait for his answer. Please let it be a coincidence. Let it not be true. It can't be. Please, if there is a god...

"It's not a scar," he tells me. "It's a birthmark. Her mother had the same one."

Everything in me shatters.

My world falls around me at my feet.

There is only one other person I know of that has that scar—

And she is six feet under.

Twenty-Four



I'm going to wring her pretty little neck. If she thought I was commanding and a brute before, she will soon see the monster she has created today. I'll lock her away, so she never sees the sun again. The only thing she will see is me. Her day—no, her motherfucking world—will revolve around me.

How dare she fucking run. After everything I've done for her. I could have sold her to Spiridakos, but I didn't. Hell, I can still sell her if she becomes too much of a pain in the ass.

But you won't.

My mind and body are at odds with one another. The logical side of me is telling me to get rid of her. She's a liability. Another Castellanos spy in my household. Too bad my cock isn't getting the message. He wants her. Is hard for her. Only her. Fucker has found the flavor he likes and won't be tempted by anyone else.

Not even Celia, the woman who sucks my cock on a regular basis, could sway him. She'd come to my office at the hotel this morning to talk about the wedding. She hadn't liked hearing that I was getting married to someone other than her. I've never treated Celia any different than the other women who blow me on the regular, but somehow, she has gotten it in her head that because she wraps her mouth around my cock on occasion, she is entitled to special treatment.

News flash.

She isn't.

The cunt also might not have been too happy when I hired her to be Vanya's wedding planner. I had laughed at the image it conjured when I thought about Celia walking into the bridal shop and confronting Vanya.

When my mother called to tell me how the outing had gone, she'd happily run me through how Vanya had threatened Celia and cut her hair. She'd also poured wine on the gown I'd supposedly picked out for her. Which I hadn't and apparently neither had Celia.

My knee bounces erratically as we near the location of Vanya's tracker. Why did she run? She knows she is being tracked. Something isn't sitting right in my stomach. She's not moving. The tracker is so new that I hadn't had time to update Anton and Sasha with the software to find her. Otherwise, I wouldn't be making this trip across town.

Something painful clenches my heart at the thought of what I might find.

Her tracker hasn't moved in nearly twenty minutes. Is she dead? Had the mysterious E-Ris, who ordered her hit, found her?

Fuck.

Why the hell do I even care? If she's dead, then I don't have to worry about marrying her for the Castellanos properties. I can just take them.

Except you want to marry her.

There's that annoying little voice of mine again. The angel on my shoulder that I swore I decapitated years ago.

"We're here," Misha, my driver says. The door opens to my right, and I step out to face a waiting Anton. He looks nervous.

"What the hell happened?" I bark at my second in command. "How the hell did she escape you?"

"Sasha was in the car with her while I ran your mother and sister up to their condo," he tells me. I turn my glare on Sasha who looks down at his feet in shame. "Sasha says she called for someone to wait and then took off before he could even get out of the car."

"Who was she calling to?"

Anton shrugs. "I don't know," he answers. "I'm having all of the security camera data in the area downloaded to the main hub for Jakub to go through."

Holding back the urge to punch someone, I pull out my phone and follow the digital trail to my escaped fiancée with Anton, Sasha, and a few of my extra men on my heels.

It takes me through a children's clothing store and out into a back alley. Nothing. I look around the area and assess everything around me. Where would she go?

"Vanya?" I call out, attempting to keep the venom from my voice. "Vanya, where are you?"

Something, like the sound of sniffing, reaches my ears but I can't tell where it's coming from.

"Vanya, you need to—"

"Watch out!" someone cries, not one of my men. I grunt as a sudden force knocks into, sending me sprawling to the ground. Brick shatters on the wall behind me, spraying pieces everywhere. A moment later, one of my men goes down.

"Sniper!" Anton hollers as he ducks behind one of the large garbage containers with Sasha. My remaining men take shelter behind the steel alley door. I shield Vanya with my body as bullet after bullet hits around us. Vanya and I are out in the open, sitting ducks, but since a bullet hasn't torn through either of us, we must be outside of the sniper's view.

He's shooting blindly.

Holding Vanya tight to my body, I case the area. The alley is situated between one large building and a smaller one that is several stories shorter. There are two possible buildings the sniper can be held up in, but since I'm rolling with the theory that he can't see me or Vanya, since we are both bullet free, it only leaves one building.

"Anton," I shout. "*Krasnyy tri. Yuzhnoye zdaniye.*"

"Podtverzhdenny."

I hold Vanya tighter to me. Her entire body is trembling, and I can hear her sobbing quietly into my neck, her hot tears rolling against my skin and down my back.

"*YA ponyal tebya, Solnyshka,*" I whisper in her ear. "I've got you." Her small hands grip tightly to my shirt as she burrows closer to me. I hold the back of her head in one hand and rub soothing lines up and down her back with the other as we wait for the all-clear.

"We've got him, boss," Anton calls as he steps out from behind the safety of the garbage container. He's got his phone to his ear and is barking directions to the men. "Misha is taking him to the warehouse. He'll be there when you're ready."

"Come on, *malen'kaya I'vitsa,*" I urge Vanya up, keeping a hand on her the entire time. "So brave." She clings to me as we stand and make our way back to our SUV. Misha has gone ahead with the Red Three team to secure the sniper, but for the first time in years, my focus isn't on work.

It's on the woman clinging to my side as if her life depends on it.

Twenty-Five



Everything is underwater.

The world around me is out of focus and hazy as I cling to Adrian like he's the last life raft on the Titanic. I'm aware of him talking, but his words are nothing more than the 'wah, wah, wah' of Charlie Brown's parents. It's senseless. Meaningless.

Death has come around for me again.

This time is closer than the time before.

The bullet was inches from my face. A little to the left and it would have exploded my face. Was it the hitman from before? Or a new enemy sent to destroy me? The bullet had come out of nowhere the moment I stepped into the alley. I'd needed air and I couldn't face going back to an angry Sasha and Anton.

Adrian leads me into the mansion, but I barely take any of it in. He's holding me but his focus is on the other end of the phone he holds to his ear. "Find out who the fuck he is. I want everything. Fingerprints. Hair fibers. I want to know when he fucking eats, sleeps, and shits. Find it now."

My fiancé is angry. Nothing new, but this time the anger isn't directed at me or the circumstances around my continued existence. It's at the man who dared try and shoot me. Rage simmers off him in giant tidal waves. The staff has disappeared from sight, not that I blame them.

This is the Adrian the Devil. Lucifer in a three-piece suit. He's the monster that haunts your dream. The boogeyman. The great shadow.

And he's mine.

But am I his?

"Bedroom, Vanya," he orders, letting go of me. His voice is low and

deadly. A distant thunder.

Fear clenches my stomach as I let go of him. I want to argue about him giving me orders. To take charge and be the queen his mother says I am, but even I know a queen needs discretion. Arguing with him right now would be a death wish and I've read enough about kings chopping off the heads of their queens to know I should probably hold my tongue.

So, I follow his order.

Sasha follows behind me at a small distance. He's quiet. I want to apologize for leaving him suddenly. To explain the situation but my tongue is glued to the roof of my mouth. When I reach the bedroom door, I stop, my hand freezing on the handle.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to Sasha. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the big man tense. "I wasn't running away. I just—I saw a ghost." A beat passes. Then two. When he doesn't say anything, I sigh and turn the handle, opening the door.

"Don't worry, *malen'kaya Koroleva*," he rumbles. "I know all about ghosts." Swallowing back the tears threatening to break free, I nod my head and retreat into the safety of my room. *Our room*. Well, maybe not after tonight.

The door closes behind me with a soft click and for a moment I feel as if I can breathe. It doesn't last long as the reality of the situation comes crashing down on me. That little girl... my jaw clenches. It can't be. Everything I know is unraveling. The tightly wound ball of string has come loose. It's unwinding and becoming a tangled mess.

Pulling up the sleeve of my sweater, I stare down at the small mark on my wrist. It's crescent-shaped and looks like scarred flesh. I was born with it. So was my father and his and his brother. Their father and his mother before him. On and on for generations.

I remember coming into the bathroom one day to find Ada cutting her wrist. It was after a lengthy separation. I thought she had been trying to cut her wrists. She'd stared up at me and giggled as she held it out.

"I'm just like you," she whispered as if it were a secret. "We're sisters." I'd been horrified that she would mar her perfect skin.

Now I am beginning to wonder.

To think.

To remember.

I startle when the door to the room swings open. Adrian stands in the

doorway, his blue eyes hardened into sapphires. He slams the door shut with so much force, it shakes the frame. My body tenses but I remain still. That's what prey does when a predator is upon them.

They lie quietly and hope they go unseen.

Adrian stalks forward until he is in front of me. Two fingers find their home under my chin and force my gaze up. Desire shoots through me at the look in his eyes.

This predator wants to devour me.

"Strip," he orders.

What?

When I don't move to do as he tells me, he repeats it again. "Strip, little wife, or I will do it for you."

I keep still, too frightened to move. Is this it? The moment he takes what is his? I'm frozen in place, unable to move. Do I want to do this? Am I ready? Will it matter?

"Vanya." Anger courses through his tone. Frustration at my inability to follow his orders.

Terror rushes through me like a raging river as I try to get my limbs to move. They won't. They're stiff and heavy. I swallow hard and shift my gaze to the door. His eyes follow mine and he smirks.

"You won't make it, *malen'kaya I'vitsa.*"

My gaze snaps back to his at those last two words. They're Russian. I know them.

Little Lioness. He'd called me that in the alley, too.

I've never heard it spoken by anyone other than Google Translate, but I've read them. At the top of every letter. On every page. Adrik called me that in his letters. He said I was brave for waiting for him. Brave to trust in him.

"Why did you call me that?" I query.

"What?" he asks, his thumb rubbing one cheek. "*Malen'kaya I'vitsa?*"

I nod.

"It means, little lioness," he tells me. "Because you were so brave."

Be brave, little lioness.

"I wasn't that brave," I say. Something dark courses through him.

"You shouldn't have been shot at," he growls, his hand on my waist tightening to the point of pain. Just another bruise to add to the mix. He towers over me, filling the air between us with his scent. Sandalwood, lime, and just a hint of lily. It's intoxicating and surprisingly calming.

“I thought you’d be glad to get rid of me,” I joke, trying to lighten the heavy blanket of emotion that has settled around us. His eyes burn with frustration.

Apparently, I’m the only one to think my attempt at levity is humorous.

Adrian reaches down between us with both of his hands. He grips the collar of my sweater tightly and rips it down the middle. I gasp, eyes rounding with desire as he throws the now useless garment to the side. I scramble out of my pants and shoes before he can decide to go all Hulk on them. Now I am left in nothing but my bra and panties.

I attempt to cross my arms to cover myself. It’s silly, really. He’s seen me naked before, but something about this moment seems infinitely more intimate than the times before. Adrian grabs my forearms and shoves them down to my sides.

“Don’t move,” he warns as he settles on one knee in front of me. The sight of the king kneeling before me takes my breath away.

Biting my lower lip, I nod meekly. He slides a hand beneath the clasp of my bra and skillfully unhooks it. He pushes the straps down my arms until the bra drops to the floor. He kicks it away and then takes a step back, his gaze darkening as it travels over the length of my body.

My body erupts like a live wire when he reaches out to touch my nipples. I blush, my skin warming as he runs his thumbs over them until they are stiff and hardened peaks. His hands splay out to palm my heavy breasts before moving up my chest and down my arms.

His jaw clenches when he comes across a bruise on my shoulder. I open my mouth to say it’s fine. That it doesn’t hurt, but my words are stolen away when he leans up, his soft lips covering the wounded flesh. His lips don’t linger as his hands continue to map and explore. He doesn’t speak, only touches, inspecting every inch of my body.

He turns me away from him, his rough hands gentle. His lips caress every bruise and scratch along his path. When he turns me back to face him, he stands, and I expect him to leave.

He doesn’t.

Instead, he lifts me into his arms and carries me to the bathroom.

Not wanting to break whatever spell has woven itself between us, I remain still and quiet as he sheds his clothes and turns on the water in the shower. Soon, steam fills the large space. He pulls me into the shower stall, my back to the shower head, and tilts my head back.

Closing my eyes, I relish the feel of his hands running through my hair as he washes the filth of the day off. He shampoos and conditions my hair. Runs a loofah over my body. It's sensual but at the same time, methodical. He's not lingering or caressing. Adrian is simply running through the motions. Until suddenly, he isn't.

My throat dries when he drops to both knees in front of me. I bite back a moan, my legs trembling, as he licks up my inner thigh.

My heart is thudding away in my chest like a jackhammer that I can feel pulsing in my neck.

"You always taste so sweet," he murmurs, pushing my legs farther apart to make more room for his wide shoulders.

I jerk slightly when he runs a finger down my slit and through my wetness.

I'm soaked for him.

Adrian lifts one leg over his shoulder to balance me and then his head lowers between my thighs and he dips his tongue between my slit.

Oh, my fucking god.

The man between my thighs pleasures me with his tongue in ways I've never dreamed were possible. Nothing in my smutty romance novels prepared me for the lightning storm currently erupting inside of me right now.

So good.

He sucks my clit in his mouth.

I moan.

His teeth graze my clit.

I see stars.

I stare down at the powerful man before me. The king on his knees before me. The black knight. There is a pull between us that neither of us can deny. A red string of fate connecting us together.

"Adrian," I moan, my head falling back against the tiled walls. "Please..."

He doesn't slow down. Even when my body begins to shake and I'm begging him with incoherent words, he doesn't stop. I ride his face, uncaring if he suffocates to death.

I'll do anything to find the pleasure in my release at the end of the rainbow.

"Come for me, little lioness," he groans. "Let go."

For the first time, I do as he orders without complaint.

I scream his name, my body shaking, and falling limp against the shower. Adrian catches me and holds me tight to his body as he washes me down one last time. When he's done, he shuts the shower off and reaches for a towel. Soon, I'm dried and bundled in his arms as he walks me to the bed.

He settles me in bed, covering my naked body with the thick, down cover. My heart is still racing as he joins me in bed and shuts off the light.

"Can I ask you a question," I yawn, my eyes drooping dangerously.

Like the night before, he cuddles me close to his chest, but there is something more possessive in his hold tonight.

"I suppose," he drawls.

Another yawn. "What is your name in Russian?" I ask. "I feel like Adrian is such a normal name. You call that burly man, Sasha, but his name is Alexander. And I've heard you call Anton, Antosha. So, what is Adrian?"

Adrian chuckles. "Always so full of questions."

"Don't pretend like you don't like it," I murmur sleepily.

"I do," he admits. I hum as I snuggle closer to his chest, the feel of his hand running along my bare arm quickly luring me to sleep. I'm so worn down that I nearly miss his answer to my question.

"Adrik," he whispers. "They call me Adrik."

Twenty-Six



I stare at the security footage from my mother's block where Vanya had run off. It's two in the morning, but it doesn't matter. I can't sleep until I figure out what the hell happened. Who had she run after? Sasha said she'd been gazing out the window while Anton had taken my mother and sister up to their condo and then suddenly leaped out as if her life depended on it.

Why?

Who had she seen?

"Found it," Anton sets his laptop on my desk in front of me and presses play. "She exits the car just as this man and his daughter walk past." He pauses the video on a man not much younger than me. A small girl is toddling after him, her small hand in his as they walk down the street. Taking a screenshot, he hits print.

"Then what?" I ask. He presses play again.

"She follows them into the children's store," he narrates. "We lose sight of her from that angle, but—" He pulls up another window. "This is from a camera in the store. Her back is to it, so we can't see what she is saying, but whatever it is, the man looks spooked."

I watch the scene unfold before me. The man appears cautious of her approach. His eyes are scanning everything around him as if he is waiting for something or someone to jump out at him. Then, she holds out her arm to him. His eyes dart down to his little girl and back to my woman. Now he looks scared.

What did she show him that has him looking so on edge?

I've mapped Vanya's entire body and the only thing on that arm is a small birthmark near her wrist. Is that what she is showing him? Is it

somehow important?

“Find me everything you can on him.” I nod my head at the screen. “I want everything. Bank records, blood type, you fucking name it.” Anton nods and grabs his laptop to get to work just as my phone rings.

“*Da?*” I answer in Russian knowing it’s Matthias.

“*Brat,*” he answers solemnly. “I’m sorry it’s taken so long to get back to you. We’ve had some... trouble up here.”

“Anything I can help with?” I ask. Matthias sighs over the other end of the line.

“I’m afraid you have your own shitpile to deal with,” he tells me. “You’re not going to like what I tell you.”

I snort. “It can’t get any worse than it is already,” I assure him. “My future bride was sniped at, and the lies my dead wife left behind are ever-growing.”

“A sniper?” His tone becomes more alert. “Is she safe?”

“She’s good, brother,” I tell him. “We caught the bastard. He’s awaiting judgment at the warehouse.” Matthias breathes a sigh of relief.

“That’s good,” he says. “You’re going to want to keep him alive for questioning.”

“I assumed.” I don’t have to tell him how hard it has been not to go and kill the motherfucker.

“You don’t understand,” he says urgently. “This man... this killer, there’s more to it than you think. He’s not just any hired gun. Bridgett had a hard time finding his kills because there is nothing on record in our assassins’ database.”

I’d wondered that myself. Taking the heads of the victims was extreme. Vanya had also mentioned that he planned on raping her. A true hired assassin would never compromise his job for a taste of flesh.

“I was starting to wonder about that myself,” I admit.

“This man, he’s a fanatic. A serial killer. Bridgett found victims all over the world with this exact same MO,” he relays. “His name is Luan Osmani, he’s the cousin of Armir Bregu, the leader of the Albanian mafia. He’s known as the Albanian Butcher.”

“Osmani,” I whisper. “I recognize that last name.”

“You should,” Matthias says. “It was Ada’s mother’s maiden name.”

That can’t be.

“I ran a check on her myself,” I growl. “Her mother’s maiden name was

Greek.”

“How deep did you look, brother?” he asks. “It took Bridgett days to sift through the information at the top to reach the sediment underneath.”

Therein lies the issue. I didn’t look all that deep. I took everything at face value when it came to Ada. I’d been blind to everything.

“I’m sorry, Adrian,” Matthias murmurs.

Shaking my head, I let out a long breath. “You have nothing to be sorry for, *brat*,” I assure him. “This is a result of my carelessness. It won’t happen again.”

“What can I do?”

Nothing. This is my mess to clean up. “Can you send over everything Bridgett has gathered?”

“Already done.”

“*Speciba.*”

“*Vsegda.*”

Twenty-Seven



A drik.

His name. Even with the morning fog rolling around in my brain, I remember. I had begun to suspect who he was when he'd first called me *little lioness* in Russian. It was the same term of endearment in my letters. Not that it was enough for me to say for sure that he was the one.

I lay awake, staring at the ceiling above me, one hand tossed above my head, the comforter cocooned around me as I think about everything I know about my soon-to-be husband and the one I'd written letters to.

On the surface, they appear to be polar opposites. Adrian is commanding and cold while Adrik had been warm and comforting. His words of encouragement over the years brought me solace that had never existed in my life before.

Be brave, little lioness.

A phrase I continued to utter to myself long after Adrik stopped writing to me. Even when he'd broken my heart by leaving me standing at the willow tree, alone and scared, I still found strength in those words.

Do I tell him who I am?

Confront him?

Anger bubbles inside me at the thought of confronting him about why he abandoned me. Does it really matter after all these years? Especially since the man in the letters seems to be nothing more than a lie. A false identity. Had I fallen into his trap, he would have used me just like Ada.

Doubt wells in my chest as I think back to the man and his daughter. She is a carbon copy of Ada.

“Look,” I point out the same birthmark on my arm to him. “I have the same birthmark. Everyone in my family does.”

The man shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter,” he stammers as he pulls the girl along. “Just leave us alone.”

“But we’re family,” I insist. “We have to be related in order for her to have that mark.”

“Just leave us alone.” He’s walking faster now, the girl barely able to keep up with his long strides. I chase after them, begging him to stop and talk to me. To hear me out. I need to understand why she looks like my friend. How does she have that mark?

“Please...” But my words go unheard as he exits the building, leaving me with more questions than answers.

HAD my entire life with Ada been a lie? I think back to the name on the tomb in my family’s mausoleum. My name. My birthdate. The date of death, and the tomb was sealed for a casket. Someone’s remains are in there and they aren’t mine.

So, whose are they?

Blackness pitches through me as my thoughts grow darker and darker. They all come back to that little girl. Who is she? She can’t be Ada’s, can she? Did my best friend cheat on her husband and that girl is the byproduct?

No. She’s at least ten years old which means she would have been born prior to Ada marrying Adrian. Why does she have my family’s birthmark? Nausea builds in my stomach, working its way up my throat. Did my father...? Oh god. Did he rape Ada and cast the child on another family? Is that why he took her away so often? So that I wouldn’t notice?

I need to find them. Need to find the truth. If anyone were to find out she is the daughter of a Castellanos, she’d be in danger. Getting out of bed, I quickly run through my morning routine before dressing in a simple pair of black leggings and a lavender tunic cinched by a black belt. Pulling on my flats, I grab my purse and twist the knob on the door, flinging it open.

There is one person I know who can help me.

“Where are you going, little mouse,” a low murmur penetrates the hallway as I walk past Adrian’s office. He’s leaning casually on the doorframe, arms folded against his chest.

“Out,” I tell him. His brows raise.

“Where?”

I shrug. “Just out.”

He gives me an expectant look.

Sighing dramatically, I turn to fully face him. “I want to go buy a cell phone. It might have escaped your notice, but I don’t have one.”

“Where is your old one?”

My forehead puckers.

“Old one?”

“The one you used before you showed up on my doorstep.”

Oh. I awkwardly stare down at my feet and shrug a shoulder.

“You didn’t have one,” his voice softens.

“Didn’t really matter, then,” I mumble. “There was no one for me to call.”

“And who would you call now?”

Ouch. That stings.

Another shrug from me. “Your sister. Or your mom. They’re nice. I’ve never really had anyone to talk to before besides Ada.”

I keep my eyes firmly on the ground studying the intricate carpet that runs along the floor. It looks expensive, maybe Persian?

“Vanya, look at me.” I shake my head and refuse to move my gaze. If I look up, I know what I’ll see. Pity. I don’t want to see his pity or his judgment. “Now, Vanya.”

There’s a finality in his voice that suggests that if I don’t follow his directions, it won’t be good for me. Lucky for him I really want to get out of this house. I drag my gaze up from the floor to meet his eyes. There’s concern there, lining the edges of his sapphire depths. What I don’t see is condescension or pity.

“Sasha and his men will go with you,” he tells me. I nod my head to show him I understand. “I won’t have another repeat of yesterday. Is that clear?” Another nod. “Words, Vanya.”

“I understand,” I whisper softly.

He smiles softly down at me before placing a gentle kiss on my forehead. My mouth opens slightly at the tender gesture that is so contradictory to what he’s shown me. Maybe he cares after all.



THE RIDE across town to the mall takes longer than normal due to the traffic. The tourist crowds are beginning to resurge in the city due to the basketball season that Vegas deems March Madness. Once we arrive, Sasha takes me to the store Adrian owns to pick out a cell phone. Not knowing what I need I allow Sasha to pick me the one he believes I'll like. It's small in my hand, but Sasha says it has a powerful camera that I can use to take photos of the garden.

We spend a few more minutes picking out accessories before finally leaving the store.

“Is there anything else you'd like to stop and look at?” Sasha asks as we travel through the mall and back to the SUV. I shake my head.

“I don't really need anything,” I tell him. He nods but doesn't look satisfied.

“Alright.” He doesn't push.

When we are situated back inside the SUV, I lean forward and ask, “Can we stop by Svetlana's, please?”

Sasha picks up his cell phone and starts typing away. I'll give you one guess who he is texting. “I just have to ask Adrian first.”

Winner. Winner. Chicken dinner.

Maybe I should take up gambling. Apparently, I'm good at predictions.

“Boss says yes.”

Pft. “Well, as long as we have his highness's permission,” I mock.

Pulling into traffic, Sasha remains quiet for a few moments as we make our way off the Strip. “You know he is just wanting to keep you safe.”

“I think you mean caged.”

“A cage is only a cage because you say it is.”

Cryptic bastard.

Who is he? Gandhi? Shaking my head, I ignore his words and lean back in my seat. He's wrong. My life with Adrian isn't a cage because I see it as one. It's a cage because of how my soon-to-be husband treats me. My entire life I have had to ask permission. I was never allowed to come and go as I please. There was never any public school or days spent playing at the park with other kids. I'd never been allowed to travel or attend college. Even at formal functions, I was kept isolated. My job was to look pretty and help show a united family front for the politicians in my father's pockets.

Will Adrian allow me to attend college if I ask him? I doubt it. What if I want to do charity events and make friends? Open a restaurant like I always

dreamed of? It will always be the same answer no matter where I go or who I am with.

Sasha parks the SUV in the designated parking garage instead of on the street like last time. If I was hoping to catch a glimpse of the girl and her father, I won't be able to do it from here.

"Come on," my bodyguard urges me, signaling to his men to keep a tight watch on the perimeter. He strides toward an elevator at the back and presses the button. It opens immediately. When we step in, I notice there are only three buttons but over forty floors. "It's a private elevator. Only goes to the parking garage, the lobby, and the penthouse." He swipes his thumbprint on the scanner. "No one without authorization can access it."

Makes sense. Especially once I learn that it opens directly into his mother's foyer. I look around the large space. It is nothing short of awe-inspiring. The walls leading down the hallway are decorated with art deco paper that gives off pastel desert vibes. The fixtures are antique gold, made to look worn and used.

Sasha leads me deeper into the penthouse condo. It's luxurious but, at the same time, homey.

"Hello, dear," Svetlana greets me as we enter the large kitchen that openly flows into the rest of the penthouse. Floor-to-ceiling windows line every available outside wall, allowing light to drift through openly.

"Hi." I smile shyly at her, unsure if I should call her Svetlana or Mrs. Volkov.

"Thank you, Sasha," she tells him with a smile. "I'll take it from here."

Sasha bows his head slightly before turning and leaving the two of us alone.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asks as she opens the refrigerator door.

"Yes, please."

A few moments later she sets a glass of chardonnay in front of me. After pouring one for herself as well, she motions for me to sit with her on the large gray sectional that dominates her living space. It provides an amazing view of the city through the large, unobstructed windows.

"I take it this isn't a social call," she gleans. I tense at her intuitive nature. This must be where Adrian gets it. She smiles into her glass when I remain silent. "Does this have something to do with the man and child you were following yesterday?"

My eyes widen in surprise. How did she know?

“One thing you will learn about me is that I see everything.” She smirks. “My son isn’t the only one with resources. Which is why I am assuming you came to me instead of him.”

Yep, scary intuitive.

“I need to know who they are.”

“Why?”

I expected her to ask for my reasoning, but I’ve been unsure about giving her the true answer. She’s a Volkov. An enemy. She can use the information I give her against me. Against the girl. They could use her to gain access to everything. The entire Castellanos fortune will be at their fingertips, and they will not need me any longer. But there is something in her eyes that pulls on my soul, begging me to trust her.

“I think the girl is my sister,” I blurt out. Svetlana nods slowly as she takes in what I just told her.

“And what makes you believe that?” she questions, and I tell her. I tell her everything starting from the very beginning. I’ve never confided in anyone this way before. Not even Ada, but I don’t think I ever fully trusted Ada to keep my secrets. It’s why I never told her about my letters to Adrik.

“You’re sure that it is the exact same birthmark?” she asks. I nod.

“It’s been the defining trait in my father’s family for as long as I can remember.” I show her the mark. “None of my father’s family is alive to give birth to a child. It was either him or my grandfather.” My face screws up in distaste at the thought of my grandfather having children at his age.

Gross.

“Ada had that same mark,” she says. “I remember seeing it a few times.”

I shake my head. “No, Ada cut her skin to look like mine when she was thirteen. She’d told me she wanted to be a Castellanos too. I remember thinking how crazy it was that she thought my life was something to be envied.”

“Her mark wasn’t caused by a knife, Vanya,” she says. “It’s a birthmark just like yours.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Before Ada married my son, she needed to go through a medical examination,” she states. “It’s required for all prenup negotiations.”

I wasn’t aware there had been a prenup.

“Aren’t those exams confidential?”

Svetlana shoots me a sly smile. “If the doctor isn’t the one on your payroll.”

Makes sense.

“So, you’re telling me that the mark on her wrist is a true birthmark?” I clarify. Svetlana nods.

“When she cut her wrist, did you ever notice the small cut just below it?”

I think back to that night. She’d been gone for weeks while I’d been locked in my room surviving on bread and water. The only thing that kept me sane was the hidden phone I had to text Adrik with. All it did was text. I’d stolen it from one of the security guards. It was a burner phone with prepaid texts that I often bribed one of the maids to refill for me every few months.

My father had let me out of my room that night, telling me that he’d give Ada back once I apologized to Peter for shoving him in the dirt when he took my doll. I’d never apologized for anything so fast.

I’d found her in the bathroom with a torn-apart razor to her wrist. Fearing the worst, I slapped the razor from her hand and covered the cut with a towel. Now that I look back at that moment, I realize I didn’t pay attention to the mark. I’d just assumed she made it, like she told me. I took Ada at her word.

I was wrong to.

“The cut that scarred just below the mark is where the doctor guesses she was trying to dig under the skin to shear off the mark.”

If that’s true—if the mark wasn’t ever a scar she created, that means —

Lilacs.

Wisteria.

Dragonbells.

“She’s my sister.”

Twenty-Eight



The file before me is damning. It's a firehose of information I'm attempting to disseminate. Luan Osmani, fifty-two years old. Spent most of his life in Albania until his cousin Armir, head of the mafia in Albania, moved Luan and his sister to Vegas. At the time, the Albanians were spearheading their way into weak territories that the five families held.

At the time, many of the mafia families were involved in their own civil wars, leaving their areas unprotected and without proper resources. Luan's sister married Vegas's Albanian boss, a man named Edan, to help solidify the alliance between the states and the homeland. Several years later, after a bloody war that brought all five families together for the first time since Vegas's inception, the Albanians were defeated.

I remember my father telling me it had been the longest and bloodiest war he'd ever seen against a mafia family. The Albanians were like cockroaches, they just kept coming back. Hell, they still do even after all these years.

According to Bridgett's records, when the Albanians were defeated, Luan ran for the hills and had never been heard from again. His brother-in-law had been murdered by Castellanos and his sister had—a photo popped up on the screen. She is younger in this photo than the one I had previously seen, but there is no mistaking she's the same person.

The woman Vanya claims is Ada's mother. Cora Berisha, born Cora Osmani disappeared off the face of the earth after the war. Until she popped up several years later after being arrested for prostitution. She's young, probably around the same age as Luan when he first came to the States. Her cheeks are hollow, eyes sunken.

She was a user, like most prostitutes who worked for Castellanos.

Prostitution, for the most part, is legal in Nevada if they are under licensed brothels. What Castellanos and Spiridakos did with their prostitutes—was not.

Years go by with a few more arrests for possession and then suddenly, it all stopped, and she's checked into a local rehab.

A rehab for pregnant mothers. Nine months prior to Ada's birthday. At least she didn't lie about that. So, Ada is an Albanian princess. But who is the father? I doubt that Castellanos would have sent her to rehab if she was pregnant with some random John's baby. He wouldn't care enough. Hell, I doubt he would have let her carry it to term.

So why the rehab?

"Boss," Anton steps into my office, a grim look on his face. That is never good. "You're going to want to take a look at this."

He tosses me a cell phone.

"What is this?" I ask as I tap on the screen to wake it.

"We managed to crack into the fucker's phone," he says. "It's connected to his iCloud, the stupid idiot. We managed to get all his transaction history as well as archived messages."

I look down at the screen and swipe through the particulars he'd left up.

"One set of messages has him chatting on Hades Net with the username E-Ris," he informs me. "It details the hit on the Castellanos family."

My eyes digest the particulars of the hit. It's laid out before me like a fucking roadmap. Every single detail is just as the crime scene depicted.

Don't let the staff suffer. Kill them with gas. Let them fall asleep as I fell asleep with them so many times before.

"Whoever ordered the hit was a staff member in Castellanos's house," I speak aloud. "But who among them could afford to hire a hitman? Trained or not."

"You can, sir."

I look up from the phone, puzzled.

"I can?"

Anton nods. "If you swipe past the messages, you can see who paid the account."

My thumb swipes fervently until I land on the information I'm looking for.

"Fuck."

I can't believe this.

My money funded the hit on Vanya's family.
Which tells me one very important thing.
I have a mole in my organization.



THE WAREHOUSE AGAIN.

Dusk has fallen over the desert and the winter wind is biting as I step out of the Escalade and walk toward the place where men come to die. I bleed them out here. Their pained cries are the melody that paints these walls.

“Boss,” Sasha smirks. He’d been giving me updates every hour on my soon-to-be bride. After picking up her cell phone, she’d asked to visit my mother, which I’d allowed. Apparently, Vanya hadn’t been too pleased at having to ask permission. Something I’m sure I’ll hear about when I get home.

My cock hardens at the thought of punishing her. It’s been far too long since I’ve turned her ass a pretty shade of red. The next time I do it, I’ll be fucking her from behind so that I can feel the heat of her punished skin on my thighs.

“Princess all tucked away in her tower?” I tease. If there is something I have been learning, Vanya is anything but a princess. She has shown herself to be so much more. When she’d asked me my name in Russian last night, something stirred inside of me. A longing I’d put aside a long time ago. She reminds me of the girl in my letters. The ones Ada had written to me for years before we ever met.

But like everything else, those letters proved to be a lie.

Yet I can’t stand the thought of getting rid of them. There are times when I wonder if Ada had even written those letters or sent those text messages. No matter how hard I tried, I could never reconcile the two.

Had Ada written those to lure me into marrying her? Had her games of manipulation started that young? If so, it would have been at the edict of Castellanos. She would have been sixteen when we started messaging. That is another thing that bothered me. The letters always sounded as if they were written by someone a few years younger at least, not a teenager.

“Well, if it isn’t the big boss man himself,” comes a hoarse laugh from the middle of the room. My eyes slide to the man hanging by his neck from

the rafters, his feet barely touching the box below him. His face is a mess of cuts and bruises. One eye is swollen shut and the other is bloodshot. Rivers of blood run from his nose and mouth.

“Luan Osmari, the Albanian Butcher.” I walk up to him, my head tilting so I can look him in the face. “You’re a lousy shot.”

“Shot the Castellanos bitch,” he sneers. “How’s the whore doing? Get a piece of that wet, tight cunt? Find out how magically delicious it is?”

He’s trying to bait me. It won’t work.

“Too bad for you,” I tell him. “She survived. What a blow to your ego that must have been.”

“Who says I was paid to kill her?”

Interesting.

“So, you meant to keep her alive?” I ask. “Why?”

He snorts. “Why would I tell you?”

I shrug. “Maybe because I’m the only thing between you and a very painful death.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Volkov,” he spits at me, blood spots appearing on my white dress shirt. Anna is going to hate me for this. She hates blood stains.

“You should be,” I assure him. “I’m capable of some pretty terrible things. I’m not known for my mercy. I’m known for keeping men alive for days at a time, peeling their skin away piece by piece until there is nothing left.”

He pales, eyes rounding in fear. Now I am getting somewhere.

“Tell me who hired you and I promise to make it quick.”

“You already know who it is.” He smirks. “You’re just too blind to see it.”

“Who is it?” I roar at him, anger tightening my features. “Who the hell paid you from my own accounts?”

“Maybe you should look deeper into who you allowed in your home, Volkov,” he laughs. “Strife and discord have been following you for a very long time. Revenge is best waited out and I’ve had mine. Now it’s time for them to get theirs.”

“Who?” I snarl. “Who wants revenge on me?”

He furrows his brow, but his smirk deepens. “You?” Another laugh. Who says they want revenge on you? Sometimes you’re the king Volkov, but other times you’re just the pawn like everyone else.”

“Who are they after?”

“You place chess, right?” His normal eye brightens slightly, and he shifts his body to gain better purchase. “Tell me. What is the most sought-after piece on the board?” He opens his mouth wide before slamming it shut. Fuck. I hear the cracking of porcelain but it’s too late. Luan’s body seizes as foam crawls out from between his lips.

Cyanide capsule.

“Dammit,” I hiss as I turn away and stalk from the building. I can hear Sasha behind me, mirroring my footsteps. “Fuck. We need to get back to the house.”

“What’s going on?” he asks as he slides into the driver’s seat. “Why did he ask you what the most sought-after piece on the board is?”

“He’s telling me who E-Ris is going after.”

“How do you know that?”

I dial Vanya’s new phone, but it goes straight to voicemail.

“Because the most sought-after piece is the Queen and that is exactly what Vanya is.”

My queen.

Twenty-Nine



Sasha had dropped me off hours ago to meet up with Adrian. Something about getting answers from the sniper.

Who also happens to be the hitman who took out my family.

At first, I was miffed that he didn't ask if I wanted to be included in torturing the motherfucker who killed my family, but the longer I was left to stew in my anger the more I came to realize that I am glad he didn't. I'm not ready to have blood on my hands.

Not yet anyway.

I'm saving it for the main event. The one who ordered the hit. The pieces are slowly coming together on the board. The pawns are slowly being pushed off the board to reveal the true puppet master behind the intricate moves.

Cora's case files are spread out before me on the bed in chronological order. Svetlana had managed to acquire them from one of the detectives on her payroll. He'd faxed them over to her within minutes. My father had led me to believe that she had died in a car accident on her way to pick up Ada from wherever my father had stashed her.

I was fifteen at the time and I knew better than to question him. It wasn't something I'd think him to lie about. But I also wasn't aware of the depths of his depravity. Ada's mother had been my father's captive. He'd made her into a prostitute. An unwilling whore for his men who were willing to pay top dollar for a piece of the Albanian mafia queen's pussy.

She'd been his prisoner. Hooked on drugs and god knows what else. Then she became pregnant with Ada. My father placed her in rehab, she gave birth, and then spent the next few years as a maid in one of my father's hotels. Twelve years later, Cora came to live at the mansion and Ada became my

playmate.

Why wait all that time?

I think back to that time but it's mostly blank. I'd been ten and still naïve to the twist of cruelty fate had dealt me when it came to parentage. What had happened that year to make him bring them to live with us? Why had he never recognized Ada as his child?

The coroner's report is heavy in my hand. Tears gather at the edge of my vision as I read it.

Multiple stab wounds to the victim's genitalia suggest some kind of sexual anger toward the victim. The victim has suffered multiple blunt-force trauma injuries to the stomach. There are no defensive wounds but burns around the victim's wrist and ankles suggest she was tied down.

The victim's head is unaccounted for. Marks around the neck suggest that the head was removed with some kind of large hand saw.

Wait. If her head was removed, how had they identified her?

Unless...

Can she be the one who is pulling all the strings? I can't blame her if she is. My father murdered her family. Tortured her. Raped her. Forced her to bear his child. I'd want revenge too. I need to dig up her grave to know for sure. The coroner's report doesn't mention any identifying marks, but Cora had a tattoo on her left arm of a golden eagle. The national bird of Albania, her home country. It's been nearly ten years since her death, but I know my father had her embalmed. With any luck, the tattoo will still be there, just severely faded.

Hopefully.

If worse comes to worst, I can grab a DNA sample.

Sighing, I scoop the papers into a messy pile and stuff them into the folder. Maybe I can ask Adrian for his help. He wants to catch whoever it is as much as I do. There is no need for me to tell him about the girl. I'll keep him in the dark about her until I'm certain he won't use her. Svetlana had promised me she wouldn't say a word.

"He isn't the monster you paint him to be. My son does what is necessary, but it doesn't make him heartless."

When I'd told her he'd planned on selling me, she didn't bat an eye.

Psychotic, the lot of them.

I stretch as I stand, my arms lengthening above my head as I yawn and walk to the window. The garden is always beautiful in the moonlight. It could

be even better if there were solar-powered twinkle lights strewn throughout the mass of flowers to make it look like the night sky has fallen to earth.

A shadow passes by the window, but in the dim light, I can't see who it is.

The guards don't have another walkthrough for at least twenty minutes. I lean forward to peer through the window when I see it. A small, hooded figure holding a gas can in one hand and flipping a lighter in the other. It's too dark for me to see the figure clearly above the nose. Their hood is pulled down too far and creates a dark shadow. But I can see the tilt of their lips into a cruel smile.

Feminine lips.

The figure strikes the zippo, grinning wider before tossing it toward the house.

Flames explode between us with an audible crack as the gasoline ignites. My breath freezes in my lungs as I stare at the wall of orange flame licking its way up the side of the house. The figure has disappeared. Too chicken shit to stick around to watch the chaos they created.

Was it her? Cora? How had she gotten past the guards at the front gate? Adrian has the most secure compound in Vegas. There's no way she could have gotten through—

The red willow tree.

There is a break in the fence line at the red willow tree where the properties split right down the middle. But even so, that's miles away from the house. Had she made her way here on foot? I can hear the alarms screeching from the hallway. Boots shuffling and people crying out. I need to get out of here.

With a backward glance, I rush toward the door flinging it open hard enough to dent the wall behind it. I freeze as I step through the doorway. The letters. I can't leave them behind. They're all I have to remind me of the version of Adrian I fell in love with. He may not be that boy now, but they show me he has the potential to be.

Grabbing my duffel bag, which is full of my old clothes still, I throw the letters on top and zip it up. Throwing it over one shoulder I haul ass out of the room just as an explosion hits the side of the building. I fall to my knees with a small cry. In a matter of minutes, smoke rises from the ground floor. Stumbling to my feet, I'm coughing and beginning to feel lightheaded.

Shit.

The fire is licking its way up the stairs. The explosion must have been from some kind of incendiary device on the first floor. I head back the way I came, into the bedroom. Shutting the door behind me I scramble for the window, smashing it open. The flames are climbing their way up the siding. They should be higher by now, but I have a sneaking suspicion that Adrian built his house with fire-resistant material.

Leaning out, careful to avoid the shattered glass, I sweep my gaze from side to side. There's no one here at the back of the house. Where are all the guards? Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and gather any courage I have. It's not much but it will have to do. Placing a sheet over the sill, I climb out of the bedroom window balancing precariously on the ledge as I straighten as close to my full height as possible.

There's only one way I'm getting out of this alive.

I have to climb to the roof.

The flames have already taken out most of the lattice to the right of the window but it's all I have. Hopefully, it's anchored enough at the top to support my weight. Another deep breath and then I start the terrifying task of climbing up to the roof. My body protests as I scale my way up. I am not necessarily unfit, but I'm definitely not friends with the gym.

Time seems to move agonizingly slow as I carefully plot out each step and handhold. Parts of the lattice are weak and disintegrating from their time in the sun. The further up to the roof I travel, the weaker the support becomes. Soon, I'm hauling myself over the lip of the roof collapsing on the still-warm shingles to catch my breath.

Flames are spreading out of the first-floor windows like tangled branches in the breeze, while smoke billows out of the second story. I need to find a way down. Carefully, I turn onto my stomach. Rising onto my hands and knees I slither up the roof, too afraid to stand up fully in case I was to pitch backward. I peer over the crest of the roof settling myself so that my feet are on either side.

I see lights in the distance flashing, and distant sirens wailing. I'm exhausted. My chest feels heavy and it's hard to breathe in a full breath. My eyes keep watering and are no doubt bloodshot from all the smoke. I let my gaze wander in an attempt to find a way down without becoming a flat pancake on the ground below.

At the edge of the grounds near the gate, I can see a small crowd of Adrian's staff gathered. Among them, I see Anna and Misha, Adrian's driver.

“Vanya,” I hear someone scream my name from the other side of the roof. “Vanya.” It's coming closer now. A rush of relief soars through me when Adrian's head pops over the lip of the roof on the opposite side. He screens my name again and motions for me. There's a wild terrified look in his eyes that I've never seen before.

It almost looks like concern.

Would he be sad if I died?

Would he mourn me?

Or would it simply allow him to take my family's empire without contestation?

There's no time to contemplate the emotions playing on his face because the house rocks and another explosion sounds from beneath me. Pulling my leg to the other side I scurry down the roof and into his waiting arms. He holds me tight to his chest for a moment his nose buried in my hair as he breathes me in.

Maybe he would miss me after all.

Thirty



The house is a complete loss.

I'm not devastated by it. Since my father died and my mother moved closer to the city with my sister, it never felt like home. Especially after marrying Ada. She'd changed all the furniture and décor. Ignored the garden I'd built especially for her. She used to write to me, telling me about her fantasy of the perfect home, but when it came time, she held distaste for everything.

The problem is that it never bothered me. It should have, but after a while, I grew distant from her. Stayed at work longer, coming up with excuses for why I couldn't attend a function or why I needed to stay at the hotel.

She never questioned me. Just shrugged a shoulder or responded with a simple, 'Okay'. I should have known that no woman would be that nonchalant toward her husband working all the time or refusing to come home. It allowed her more time to spy and plot. To execute the Castellanos's plan of taking my empire.

I sit with Vanya in my lap in the back of the ambulance that sits just outside the gates. She's clinging to my chest, an oxygen mask pressed to her face. Vanya is suffering from minor smoke inhalation. Nothing major, just enough to irritate her lungs and make her chest feel heavy. The oxygen will help and if she is still having issues, I will have Eric look at her when I take her to the hotel.

"Mr. Volkov," a nervous firefighter strides toward us, giving Anton, who is standing nearby, a friendly nod. "I'm assuming your wife filled you in on the cause of the fire?" I nod. "Good. We managed to contain most of the

flames but not in time to save the structure.”

“My house was equipped with a fire suppression system,” I growl. “That your department recommended. The damage shouldn’t be this severe.”

“We won’t know for sure until we can safely assess the damage tomorrow, but I believe your system was targeted.”

“The explosion.” Vanya’s voice is hoarse and muffled beneath the mask. “After she set the fire, there was an explosion. Like a bomb.”

The firefighter nodded. “Some of the fire patterns, around the west side of the building, suggest that an incendiary device was used. It would have knocked out your system and left the house vulnerable.”

Fucking great.

“Thanks,” I tell him.

He bobs his head. “I’ll have the arson investigator reach out, sir.” He dips his head one last time and walks away, directing his crews to overhaul the house to make sure there are no remaining hot spots left that could reignite the fire. Fuck, there is nothing left to burn, honestly. The entire house is gone. All except the one duffel bag Vanya managed to save.

We wait another hour before the paramedic gives Vanya the all-clear.

“The best thing for her is going to be steam showers to help get the gunk out of her lungs,” he instructs me. “If that doesn’t work, you can look at getting her an albuterol inhaler or nebulizer. Everything else is superficial. She doesn’t have any burns and shouldn’t have any lasting damage to her lungs.”

“Thank you,” I tell him sincerely. The medic gives me a knowing look before he starts to clean up the papers and debris in the back of the ambulance.

My secretary, Sophia, has already prepared my penthouse suite at my casino, The French Quarter. Anton opens the back door of the Escalade and I easily slide across the leather seats with Vanya in my arms. Her hazy eyes are drawn and tired. Her lashes flutter against her cheeks as she struggles to stay awake. She’s covered in scratches and soot. Her hair is a bird’s nest on top of her head.

I’ve never seen anything more beautiful.

During the drive between our house and the casino, she falls asleep, her head resting gently on my shoulder, her hot breath on the curve of my neck. It’s a delicious feeling that has my cock growing hard beneath her.

“I’ll see if I can get anything off the remote database,” Anton whispers

from the front. “The fucker who did this had to have been caught on camera somewhere.”

“Vanya says it was a woman,” I relay to him.

“A woman?” his voice is surprised.

“I think that this E-Ris person is a woman,” I divulge. “In fact, the name is from a Greek goddess. Eris, the goddess of strife and discord. Known in the Roman culture as Discordia.”

“So, we are looking for a female,” Anton repeats. “But who? None of the mafia families have any female leaders. Unless you’ve scorned some woman I don’t know about, I can’t think of anyone who would come after you like this.”

“It’s not me they are after,” I inform him. “It’s her. Luan said, ‘who says I was paid to kill her?’.”

“I’m confused.”

“I don’t think he was planning on killing her the night her parents were murdered,” I explain. “There is no way she should have gotten away like she did. He’s a skilled killer. He *let* her go knowing she would run to me.”

“So, whoever this E-Ris is, she’s after you?” He still doesn’t get it.

“No,” I assure him. “E-Ris is targeting Vanya. I bet whomever it is expected me to kill her. When I decided to sell her instead, they positioned Peter to do the buying.”

“Then why shoot at her in the alley?”

“Because I didn’t do what they planned.” I can’t believe I didn’t see this before. “They wanted a reason to start a battle in Vegas and if I killed or sold Vanya, the other families might have taken it as an act of war. They would have believed that I was the one behind the hit and that they would be next.”

“That seems like a stretch,” Anton sighs. “I’m not saying it’s wrong, but who gains from a war between the families.”

“Someone whose family has been after it their whole life.”

“The Albanians,” Anton breathes.

“Now I just have to figure out how Vanya fits into all this.” Because some things aren’t adding up when it comes to her. She looked at me like I hung the moon and stars and not like the bastard who nearly sold her to her abusive ex-fiancé.

“Do you think it could be Cora Berisha, Ada’s mother?” he asks. “She’s the only one we can’t account for.”

“Vanya says she died in a car accident when Ada was fifteen,” I remind

him.

“I’ll see if I can get my hands on the report,” he tells me. I chuckle.

“No need,” I say as I look down at my phone. I’ve been going through the messages I neglected throughout the day. “My mother is one step ahead. One of the detectives down at the station texted to tell me she requested the file.”

“Why?”

I stare down at the beautiful creature in my arms.

“I guess I’ll have to ask my mischievous fiancée when she wakes up.”

Thirty-One



Adrian's arms are wrapped around me. Holding me gently to his chest, whispering soothing words. I feel the vehicle come to a stop and a few moments later, the sound of the door opening. Groaning, I shift my head away from his shoulder to get a better look. It's still dark but I can tell from the heavy sound of traffic and the buzzing of voices that we are somewhere on the Strip.

"Where are we?" I ask sleepily.

Adrian slides out from inside of the Escalade keeping me in his arms. He looks down at me, something different shining in his eyes. "The French Quarter," he tells me. "One of my prestige hotels on the Strip."

Oh.

I've only seen one of his hotels, the one I went to for wedding dress shopping. I look toward the building he's walking to, my eyes widening at the sight. It's beautifully rustic. It has the elegance of the Paris, but with a sensual feel that oozes desire and lust. Anton leads us to the side of the building where one of Adrian's men stands guard in front of a pair of grand elevator doors.

As we walk toward him, he presses the elevator button holding the doors open for us, and we step inside. Anton presses his thumb against a scanner and up we go.

"This is fancy," I murmur. Anton chuckles.

"It leads directly up to the penthouse," Adrian explains. "That way I don't have to walk through the casino floor."

Can't really blame him. The Volkov name is known throughout Vegas. It brings both intrigue and fear to those who hear it. The doors open, and I'm

carried out to a sea of opulence. The entire outer walls are nothing but floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the wave of lights coming from the Las Vegas Strip. Burnt orange leather sofas and black armchairs are strategically placed in front of those windows for optimal city viewing.

It's so different from the house. It's cozier and less gaudy. There's a comfortable simplicity to it that makes me wonder which place he prefers more. Strolling through the penthouse he doesn't bother with a tour but takes me straight back to the bedroom where he sets me gently on the oversized duvet, so my feet are dangling over the edge.

"I'm sorry about the house," I whisper regrettably. "I know it's been in your family since your father came to America."

Adrian shrugs as he helps me out of my shoes. "Houses can be remade." He stands and goes to the bathroom. I can hear water running and when he comes back out, he's holding a white cloth. "You can't be."

"Well, at least you wouldn't have been forced to marry me," I joke to lighten the mood, as he washes down my sore feet. He stops his ministrations and looks up at me his face dark and serious.

"Don't say that."

His voice is a gentle susurrant that belies the savage look on his face. Having him look at me like I'm something special to him causes my emotions to spiral and I can't keep the tears back anymore. There aren't many people in my life that have shown me kindness outside of those who raised me. My own parents never felt the need to hold me or care for me as parents should. Even my grandfather, though he often showed me a gentle side of him, never showed me any true compassion or kindness. He never looked at me the way Adrian is looking at me now.

Like I'm the center of his world.

Like I matter. In this moment I don't feel disposable. I don't feel like a pawn that can be easily tossed to the side when their use is done. This is not Adrian looking at me but Adrik, the mysterious boy I fell in love with so many years ago.

Adrian's arms wrap around me, and he gently pulls me into his chest. This time I'm not fighting him or the pull between us. I bite my bottom lip fighting to keep the sobs at bay. Fighting to regain control, but it's useless. The trauma of tonight's events just seemed to compound everything that has happened since that fateful night.

"Come on," he ushers me gently. "Let's get you cleaned up."

I chuckle as I look down at my soot and grime-covered body. “What?” I tease. “Smoke kink not your thing?”

He flashes me a megawatt smile. “I’m into any kink you’re into baby.” He licks his lips. “I’ll take you right here, right now, if that’s what you want.”

Be still my beating heart.

All the blood in my body rushes to my core.

Dropping the cloth to the floor, Adrian stands pulling me along with him. His hands caress my backside, kneading the flesh before hoisting me into his arms. My legs automatically wrap around his muscled waist. He smells of smoke, sweat, and a hint of sandalwood. It’s soothing, and I breathe him in as he carries me into the bathroom. In his arms, I can forget about everything. Every unkind touch. Every mean word.

I know this doesn’t mean that he’s changed. A tiger can’t change its stripes and I don’t expect him to. He’s always going to be the mafia boss and whatever happened to make him this way isn’t just going to disappear overnight. I remember what Svetlana told me. That no matter our rocky start he would treat me with the respect that being his wife deserves. Is that what he is doing now? Is he treating me this way because he suddenly gave me the title of his wife or because he actually cares for me?

What happens when we disagree or when he grows bored of me? Will he seek comfort from someone like Celia again? Will I be made a mockery of? Adrian isn’t a good man. He’s a killer. A king whose empire is built on blood. Does that mean that he won’t be a good husband?

I guess only time will tell.

“What did you find out from the sniper?” I ask. “Did he tell you anything?”

When we reach the bathroom, Adrian deposits me on my feet. The tiled floor is cold against my warmed flesh. He’s quiet as he runs the bathwater, his fingers dipping in to ensure that it’s not too hot or too cold. For some reason that small move grips at my heart. It’s such a simple thing but it brings tears to my eyes.

“Did you know that Ada’s mother was Albanian?” He kneels down in front of me, sliding his fingers along the waistband of my pants. Slowly he draws the fabric down my legs placing a kiss over every bruise and scratch that climbing the lattice caused. Can a heart burst with fullness?

“Not at first,” I admit softly. My eyes are transfixed on his as he continues to remove every scrap of my clothing. “I’ve been trying to wrap my

head around everything. On who would want my family dead or why someone would hire a hitman to take out an entire household worth of people? I was twelve when Ada's mother died. My father said that she was on her way to pick Ada up from where he'd stashed her, and at the time I was too consumed with my friend's grief to think about what he said."

Adrian stands. Taking my hand, he helps me into the tub. The water is so high that when I sit some of it sloshes over the edge, but he doesn't seem to mind. The water is warm and inviting. It's a cocoon of safety around me that washes away the rest of the world until it's only me and Adrian. Nothing else exists outside of our bubble.

He grabs a washcloth and squeezes a drop of body wash onto it before he begins to clean away the evidence of the night from my body.

"Cora never drove herself anywhere," I continue after a moment. "She wasn't allowed a license. When I was sorting through anyone and everyone who I thought would take out an entire family, it all came back to her. And then I read the coroner's report. She was stabbed and beaten to where her body was pretty much unrecognizable. And then she had no head. Someone had taken it just like they took my parents' and my grandfather's."

"The hitman's name was Luan Osmani," he informs me. "He was Cora's brother and a serial killer."

That information confirms the theory that has been rolling around in my mind.

"I think the body that was found wasn't Cora's," I say. "But a body double. Everyone would think it was her because there was no cause for anyone else to be in that room."

Except Ada.

Ada would have been in that room. Did she know that her mother was alive all along? She'd grieved her just as I did but it hadn't lasted long and after that day, she barely mentioned her mother. The woman who fought so hard to raise her. Who went through hell every day to give her a roof over her head. Cora had been forced to see her daughter's father on a daily basis and had never been able to say a word.

I know what would have happened if she did.

My mother would have killed her and Ada if she ever found out my father had an illegitimate child. In our world, the wife's place at the husband's side is contingent on being able to have children and my mother could no longer bear a child after I was born. It's one of the reasons I believe she, and father,

detested me so much.

“That makes sense,” Adrian agrees. “But why is she doing all of this now after all these years?”

“Because...” I hesitate. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him about the man and his little girl, the one who looks like Ada, but I can’t. What if he uses her and decides to get rid of me? If Cora recently learned about the girl’s existence, her granddaughter with Castellanos blood, it explains why she ordered the hit. There is no one alive to contest the girl as an heir. Except me. But if fires keep spreading and snipers keep taking potshots at me, I won’t be alive for long.

Cora could control the entire Castellanos fortune through that girl as her guardian.

“Maybe she was building up enough power?” I say instead. “She would need money and allies, right?” He looks thoughtful for a moment before conceding with a tilt of his head.

“It’s possible,” he says as he continues to wash my body with care. We lapse into silence as he runs the washcloth over my breasts, the simple action causing my nipples to pebble as the rough texture contrasts against my sensitive skin.

My hazel gaze rises to his face, but his eyes are on the motion of the cloth as he dips down across my stomach and to my mound. He swipes the washcloth against my pussy and my back arches at the sensation.

“Fuck,” he curses. “Enough of this.” I yelp when he pulls me from the water without bothering to drain the tub first.

“Adrian,” I squeal when he marches from the bathroom with determined steps, me in his arms. “I’ll get the bed wet.”

Desire possesses every part of me when he throws me down on the soft covers. I bounce slightly, a giggle escaping me.

“I don’t give a shit.”

Excitement shoots through me, my body trembling in anticipation. I prop up on my elbows and stare up at him in wonder. He stalks toward me like a predator but this time I’m his willing prey. Adrian leans down his body just hovering over me, his lips millimeters away from mine.

“Are you ready for me, *moya malen'kaya I'vitsa?*” His words are soft wisp against my mouth that drives my need and desire higher. My core clenches at the thought of him taking me. Will it be rough and taunting? Or slow and loving?

The need in me keeps growing. So, instead of speaking, I slam my mouth against his.

Adrian is still for a moment, his lips tense against mine as he takes a moment to gather what I've done. Then, he's kissing me back fervently. He devours my mouth like a pirate captain taking no prisoners. It isn't slow and gentle, but it devours every piece of my soul. He shoves his tongue into my mouth as if he has a need to claim every part of it.

I've never felt like this before. This heat. This connection.

Adrian groans my name like he's a supplicant calling out to his god. His hand tangles in my hair and I delight in the subsequent pain it causes when he wrenches my head to the side, deepening the angle of his possession.

He pulls back from my lips, and I let out a small whine in protest at the sudden loss. There is a sly grin painting his mouth as he sheds his shirt and toes off his shoes and socks. I rub my thighs together, yearning for the friction, and admire the beauty of the man in front of me. He slowly unbuckles his belt as he strides to the edge of the bed. I shiver at the sound of the leather swishing through the belt loops.

Adrian tosses the belt aside and I barely have time to think about his next move before his body is covering mine, our lips locked together. For the first time, I'm free to let my hands explore the muscles of his body without consequence. I run my hands down either side of his neck, his shoulders, and his solid muscled chest. My fingers caress the tattooed skin as if by touching them I could learn their story.

He doesn't give me long to appreciate his body before he's shoving me further up the bed. And the next moment he's on his knees with my thighs tossed over his shoulders his face level with my pussy. Unlike our previous encounters, I don't fight him. I'm not scared or frightened of what is to come.

At this moment I give myself to him—all of me.

“I've been wanting to lick this pussy again since our shower.” His tongue skates along my slit. “I've thought of nothing but devouring your sweet cream again and again since that moment. Imagined you screaming as you orgasm on my fingers and tongue. Begging me to fuck you.”

“Oh, god,” I cry out as he shoves two fingers inside of me without warning.

“No god, Vanya.” Another slow lick. “Your fiancé.”

Fuck. I gyrate my hips trying to pull his fingers deeper inside of me.

“That's it, *detka*. Fuck yourself on my fingers. Make yourself come so I

can taste every bit of it.”

Holy shit. Who knew he had such a dirty mouth? His words feed the fire growing inside of me. My eyes clench shut as he plays with me, his fingers working in and out of my pussy, while his tongue slithers along my clit. He's like a starved man who's found water in the desert.

My nipples are hard, they're aching to be touched. Experimentally I bring my hands to my breasts and play with the hardened buds. I moan at the varying sensations that are skimming over my body.

Adrian doesn't let up as he feasts on my pussy like it's his last meal. I grind myself on his face as bursts of pleasure zip through me. Adrian gazes up at me through hooded eyes, a wicked smile on his arousal-tinged lips. He places a gentle kiss on the inside of my thigh before he stands and strips from his trousers.

I still can't believe I had that thing in my mouth.

It's hard and ready, pointing straight at me.

He gives himself a few hard tugs, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Do you want me to fuck you, Vanya?”

I may as well be a bobblehead with how hard I am nodding.

He tugs at his cock harder, and I swear to god, I salivate.

“Beg me,” he whispers darkly. “Beg your soon-to-be husband to fuck you.”

Can you orgasm just from words? I'm about to find out. His voice is low and throbbing with desire and need. He stands like an Adonis before me, perfectly sculpted. My body is on fire for him. He wants me to beg for him. I'm flying so high on arousal that he could ask me to get on my hands and knees and bark like a dog and I would do it.

I search his gaze for any malicious intent. Is he asking me to beg for it because he wants to use it against me later? To taunt me and call me a whore? But none of that's there. Not like it was before when he made me ride his boot until I came. No, all I see there is a deep lust brimming through him.

“Please—” I lick my lips and smirk up at him, my eyes dancing.

“Yes?”

“Please fuck me.”

He grins and stops stroking himself.

“I'm sorry,” he teases. “What?”

I playfully narrow my eyes at him.

“Oh, please mighty king,” I drawl dramatically. “Please fuck me with

your magic cock.”

Adrian's playful expression drops turning predatory and ruthless. He kneels on the bed situating himself back between my thighs. My pulse is fluttering like a hummingbird's wings, my chest rising and falling in rapid succession.

His fingers dance over my hardened nipples before scurrying up my chest to wrap around my throat. He's slow and calculated, a direct contradiction to the fire burning like embers in his eyes. Then he strikes. His mouth latches onto mine in a fury of passion as his hardness brushes up and down my slit.

Christós.

A growl emanates from deep in his chest as his thin hold on his control begins to fray. I know it's going to hurt. I'm not naive enough to believe that there won't be some kind of pain. My mother, when I got engaged to Peter, encouraged me to just lay back and take it. To let him claim what was his and not make a fuss. She'd said it was never good for the woman and that I shouldn't expect to be pleased. That's the only advice she ever gave me. How utterly fucking sad for her.

The swollen head of his manhood probes my opening. I tense, my muscles going rigid. Adrian shushes me, his soft voice whispering words of encouragement in my ear. One hand cradles the back of my head while the other is bracing his weight on the mattress. Another push and then a sharp burn tears through my core as he fills me in a single, forceful thrust.

My hands fly to his shoulders, nails digging into the soft flesh as my back arches and my hips try to pull away from the sudden intrusion. I bite my bottom lip and stifle a groan. Adrian's hand on the back of my head massages soothing circles as he gently kisses me, distracting me from the pain. He doesn't move, keeping still to allow me to adjust to his size.

“Open your eyes, *moya malen'kaya I'vitsa,*” he orders. Taking a deep breath, I do as I'm told. It stutters for a moment when he swivels his hips against mine. He pulls out and my body feels the sudden loss of fullness. Then he plunges back inside of me. He presses his chest against mine, his lips exploring every inch of my skin that he can reach. He thrusts again and again, his brutal pace slowly turning the bitter agony into bountiful pleasure as every hard inch of his manhood fills me.

Adrian's eyes hold mine for a moment and a sly smile crosses his handsome face. He sits back on his heels and grabs up my ankles in one hand to rest on his left shoulder. I moan in pleasure, the new position causing him

to hit something deeper inside of me.

Every neuron in my body is firing, overwhelmed. I can feel the coil in my core tightening and tightening until it feels like it's ready to snap. There's something deeper about this pleasure, something stronger.

"Adrian," I beg. "Please..." I don't even know what I'm begging for just that I need to. There's something coming, it's sitting right there on a knife's edge, but I can't seem to get it to fall over. His hand falls between us, his thumb pressing against my clit.

"Come for me," he commands with all the strength of a god. "Scream for me."

He pinches my clit between his thumb and forefinger as he fucks me harder. I'm muttering incoherently. Somehow, I've lost the ability to speak. Moans and whimpers spill over my lips like a waterfall. I need more. I want more.

"Do as I say," he growls. "Come. For. Me."

Then the world shatters around me. My body tenses and convulses, a scream of utter pleasure ripping from my throat. Every muscle is wound tight as the universe slips through me creating majestic euphoria.

I orgasm, if it can even be called that because I'm pretty sure that I just had a come-to-Jesus moment. Adrian doesn't stop fucking me, prolonging my rapture. His body jerks and his thrusts become more erratic.

"*Blyad*," he groans as he empties himself inside of me. He lowers my legs to either side of him and leans into me, resting his sweaty forehead on mine.

"You are absolutely gorgeous, Vanya," he whispers to me. "Fucking incredible."

He collapses beside me and pulls me into his side. My hand rests lazily on his chest just above his heart and I fall asleep to the comfortable, safe rhythmic beat of the first and only man I've ever loved.

Thirty-Two



The tomb is already dusty. It hasn't been that long since I brought Vanya here to say goodbye to the assholes she called parents, but in that small amount of time, dust has already gathered. Anton had already had the parent's tombs sealed shut. That isn't what we are here for.

Today, we're here to open the tomb with my fiancée's name on it. Someone is in there and she wants to know who. We'd spent the night talking and fucking.

Mostly fucking, but in between the times I spent buried in her beautiful pussy, she shared more about her life growing up in the Castellanos household and her day at the crypt. It bothered me that there was something about her family I didn't know. For example, Ada was Vanya's half-sister. How the hell had I missed that with all the research I had conducted? It's something I should have suspected sooner. Now Cora's expensive rehab trip made more sense.

But why had Theo Castellanos hidden her parentage?

Vanya thinks it has something to do with her mother, but I think it's something far more sinister than a scorned, petty wife worried about inheritance. Especially since they had planned on selling Vanya instead of making a marriage alliance.

There is still some piece of information missing, however. Cora seems like the obvious puppet master behind the hit on Vanya's family. It made sense that she wouldn't kill Vanya. If she wants the Castellanos fortune, she needs her alive... then, Luan tried to kill her in the alley.

Why the sudden change?

It must lead back to that man and little girl she followed into the store.

Except Vanya is a vault when it comes to them. She brushed it off this morning as a mistake saying that she thought the man was someone who once worked for her family.

It was an obvious lie, but one I let slide.

For now.

“Fuck,” Anton grunts as he hits the blunt side of his axe against the blunt side of my Halligan. It’s been nearly half an hour and we are barely over halfway done. “Next time, we’re using super glue or some shit. Just tape them up using duct tape. Everyone knows duct tape works for everything.”

Vanya’s giggle rises behind us. She’s been monitoring our safety from the steps of the doorway. The little minx just doesn’t want to put the sweat in. Not that I would let her.

“What do you think is in here, anyway?” Anton asks Vanya. “Obviously it’s not you.”

“I honestly don’t know,” she admits sadly. “Maybe it’s a decoy and they have information stashed in here.”

“Or maybe it’s the real Vanya Castellanos and you were taken as a baby to substitute.”

Vanya snorts. “I wish that were true,” she sighs, a finger tracing her birthmark. “Unfortunately, the mark on my skin proves that I am their biological daughter.”

I wish she wasn’t. The Castellanoses didn’t deserve to have a daughter like Vanya, whose soul is all light and happiness. Nothing like how Ada described her. Sometimes I wonder if they were really friends or if Vanya saw something that was never there. When Vanya talks about Ada there is a light in her eyes that shines. She believes her friend was good and caring, even in the end. Ada constantly complained about Vanya. How spoiled she was. How stuck up and conceited.

I’m beginning to think those flaws were all a self-reflection on my late wife’s part. Projecting her own insecurities and flaws on the person closest to her.

“Got it,” Anton crows as we finally break through the last of the tomb’s seal. He throws the axe to the side and picks up a crowbar.

“Ready?” I ask, my Halligan buried in one side of the tomb. Anton nods, placing his crowbar along the crack of the other side. “One. Two.” I grunt. “Three.” We lever the large concrete slab from its resting spot and maneuver it out of the way.

Grabbing a set of hooks, I secure them to the rods of the casket. I hand one strap to Anton, while I take the other and together, we manage to pull the casket from its resting place. It's lighter than I thought it would be and it isn't until we pull it out completely that I see why.

The casket is built for a child.

A baby.

"Jesus," Anton shakes his head. I don't think he had actually thought a child would be buried inside when he made the joke earlier.

"It's very..." Vanya pauses. "Opulent."

That's an understatement. The entire casket is decked out in gold and jewels. It has a pink undertone to it, signifying that whoever is inside was a girl.

Giving Anton a nod, we bend down and flip the latches, opening the lid.

It's a baby, alright. A newborn from the look of it.

"Oh god," Vanya sobs as she kneels next to the casket. The body inside is preserved fairly well for being nearly twenty-five years old. Whoever did the embalming had been paid to be meticulous.

"Is that..." Anton looks horrified. "Is that an umbilical cord wrapped around the neck?"

I take a closer look. It sure as hell looks like it.

"Oh my god," Vanya whispers from her place on the floor. She has what looks to be a journal in her lap. She's holding another one in her hands, flipping through the pages. "I killed her."

What did she just say?

Tears pour down my little lioness's cheeks as she flips through the pages.

"What are those?" I ask her.

"My mother's journals," she whispers hoarsely. "She wrote in them every day for nine months while she was pregnant with us. These are the entries she wrote right before she gave birth."

MAY 15TH,

SOMETHING IS WRONG. I can feel it in my bones. Everything has been too perfect this entire pregnancy and I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Theo thinks I am being paranoid. When he found out I was pregnant, he became ecstatic. We've been trying for so long. His excitement grew when I announced we were having twins. The moment he learned they were both girls, he grew distant. Angry. Girls can't inherit his empire. They aren't good for anything, even if he married them off for alliances, they will never be as useful as a male heir.

I assured him we can try again when they are born.

I'm doing this pregnancy alone now. He lost interest in the children and grew more interested in the whores he promised me he would never frequent again once I became pregnant. Apparently being pregnant with the weaker sex nulls that agreement.

I can only hope my girls won't face the same challenges with their future husbands and I do mine.

MAY 16TH,

SOMETHING IS DEFINITELY WRONG.

I began spotting and cramping. Magda, my home nurse, tells me it's normal, but I know it's not. I just know it.

MAY 18th

HOW CAN the heart suffer such tragicness? My soul felt heavy as the priest presided over the service. I can't find it in me to cry any more tears for the loss of a child I never got to know. I clutched the ultrasound photo firmly in my hand as they sealed her tomb.

Vanya Mariella Castellanos will never know the love I had for her even though I never met her.

I will spend the rest of my life getting justice for her murder.

Her murderer will never know love or kindness.

Theo's father says I am being irrational, but the proof is in the ultrasound

picture.

She murdered my baby.

Her sister. The chord was wrapped tightly around her neck, and she was holding it.

She killed her in the womb.

I'll make sure she understands what she's done.

Her name will be a reminder of what she cost me. A reminder of what she took.

I'll never love her.

Not only did she kill my child but because of the trauma caused to my body, I can't bear Theo any sons.

He said I'm useless to him.

So, she will be useless to me.

Vanya.

Vanya.

Vanya.

MY POOR BRAVE lioness is sobbing by the time she gets to the last entry. Her tears wet the pages. I gather her in my arms and hold her to me. Her entire body is shaking from the force of her cries. It angers me to think that a parent would blame a child for something they have no control over. Vanya didn't strangle her sister with the cord in the womb. Anyone with half a brain would know that due to the compressed space, it's more likely to happen with twins. I look at the photo that is tucked in between the pages where she was reading.

This was her damning proof that Vanya was a murderer?

All it shows is that she's lying on her side her small arms stretched out toward her sister. To me, it looks more as if she is comforting and not harming. It seems to me as if the anger was less about her child dying and more about her inability to be able to conceive an heir.

"None of this is true, *solnyshka*," I whisper to her as I rub a hand up and down her back. "These are the words of a grieving woman whose selfishness cost her the best thing in her life. A relationship with you."

"I know," she murmurs sadly. "But it still hurts."

"And it will for a while," I tell her honestly. "That feeling of rejection may never go away, but it will get better over time."

She nods her head but doesn't say anything.

There's nothing to say. For years she must have wondered about the way her parents treated her. What had she done to deserve their hatred and disgust? The answer was, absolutely nothing. Her mother was sick long before she lost her first child. Anyone can see that from her writings. Her last entry is the ramblings of someone whose grief and mental fitness were long gone.

I'm just sorry that Vanya had to be the one to suffer.

"Let's put her back in her resting place," I tell her softly as I pull away. "And head back to the penthouse."

Vanya nods solemnly before detangling herself from me. She places the journals gently back into the casket along with one of the bracelets I often see her wear. She'd brought it with her when we first came here.

My beautiful lioness places a soft two-fingered kiss on the coffin lid and watches with sad eyes as we place her back inside the tomb.

"I'll have the men come by later and seal it back up," Anton assures her. Vanya nods gratefully. Anton leads the way out of the crypt and I follow, stopping at the top of the stairs to wait for Vanya who is standing quietly in front of her mother's grave.

"I loved you even though you didn't deserve my love." Her voice is low and sough as if she is telling her a secret. "I'm sorry you didn't have the capacity to love me."

My jaw clenches when I hear those words because I feel them deep inside of me.

Vanya is to be my wife, but that doesn't mean I will ever love her. Because, like her mother, I no longer have the capacity to love. It's been tarnished and tainted by my past. Unlike her mother, however, I will treat my wife with respect. I will care for her every need. She will never want for anything.

I'll give her the world.

Just not my heart.

Thirty-Three



Something is off with Adrian as we make our way to the penthouse. Since we walked out from the tomb, he's been deep in thought, lost to the world around him. The only time he looks up from his phone is when Anton updates him about something at work. Maybe he hadn't meant what he said about the death of my infant sister not being my fault.

Or maybe it's something else.

He's still sitting in the back seat with me. That's something.

Now if only I can get him to look at me.

"The wedding dress should be ready tomorrow," I tell him. He gives a quiet hum of acknowledgment. In the review mirror, I see Anton's eyes flick back to us, concern lining the edges. I don't understand. He's the one forcing me into this marriage in the first place, I feel like he should at least show some interest.

"Were you able to get the information I needed?" Adrian lifts his head to ask his second in command.

"Yes."

"Good," he says. "If I can figure out how they play a part in all this, maybe I can start putting some pieces together."

"Who?" I ask my soon-to-be husband. If he's even lucky to be called that, at this point.

"Doesn't matter," he shrugs it off. "Not important for you to know."

I frown. Where is all of this coming from? "But important enough that you had to drag it up now?" Why is he acting weird? Anton gives a small cough from the driver's seat. Is it a warning to me or to his boss?

"My business is just that, Vanya." He finally puts down his cell phone. I

have his attention, but now I don't know if I want it. The look on his face melts away any hopes that surfaced last night after he made me orgasm. The man who tenderly held me in my family's crypt is gone. Maybe he was never there at all. Was it all a ruse or maybe it was my imagination projecting onto him who I wanted him to be?

"I'm going to be your wife," I hiss, but the sadness in my voice dulls the sharp edge of it.

"And as my wife you will be safe and provided for," he tells me with a straight face. "Nothing has changed, Vanya. You will do as you're told. Follow the rules and we won't have any problems."

Rules?

Rules!

"Are you kidding me right now?" I want to scream at him, but Anton is in the car.

"Vanya," Adrian warns me but at this point, I'm not listening to anything he has to say.

"What about last night?" Pretty sure my soul is withering in my body. "And today? Comforting me at the crypt. What was what? Providing for me?"

"You take care of my needs and I take care of yours."

No. He. Did. Not.

"That's what last night was all about, huh?" Tears are pushing at the back of my eyes, the pressure building. "Fulfilling your needs?"

"That is your job as my wife."

I snort in disbelief. "I'm not your wife yet, Adrian," I remind him, holding up the empty ring finger. "And I honestly don't think I plan to be if this is what you are offering."

A growl rips through him and a moment later his seatbelt is off and he's crowding my space, his body pressing up against mine.

"There are two choices here, Vanya," he sneers, all traces of the man who comforted me last night after the fire, gone. "Become my wife or go back on the auction block. You choose."

Hear that? That is the sound of my heart shattering.

This isn't the boy I fell in love with. He isn't the one who wrote those poetic words to me expressing his love, frustrations, and dreams. Those letters kept me going when all I wanted to do was give up. I think back to the fire, his strong arms wrapped around me, and his voice whispering words of

reassurance in my ear. His gentle touch in the bath and the careful way he made love to me.

Was that all a mask? A façade to lure me into a false sense of security so he could tear down my walls? Is he still punishing me for being a Castellanos? Something I have no control over? Svetlana was wrong when she told me I was a queen. She was wrong when she'd said that Adrian would treat me with the respect a wife deserved.

A wife deserves love and safety, and he can't give me either of those. How can a king love a pawn he pushes around the board, waiting for the right moment to sacrifice it for his own good? And safety? He might be able to keep me safe from a bullet—but I would never feel safe giving him the one thing that matters the most.

My heart.

“Okay.” I take a long, defeated breath. That seems to please him because he straightens back into his seat, re-buckling his seatbelt. I chuckle sadly, my eyes burning into his.

“What’s so funny?” he mocks.

“That I once thought you could be the man in those letters.” I shake my head in bitter disappointment as I place a subtle hand on my seatbelt button. It doesn't make a sound when I slowly release it. “What pretty words you wrote, Adrik. Too bad they were just false promises like everything else. Which is sad, because I loved that man who put his dreams and hopes for me to read in that red willow tree. I'm not sure how I expected you to be. Maybe this is how you always were. It sure does fit. You never did show up that night. That night you promised to take me away. I stood under that red willow tree for hours, waiting for you. You never came. You stood me up for someone else. Chose someone else. I've never felt like I mattered before. Not even to my best friend, but those letters you wrote to me made me feel like I was the most important person in the world. But you never really believed that. Did you?”

My words must shock him because his response to me flinging off my seatbelt and bolting out the car door in the middle of traffic, is low.

“Boss,” Anton cries over the noise of traffic. He must have gotten out of the car.

“Let her go,” I hear him respond.

Let her go.

Because that is what you do with pawns.

You sacrifice them and let them go.



ADRIAN

“YOU’RE A FUCKING IDIOT, BOSS,” Anton chastises me as he gets into the car. Traffic has started moving and the honking has already started. I don't refute his statement because it's true. I am an idiot. Vanya doesn't have a choice. She will marry me, but she needs to know that there are boundaries. Rules in place. I can't love her. Because I thought I was in love once and it nearly cost me everything.

What pretty words you wrote, Adrik.

How does she know about the letters Ada and I wrote to one another?

Had Ada shown them to her? She'd never mentioned it.

You never did show up that night. That night you promised to take me away. You stood me up for someone else. Chose someone else.

Does she have me confused with someone else? She knows I wrote my letters to Ada under my Russian name. Was that something Ada shared as well?

I stood under that red willow tree for hours...

Ada and I hadn't met at the red willow tree where we left our letters. She'd changed the location at the last minute stating that she was being watched. Followed. What had Vanya said about Ada? That she had become a maid for the Castellanos house at fifteen when her mother died.

Why would Castellanos marry off a maid?

He wouldn't.

Then again, Vanya said she is certain that Ada was her half-sister. But she was also never recognized as a Castellano.

Picking up my cell, I call the last person on earth I want to talk to.

A Spiridakos.

It rings and then, “Haven't you done enough, Volkov?”

“I can always do more,” I tell him with a shrug. “Or I can give you

something you want if you provide me with some information.”

He pauses but I can hear the gears whirling in his head.

“And what do you have to offer?”

“Castellanos’s east front properties,” I propose. “That includes access to the docks.”

Another silent pause.

“What do you need?”

I let out a breath of relief. “Was your brother ever actually engaged to Vanya or was it all a ploy?”

“He’d been engaged to her since she was three,” he says. “It was my father’s idea to merge the families through marriage. Theo only had one daughter and he didn’t seem to care who he married her off to.”

“What changed?” I ask. “When did Peter suddenly decide to sell her?”

Spiridakos huffs out a breath. “Peter owed a shit-ton of people he couldn’t pay back. Gorgio and I managed to hide a lot of the money from him, but he still kept digging himself a deeper hole.”

“And Castellanos agreed to this?”

“Peter said something about her father not needing her anymore,” he says honestly. “Not to mention that Theo Castellanos was also hemorrhaging money. His businesses were being hit on all fronts by some unknown gang run by some weird leader named E-Ris. He needed the cash flow to keep things moving.”

“Why didn’t he go to the other families about it?”

“Who the fuck knows,” Spiridakos sighs. “Peter was getting into some bad shit with Castellanos near the end. Something was haunting Theo, man. I’m not sure what it was but whatever he was into, he didn’t want the families to know about it.”

What the fuck was Castellanos getting into?

“I appreciate the information,” I thank him. “My office will send over the signed contracts tomorrow for you to sign.”

“Thanks.” He’s silent for a moment, not hanging up. “Be careful, Volkov. Whoever this E-Ris is, Castellanos was scared shitless.”

“Will do.”

I hang up on him.

Anton pulls the SUV into the parking garage of the casino.

“Good news?” he asks.

Placing my phone in my pocket, I slide out of the car to face my best

friend. He's been by my side since we were children. Every step of the way.

"I have a feeling this whole thing goes way deeper than I thought," I tell him as we head toward the elevator. "Someone's been playing me for a fool."

Anton is silent for a moment.

"Maybe it isn't you they're playing."

I pause and look at him for a moment.

"What do you mean?"

"Everything we've found out leads back to the Castellanos being at the center of it."

"So, what?" I press. "I'm just collateral damage in someone's war against the Greeks?"

Anton shakes his head and sighs.

"You're not collateral at all boss. You're the pawn and you're playing directly into their hands."

Thirty-Four



“Thanks for doing this, I appreciate it,” I murmur to Yelena as she drives us toward a small stretch of town on the outskirts of the city. This is where my father buried Cora. He had buried her with her late husband, the one he brutally murdered.

“My brother is an asshole,” she states. “I’m sorry he left you like that.” All I can do is shrug. I don’t really want to talk about that conversation, at the moment. My heart is still aching. Maybe I was wrong about him. Maybe there isn’t any Adrik in there at all. He isn’t actually the boy who wrote me those letters growing up. It must be someone else.

It has to be.

“Are you sure you want me to just drop you off here?” Yelena eyes the area nervously. “I can stay.”

I shake my head.

“No,” I tell her. “I need to do this alone.”

She lets out a long sigh but doesn’t argue. I think she understands my need for some space and independence. Yelena is a mafia princess, just like me, and even though she is afforded some freedoms, it’s limited.

“If you’re sure,” she says and pulls the car into a parking spot near the entrance of the cemetery. “Just call me if you want me to pick you up.” I nod. I’m glad that Adrian had decided to let me have a phone. Otherwise, I would have had to walk here.

“Take this.” Yelena hands me a black credit card. “Use it to get a Lyft or something if I can’t come and get you.” She screws up her nose. I smile a little. Yelena had snuck out of the penthouse to do this for me.

“Thank you.” I open the door and get out of the car. “I appreciate this.”

She smiles. “Us mafia girls got to stick together.” I chuckle and close the door, not waiting for her to pull out before heading into the gloomy cemetery before me. I don’t have to worry about a map. I know where to go. I was there when Cora was buried. At the time, I didn’t understand what it meant to be buried here. I didn’t know the history. Now I do, and I regret everything my family has done. This isn’t the place for her.

The afternoon sun is hot on my back as I trudge to the furthest side of the cemetery. A few trees dot the long expanse of space, but most of it is open to the elements. It isn’t a well-cared-for resting place. Most of the stones are cracked and the names are fading. What little grass there is, is overgrown. Small tumbleweeds litter the walking spaces.

There are small sheds near every section of plots for visitors to use. This place doesn’t allow for a groundskeeper. It’s a DIY situation here. I grab a shovel from the nearest shed and make my way to the grave.

Hopefully, karma doesn’t come biting me in the ass for disturbing someone’s resting place. Although, if I’m right, this particular someone doesn’t belong in this grave. The ground is hard, and I have a difficult time digging the shovel into the dirt, but once I get past the surface, it slowly becomes easier.

Time passes and I’m barely aware of the sun sinking behind me. It is growing dark and the lights in the graveyard have flicked on, but I’m still digging away. I must be close. *Christós, I hope I am.* A desperate ache is spreading up my lower back from digging hunched over. My palms are cracked and bleeding, fingers stiff. Sweat drips down my forehead and into my eyes, but I don’t stop.

I can’t.

The need to find out who is targeting me is greater than the pain. Nothing is adding up. I’m adding two and two and getting seven instead of four. I can understand Cora targeting my family, especially my father, but why me? The time I got with her was short, but she’d always treated me with kindness and compassion. She used to smile when Ada and I played together, her eyes a little sad.

Now I know the reason for that sadness. We were sisters and we never knew it.

Destined from the beginning.

That is also something that doesn’t add up.

Ada lying to Adrian about her mother. The accusation against her when

he'd mentioned that she'd betrayed him. None of that sounds like my best friend.

Then again.

When I think back on the years, I realize how much I might have missed. It's funny how, when you take a step back, your world opens a bit more and you see things from a different angle. I thought Ada had changed after her mother's sudden death, but now I can see that it started before then. It started the night I thought she'd been carving my birthmark into her skin.

Svetlana says it wasn't a scar from her cutting.

Which means she had been trying to shear it off.

The lightbulb dings.

She knew. Ada knew I was her sister and had been trying to remove the mark that signified her as a Castellanos. Did Cora tell her who she was? My father?

"WHAT DO YOU DREAM ABOUT?" I ask Ada as we lie in my bed. The morning sun has begun to slowly rise but we haven't been to sleep yet. Some nights are harder than others for Ada without her mom. It's been nearly a year since her passing, and I can tell that she is lonely without her mother to sleep at her side.

"Justice," she whispers, a dark note to her tone.

"Against whom?" I ask curiously. Maybe she wants justice against the man who blew the red light and killed her mother. But then, my father said that man was already serving a life sentence in jail for manslaughter.

"The bitter man and the pleasant man."

"Who?" I tilt my head, my gaze searching hers.

Ada sighs. "You don't know them," she says sadly. "You're lucky."

"Are these men in your dreams?"

"And my every waking hour."

"I don't understand." I'm trying to but she isn't making any sense.

"And you never will, Vanya," she sighs. "You're too sheltered and naïve to know anything. Sometimes, I wish I was you. I wish I could have what you have."

An unladylike snort bursts through me.

"You've seen my life, Ada," I remind her as I play with a lock of her beautiful curls. They are the same color as mine. Her eyes, too. We could be

sisters with how similar we look. Then again, most Greeks look alike to me. “Parents who barely acknowledge my existence. There’s no love here. No laughter. I’m not allowed to attend a public school or make friends. My life has been decided for me since the day I was born.”

“Still better than mine.”

“How can you say that?” Why would she think that? Her mother loved her and cared for her. My mother screams my name when she’s drunk and yells to the world what a disappointment I am. How she wishes I was never born. I’d rather be a maid or member of the staff than their daughter.

“One day,” she sighs. “One day I’ll show you what it’s like to be me and I’ll take everything you have.”

“Fine by me,” I tell her with a wave of my hand. “Have at it. Bonus points if you can stand in the room for five seconds with either of my parents without crying.”

She laughs.

“Deal.”

A SOLID THUD radiates through the shovel.

Paydirt.

I use the sides of the blade to shift the dirt off the coffin and to the side. When I finally get a clear view of the upper latch, I throw the shovel to the side and bend down. Flipping back the lock, I grunt as I struggle to lift the heavy wooden lid.

Unfit bitch.

I am going to get a gym membership when this is all done.

Running from snipers, climbing houses, and now digging holes... yep, soon I’ll be sweating to the oldies or taking Zumba classes.

Fuck this is hard.

A cloud of dust rises around me, a foul stench filling the air.

Gross. Gross. Gross.

This was a better idea when it was just in head.

Okay. I mentally gird my loins and lean down into the coffin. I can do this. I can do this. Maybe if I keep psyching myself up, I won’t vomit at the sight of rotting skin and bones. Taking a deep breath, I fortify myself. I can do this.

I’m on my knees on the bottom part of the casket, which is luckily solid

and not cheap. Otherwise, I'd probably fall right through it. Leaning forward, I run my gaze along her left arm searching for the...

No.

That can't be right.

It's faded, but there is no mistaking the outline of the golden eagle tattoo on her forearm, right where it's always been. That doesn't make any sense. Who else would want to kill my family? Everyone I can think of is either dead or doesn't have a motive.

Peter wanted money and control, but he never hired the hitman.

The four families would never have made a move against my father. They rely too heavily on their truce to keep the peace. It would be bloodshed if someone called for the hit.

From what I've learned, Adrian was already slowly dismantling my father's empire from the inside using a spy... again. A spy who was also murdered the same day as everyone else. If he'd ordered the hit, he would have left her alive. Also, he wouldn't have killed the hitman.

Right?

It's obviously not Cora since she's rotting in the casket below me.

Then who...? The sound of the shovel's blade skimming along the dirt draws my attention away from the grave. Then there is nothing but darkness.

Thirty-Five



“She’s not here,” Anton reports.

“Fuck,” I snap. “Where the hell can she be?”

Anton’s brow buries in his hairline. I’m not going to get any help from him. I’ve never seen him this angry with me before. He’s livid with what I told Vanya in the car. There are very few people in the world that I would allow to speak to me the way he did.

He’s lucky.

“Did you honestly expect her to come back here?” he asks seriously. “The look on her face when you said those things tells me you broke her heart. She’s not coming back, brother.”

“She should have known this would never be about love,” I snarl.

“Really?” he questions surprised. “Because the way you were with her last night after the fire and then in the crypt—that spoke volumes. Maybe you’re not up to *love* yet, but you care about her.”

I shake my head, dismissing the thought.

“Holy shit,” Anton smirks. “You are in love with her, aren’t you?”

“No,” I sneer, but it’s a weak denial. “I told myself I would never fall in love again. Not after what Ada fucking did.”

“Ok, you keep living in that pretty land of denial you’ve set yourself up in.” He shakes his head and smirks knowingly. Perceptive asshole. “Let me know when the rent gets too high, and you need to come back down to reality.” I run a hand through my hair as I pace the living room. “She needs to know that I can’t provide what she wants. She needs to leave her expectations at the door. I won’t go through that again.”

“Vanya isn’t Ada, Adrian,” he tells me softly. “In fact, I’m pretty sure

Ada wasn't Ada either."

I shoot him a curious look. "Why do you say that?"

"You see, I was actually listening to what Vanya was saying in the car."

He looks at me pointedly.

"I was listening."

He snorts. "Not well enough, or you are coming up with an excuse not to believe what you heard."

I grumble something unintelligible under my breath.

"Fuck you," I growl. "No one likes you."

He laughs. The fucker actually laughs.

"Nice try." He bats his eyelashes at me. "Everyone loves me."

"Because you're defective. They feel sorry for you."

The door to the elevator dings open.

"I don't feel sorry for him," comes a smug voice. "He's like a cute puppy who shits on the floor, but you can't get rid of him because of those big doleful eyes."

Anton scowls at the newcomer.

"Fuck you, Vitali," he spits playfully. "At least I'm cute. You look like the wrong end of a Doberman."

"He's right," agrees Kenzo, who's standing to Vitali's right.

"Pfft," Vitali shoves off the comment. "This coming from the man who acts like a miniature Pinscher. All bark and no bite."

The four of us crack up laughing.

I missed them. It isn't like the old days when we studied together at Royal Elite. We were inseparable. Now, we barely have the chance to see one another except for special occasions.

"What are you doing here?" I ask them.

Vitali inclines his head toward Anton. "This motherfucker filled us in on what's been going on."

Kenzo shakes his head and narrows his gaze at me. "Why the fuck didn't you tell us what was going on, *otouto*. We would have been here in a second."

"That's what I told him," Anton ribs. There's a teasing smirk playing on his lips, but his eyes are still serious. He's just as worried as I am.

"I didn't want to burden you," I admit shamefully. "If I hadn't been so weak, none of this would have happened."

Vitali steps in front of me, placing a strong hand on my shoulder. "You

are never a burden, brother. We are all in this together.”

“Yeah,” Kenzo speaks up with a broad grin. “That’s why we’re a Brotherhood. You know, *Brotherhood*.” He enunciates the last word. “We’re not the brotherlones.”

The three of us stare at him for a moment before bursting out laughing. Fuck, I missed them. We’d all attended Royal Elite University. It is a specialized training institution for those in the mafia founded by Tomas Ivankov. It’s neutral ground, anyone can send their men and women there to be trained as heirs, enforcers, or second in commands.

Vitali, Kenzo, and I were trained to take over from our fathers. Anton learned how to be my *Sovietnik*. Most of my men have gone through their training and so have the others. Matthias has a similar school for youngsters where they attend school and training from as young as kindergarten, but it is only designed for the *bratva*.

“Alright, point taken.” I give a sigh of relief. Friends like these are hard to come by in our world. Trust is a word that not many people know.

“So,” Vitali starts. “What do you need help with, *fratello*?”

“Kenzo, can you see what you can find out about where my fiancée disappeared to?” I ask him, tossing him my phone. “There’s an app on there that tracks the chip in her neck but it’s not working. The signal keeps bouncing all over the place for some reason.”

Kenzo nods and makes himself at home at the kitchen island, dragging out his laptop from his backpack and getting to work.

I turn to Vitali. “I need information on the death of Cora Berisha. Vanya had requested the file not that long ago, but it all went up in flames, along with my house.”

Vitali winces. “Yeah, I’m sorry about that man.”

I shrug.

“It never felt much like home anyway.”

Vitali nods in understanding. His father was usurped by this uncle when he was eighteen in Italy, and he’s never been able to go back. Unfortunately, even with our combined power and reach, it would be a battle we might not win. We’ve told him many times that if he wanted to fight, we would stand by his side, but he doesn’t want to take the risk.

“I’ll see what I can dig up,” he tells me and heads to the kitchen to join Kenzo. Anton turns to me.

“I’m still working on the identity of that man and his daughter,” he tells

me. “I have the facial recognition software working overtime and Matthias let me borrow his best hacker.”

“Thanks.” He bobs his head and goes to join the others. Meanwhile, I head to my bedroom to see if I can find some clues about Vanya. I didn’t think about it at the time, but I find it odd that she lugged a duffel bag up to the roof with her. She’d been clinging to it tightly, unwilling to let it go. It’s the same bag she’d used to pack her meager belongings from the Castellanos house.

What is she protecting so fiercely?

Where did she put it? I dig around the room, searching high and low for the bag. There it is. I find it hidden at the back of the walk-in closet, behind a box. Crouching, I zip open the duffel and peer inside. Clothes, clothes, more clothes, and... gotcha.

Wait. Is this—?

My hand reaches in to grab the stack of bound, folded papers. Pulling them out, I sit back on my ass and turn them over in my hands. The paper and specific fold are easily recognizable. My messy scrawl can be seen on the top of the first letter.

My little lioness.

I never called Ada that. Not once. I meant to, but whenever I attempted to call her by the nickname, it never seemed to fit. Is this why? Untying the ribbon, I sort through each letter I’d placed in that tree over the years. There are dozens of them, all perfectly preserved. Just like the ones I kept in the box in my office at work.

What this? There’s an extra letter at the bottom, messily folded, with my name on it. Setting the rest aside, I run my thumb gently over the paper. It’s tear-stained. Swallowing back the lump that has grown in my throat at the emotion building up around me, I open it.

Adrik

I’ve never known heartbreak until now.

Never known true sorrow until the moment I waited for you at the red willow tree.

Hours passed and the hope I had began to dwindle from a roaring fire into nothing but embers and smoke.

I texted you again and again, begging to know what I had done wrong.

*Was it something I said?
Is it my family? Did you see me and know who I was?
All my texts went unanswered.
Time and time again, until at long last I rid myself of the phone that once
connected me to you.
You're the boy I fell in love with and the boy who broke my heart.
I don't know if this will ever find its way to the willow, but if it does, know
this—
You are forgiven.*

*LOVE WITH ALL MY HEART,
Vanya Castellano, your lioness*

SHE SIGNED her true name in this letter. Gave me her identity. My eyes devour the page again and again. This proves that Ada was never who I thought she was. She wasn't the girl I'd been communicating with all those years.

Then why pretend she was?

What did she have to gain from marrying me?

I rush to my feet and out the door to where the men are gathered around the kitchen island.

"Vitali," I breathe. "Is it possible to clone a burner phone?"

Vitali turns away from his laptop to face me and nods. "It's actually easier to clone a burner because of the lack of built-in security."

"Would you be able to see records of a cloned burner phone?" It's a stretch, but I'm hoping he says yes.

"It's possible if I have the phone," he tells me. I hold up a finger as I back away into the hallway and open the closet door. Grabbing a large box from inside, I head into the living room and dig through it until I find what I'm looking for.

"The phone is fried, I believe." I hand it to him. "But the information should still be accessible."

Vitali nods and carries it over to his laptop. Within a few minutes, he has the face of the cell phone off and several wires connecting from its

mainframe to his laptop. Numbers and letters fill his screen like a scene from The Matrix. His fingers fly across the keyboard.

“So, burner phones are highly coveted because you can’t trace who buys them, especially if paid for with cash. But burner phones that clone another phone put themselves on the NOTL, or nationally organized telegraph list, because it gets flagged as having a duplicate number.”

Kenzo stares at Vitali’s laptop impressed.

“I’m searching for the phone’s number and... bingo,” Vitali exclaims. “There is another phone with the exact same number.” He clicks on both numbers pulling them up on separate screens. “Okay.” He points to the left side of the screen. “This phone number is over fifteen years old.” He points to the opposite side. “This phone number is only about eight years old. In fact, nothing on this device is over eight years old. Messages, calls, all of it is exactly eight years old.”

“What’s the date?” I ask.

“June 5, 2015.”

We all exchange a knowing look. The men in this room are all aware of my history. Including the texts and letters.

“That’s the day I got the text message asking me to change the location of where to meet. “Why change the location?” Kenzo asks.

“Because Ada wouldn’t have known where the red willow tree was.” God, I am such an idiot. How could I not see through all of that? Ada had been manipulating me from the very start. I’d bet anything that Ada blocked my number on Vanya’s cell phone so that she’d think I abandoned her. And I wouldn’t be any the wiser because Ada had all our messages as proof of who she was. Or who she was pretending to be.

“Why though?” Vitali asks the question I’m thinking. “She couldn’t have known who you were at the time. You never shared your identity.”

“Because it was never about him,” Anton whispers. “None of this is about Adrian.”

“Then who is it about?” Kenzo questions.

“Vanya,” I say. “This is all about Vanya.”

“She was never spying on me for the Castellanos,” I ground out bitterly. “She wanted me to believe that. I think she was doing someone’s dirty work. Spiridakos said that E-Ris had been making a play for his shipments. Theo Castellanos was millions in debt to suppliers because he kept losing all of them to an unknown thief. That’s information that takes

years to gather. I'd bet she was really looking to take the Castellanos down and whomever she was reporting to was the one funding it."

"So, you're saying over the last six years that whoever's running the show now has been using Ada's information?"

I nod. Anton's phone chimes and he walks over to the other side of the island to grab it.

"Here's what I don't understand though." I pinch the bridge of his nose in frustration. "If they were just going to call for a hit on the Castellanos family, why bother digging their empire into the ground? Why wait six years?"

Anton snaps his fingers. "Didn't Spiridakos say that Theo was giving up Vanya because he didn't need her for a marriage alliance anymore?"

"Yeah." I'm unsure of where he is going with the information.

"What if he found another heir? Someone related to him by blood but who wasn't his daughter."

I look at him in confusion. "I'm not sure what you are saying right now."

"That little girl and her father?" he starts. "Their names are Jonathon and Mary Tessler and this..." He swipes on his phone and holds it out for us to see. "Is his late wife Monica."

Holy fucking shit. I'm looking at a photo of Ada.

"Are you telling me his traitorous-ass wife had a whole other family?" Kenzo asks shocked. I'd almost believe it except for one small problem.

"Ada couldn't have kids," I tell them. "She had to have her ovaries removed when she was sixteen due to cysts."

"What does that mean? Who is that then? Her fucking doppelganger?"

I stare at the photo and shake my head. Fuck, I should have seen this coming. Ada didn't have a doppelganger.

She has a twin.

Thirty-Six



Jesus. My head hurts and one side of my face feels swollen. There is a whirring somewhere above me but I'm too tired to open my eyes.

If one of them can even open at all.

What happened?

I remember that I was digging up Cora's grave... she's definitely in there, and then...

"Look who's finally awake." That voice. I know that voice. "Come on, open those big eyes of yours, Vanya. I know you're awake. Don't pretend."

The jig is up. Slowly, because my eyelids feel like bricks, I open my eyes. Is this what it feels like to be hungover? There is a jumping monkey with a tambourine inside of my head. Possibly a bull raging through a China shop.

Ugh, Jonah's beady eyes. I should have known. The way he had looked at me when I first saw him should have been a clue.

Also, beady eyes. Need I say more?

But why?

"Where—" I lick my dry lips. My mouth may as well have cotton stuffed in it. I lift myself onto my elbows, slowly shifting myself into a sitting position. I'm on a couch in an old, decrepit motel room. A musty smell hangs heavy in the air. Mold and mildew creep up the walls. The carpet is so dark that I can't tell if it's stained or if it is supposed to look like someone vomited all over it.

I don't even want to think about what's on this couch.

"Where am I?" I ask, now that I can properly speak without feeling like the entire Nevada desert is in my mouth. My gaze draws away from the room and to the man sitting on the kitchen chair in front of me.

“The place where it all started.” He leers at me, his mouth tugged up into a sneer. What? Another glance around the room tells me nothing more than it did before.

“I don’t know what that means,” I tell him.

He smirks. “You will.” He tilts his head back and yells, “Boys!”

Taking the sparse moment when he is preoccupied, I dive off the couch and shove my foot down on his junk. He made it an easy target by having his legs played open. Jonah howls in pain. His sudden move to cup his jewels causes the chair to tip precariously and fall back on the carpet. Maybe it will come alive and swallow him whole.

That would be some luck.

“Fucking bitch,” he screams at me, his hand latching onto my pant leg as I scurry past him to get to the door. I manage to shake his grasp, but the loss of time costs me. The hotel door opens with a bang, and I find myself face-to-face with two Arnold Schwarzenegger lookalikes. They have matching sunglasses and black shirts. All they need is the accent with the tagline “Hasta La Vista” and they will be all set.

So that exit isn’t going to work.

Next.

Jumping over Jonah, I make a mad dash for the far window. I don’t dash fast enough. That or the Arnie twins somehow multiplied because I’m suddenly yanked by my hair and thrown against the opposite wall of the hotel room.

Yep, that’s going to leave a bruise.

I land in a heap on the floor, a groan falling from my lips.

Pathetic. Utterly pathetic.

“Fucking Castellanos bitch,” Jonah sneers down at me.

“Better than being a beady-eyed cum bucket,” I snort. “Are you the meat in that Arnie filling? Or the bottom of the ladder?”

He doesn’t respond, but his boot does come down on my head.

And then it’s lights out.



WHEN I COME TO AGAIN, my mind is a groggy mess. It feels like the Hangover Part 2 is going on in my brain. My entire body aches. I let out a

low groan as I pry my eyes open. I try to move my arms to ease the ache in my shoulders, but they're suspended above my head. My head rolls back, and I'm able to see the rope securing me to the ceiling of the motel room.

Soft voices whisper behind me in a language I've never heard before. The words are harsh and angry, and one of them is female.

I manage to lift my head back up, the simple movement sending shock waves of pain down my spine. Why did they take me? Why not just kill me when they have the chance? I struggle against my bonds, the rope biting harshly into the delicate skin of my wrist.

My toes barely graze against the carpeted floor. There's nothing for me to use to gain any purchase.

“You're awake again.” Jonah's ugly face comes back into view. He eyes me up and down and licks his lips lasciviously.

Yeah, no.

His hand reaches out and gently caresses the side of my head. “I'm sorry I have to do this,” he says regrettably. “I mean, we are technically family. Just not enough for me to care.”

Family?

“I don't know you,” I spit. “We're definitely not fucking family.”

A cruel sneer tugs at his lips.

“What do you know about the Greek and Albanian war?” he asks. “Did your father ever tell you about the monster he was? How he butchered women and children just to get what he wanted?”

I'd heard of that war alright. My father liked to boast about his conquests. I was too young to understand the first time I heard him tell it at a dinner party but as I grew, I slowly began to understand what kind of man my father really was.

Jonah is right. My father was a monster and if I get out of these ropes, he's going to see how very much like him I am.

“You're only painting one side of the picture,” I tell him. “I know all about what my father did and how disgusting it was. But I also know what the Albanians did. He killed your women and children and that was wrong because family should never be involved in a mafia war. But—they were murdering innocent people that had nothing to do with their war against the families. They had blood running in the streets of Vegas. People were afraid to come out of their homes or to visit at all because of the chaos the Albanians caused.”

“Did you know Cora was Albanian?”

I shake my head. “Not until recently,” I admit.

He lets out a rough sigh and nods his head. “Cora was my brother’s wife. When your father murdered him, he took her for himself. Turned her into a prostitute. A whore.” He turns away from me toward the kitchen table and picks up a small case. “Then he got her pregnant. Imagine my surprise when I found her at that rehab. I was going to rescue her. I told her we would take back the Albanian empire here and wipe the Castellanos from the face of the earth. Do you know what she said?” He turns back to me with a raised brow.

I swallow hard and shake my head.

“She told me it was over and to accept the defeat.” He chuckles as he takes a pair of pliers from the case. “I didn't take that so well.”

Fear tightens my stomach, and my mouth grows dry.

Is he going to use those on me?

Jonah walks toward me, every step he takes causes my heart to be faster and faster until I'm sure that it will punch through my rib cage. I can't think straight with the blood rushing to my head as terror seizes my lungs.

“I left her there with the promise of revenge. I told her I'd be back for her and that she'd come with me, or she'd die. Imagine my surprise the next time I found her she'd given birth.”

“Ada,” I whisper hoarsely.

Jonah chuckles darkly. “Did you know that a family's ability to give birth to twins is genetic?” he asks. Wait, is he saying what I think he's saying? “It's very rare for every offspring to be a twin but not rare enough that it can't happen.”

Oh my god. How could I miss that? That was the piece I couldn't get to fit in the puzzle. The moment that I saw that Cora's body was still in her casket, I came up with every plausible scenario that I could but none of them came to this.

I can hear the jingle of bracelets and the soft click of heels against the carpet behind me. Please, don't let it be her. Don't take that away from me. I closed my eyes and take a deep breath, the ache in my chest growing.

My body senses the disturbance of air in front of me as the clicking of heels comes to a sudden halt. My brain is begging me to open my eyes, but my heart is telling me don't because it knows what I see in front of me will ultimately break it.

Slowly, I peel open my eyes, tears streaming down my cheeks as a sob

breaks loose.

“Hello, little sister.”

I look at the woman in front of me. My best friend. And for the second time today, my heart shatters.

Thirty-Seven



Where the fuck is she?

Kenzo hasn't had any luck tracking Vanya's device. The signal keeps pinging on multiple cell phone towers, and he can't get a lock.

"This isn't a malfunction," he tells me. "Someone is purposely misleading you so that you can't pinpoint her location."

"Who would have the ability to do that?"

Kenzo shrugs. "Only people who know about it and have access to the software."

Eric.

I turn to Anton. "Get some men down to Eric's place now," I order. "I want to know what the fuck is going on."

"Got it," he responds as he steps out of the room with his phone to his ear. Could Eric have betrayed me? My gut is telling me no. He's been loyal to me for years. The moment I found out Ada was a twin, I briefly wondered if he had been in on it but remembered that there was no way for him to know. I'd had every inch of that room surveilled when he'd been in there working on my wife.

No, not my wife.

Her twin sister.

Ada had used her own twin sister to fake her death. She'd taken an innocent woman away from her family to use as a ploy so she could work on... on what? What is her endgame? If she wanted the Castellanos empire, why tear it down? No, it must be something deeper.

Or maybe it wasn't deep at all.

This whole time, we've been assuming she's after something big. Taking

over the Castellanos's territories or even trying to start a war between all the families here in Vegas. But what if she isn't? What if the only reason she has done everything was to achieve one thing, and one thing only?

Chaos.

She'd chosen that name because that is exactly what she wanted to cause but not between me and the Castellanoses. Or at least, not just between us. Everything she has done has directly affected Vanya. Ada discovered the letters and decided to pretend to be Vanya when we met. It broke Vanya's heart and for the next few years Ada smugly rubbed it in her face and Vanya was none the wiser. But that didn't matter to Ada because she knew what it meant to be the one to have me instead of Vanya.

The gardens.

Fuck. No wonder Vanya had spent so much time out there once I gave her the freedom to leave her room. I'd planted that garden the exact way she had described it in her letters.

"Boss," Anton shouts. "Eric's been stabbed. He's currently at Vegas Memorial in surgery."

"How the hell did that happen?" I growl.

"Mac says the doc's entire home office was torn apart and his laptop was taken."

Shit. I stroll back into the kitchen. "Do we have video surveillance?"

"Yep." Anton pulls it up on his phone and tosses it to me from across the island. "You're not going to believe who it is."

Un-fucking-believable.

Jonah, that slimy bastard. The camera clearly shows him rooting around Eric's office. When Eric rushes in to confront him, Jonah stabs him several times before running off with his laptop.

"Shit."

"Not to add to your plate, but I've got the coroner's report on Cora," Vitali pipes up. He shifts the laptop so we can all see. "Multiple stab wounds to the pelvic cavity. Head sawed off. She was found in a hotel room in Spring Valley."

"Sounds like the work of her brother," Anton points out. "But why would he kill his own sister?"

Why indeed.

"It doesn't make sense that a man did this though," Vitali says. "The report says that the stab wounds were most likely done by a female. Not a

male.”

“Was the sawed-off head done by a female, as well?”

Vitali shakes his head. “Nope, that was definitely done by a male.”

“Why would someone do that to another woman?” I ask Vitali, the resident psychologist of us all. He’d been trained in the art of neurolinguistic programming at Royalty Elite. The same science used by the FBI to track serial killers.

“I would say resentment,” he tells me with a look of disgust. “Of what, I don’t know. It could be a scorned lover resenting the prostitute her man is sleeping with. Maybe her madam if she pissed her off or stole money.”

“Or if she resented being born?” Anton asks hesitantly. I turn to look at him.

“You think Ada killed her own mom?”

Anton shrugs a shoulder. “Vanya told you that her father used to take Ada away from her and that when she came back, she wasn’t the same. What if Theo was whoring Ada and her mother out in that hotel room and then one day Ada just snapped?”

Fuck. She’d really resent her mother then.

“Together?” Kenzo’s face twists in disgust. “Like a mother/daughter special?”

That sick motherfucking bastard. Making money off his own daughter like that. I knew Theo Castellanos was a depraved human being, but this takes the cake.

My phone rings, dragging me out of visualizing all the ways I wish I could bring him back to life just to kill him again.

I look down at it.

My mother.

I press ignore.

It rings again.

My mother.

I press ignore.

Another ring.

Son of a— I answer the phone.

“Yes, mother.”

“Adrian,” my sister’s voice is panicked. I straighten up.

“Yelena,” I bark. “What’s wrong?” My sister is sobbing into the telephone. I can hear my mother in the background soothing her.

“It’s Vanya,” she hiccups. “I—please don’t be mad.”

Mad? I’m going to blow a fucking fuse if she doesn’t tell me what the fuck is going on.

“Yelena, what about Vanya?” I urge, frustrated with how long this is taking. “Do you know where she is?”

Another sob. “I—I picked her up after she ran away from you,” she cries. “She had me take her to this cemetery on the other side of town. I told her to call me when she was done or use my card to call a taxi or Lyft.” She pauses.

I clench my free hand into a fist and tighten the other one around my phone. “And?”

“Nothing,” she wails. “She hasn’t called and there has been no recent activity on my card. I panicked and told Mom and she told me to call you. I’m so sorry. She was just so broken down and sad and she said she wanted to visit the grave of her best friend’s mother.”

Cora’s grave. I turn to Anton.

“Get me all the footage from Section B5 of the cemetery on Canal Street,” I snap at him. He doesn’t waste any time doing as I request. When Matthias had given me the information on Ada’s mother, I had looked into where she had been buried.

“I’m so sorry, Adrian.”

“It’s okay, Yelena,” I soothe her in a gentle voice. “You did the right thing calling me, but I’ve got to go, okay?”

“Okay.” Another hiccup and then she hangs up the phone.

“I’ve got her,” Anton calls a few moments later. “She goes into the cemetery but doesn’t come out.” A few more strokes on the keyboard. “Fuck. There isn’t an angle on Cora’s grave.”

Dammit.

“Wait...” His index finger scrolls on the mouse. “Several hours later a small van pulls into the parking lot and... ten minutes after that it looks like they are carrying someone over their shoulder. It has to be Vanya.”

We got her.

“Kenzo. Can you track the chip in Yelena’s credit card?”

Kenzo smiles broadly. “You bet your ass I can.” All the black limitless Amex credit cards have a tracking chip in them in case they're lost or stolen. If we're lucky, the men that took her won't know that.

“Bingo,” he shouts. “You're not going to believe this. They're at the motel where Cora was found murdered. I've sent the address to your phones.” This

news should surprise me, but it doesn't. If I've learned anything it's that Ada seems to have a flare for the dramatic when it comes to Vanya. For Ada, that motel is where it all began. Long before murdering her own mother.

“Let’s get strapped up,” I tell them. In minutes we're down in the basement of the casino where I keep the Armory. Each of us grabs a Beretta 93R submachine gun as well as our Glock 45s. Fifteen of my men are gearing up with us and ready to be on standby in case anything goes wrong. We don't know how many men Ada will have at her disposal, and we want to be prepared.

I strap on a bulletproof vest and tuck my Glock into the holster that sits above my heart. Another Glock sits at the small of my back while I sling the strap of the machine gun over my shoulder. I load extra ammunition onto the clips that are anchored on my belt.

Together we make our way to the parking garage, our entourage of SUVs already waiting.

“You all know our target,” I tell the men. “The asset’s picture has been loaded onto your phones and you are to protect her at all costs.”

“Are we taking anyone alive?” one of my men asks.

“No. Kill them all.”

Don't worry, moya malen'kaya I'vitsa. I'm coming for you.

Thirty-Eight



Pain.

White, hot, blinding pain.

It is all I feel. It's everywhere. Unbearable and relentless, offering no escape from the constant torment. Groaning, I slowly begin to regain consciousness, fighting the roll of my stomach. How long have I been out this time? Seconds? Minutes? Hours?

My brain is pounding like a heartbeat against my skull. Warm, sticky liquid is trailing down the side of my arm where Ada had started cutting me. My breathing is shallow and painful, an ache in my lungs making it nearly impossible to take a deep breath. Even the tiniest movement sends a searing bout of agony cascading through my midsection, burning a trail across my lower body.

I'm not sure how long she worked that knife across my skin like it was a paintbrush, and I was her canvas, but it was long enough that my body finally gave out. My shoulders are screaming at me and I'm worried about the damage that having them above my head for so long is causing. It almost feels like they're dislocated, but when I try to move them or do anything to lessen the strain on the tender joints, a fiery stinging on my wrists stops me.

"Welcome back," Ada drawls, standing up from her chair. "I can't tell you how cathartic it is to see you in my position. You always did say my life was better than yours. That one day we'd trade places. Well—" she gestures to the room around her. "Welcome to my life, little sister."

"What are you talking about?" My voice sounds strange to my ears, hoarse and scratchy, my larynx sore from all the screaming.

"This was my reality, Vanya," she hisses at me. "I was fourteen when our

father brought me here and made me watch as his men gang-raped my mother.”

No. My father was a monster but not... he wouldn't...

“I can see you're struggling with that.” She moves closer to me. Instinct has me shrinking away from her. My toes slip out from under me as I try to move away, and I grunt in pain as my body weight pulls against my shoulders and wrists. I can feel the fresh blood of my torn skin pouring down my arms. A feral smile stretches across her painted lips. She's enjoying this.

“You got your revenge,” I tell her. “You killed him. You killed them all.”

She laughs. “I did. Hired that stupid uncle of mine to do the job and he couldn't even do it right. He had to go and take the heads. Sick bastard liked to use them.”

Oh, that's disgusting. If I wasn't nauseous before I am now.

“So, what now Ada?” I ask. “You're gonna kill me, too?”

She touches my cheek with a long, painted fingernail. “Oh no, little sister. I've got an exciting agenda for you.”

That sounds about as much fun as Edward Scissorhands giving me a back massage.

“Sorry to disappoint. But my agenda is already fully booked.”

Ada throws her head back and lets out a full-belly laugh. “It seems the little mouse has found her voice. You were always such a meek and quiet little thing which is why it was just so easy to manipulate you. Make you see what I wanted you to see. I told you once, Vanya, that it's always worth taking something from someone.”

“Is that why you took Adrik?” I snarl at her. “Because you wanted to take something from me?”

Ada makes a tscking sound, wagging her finger in front of me. “It's about so much more than that. You wouldn't understand because you don't have my vision. My drive. You should never have been the heir. If only he would have recognized me, I could have been the one writing letters and dreaming about a better place. Instead, I was tortured and beaten and raped. Our father used to call it the two-for-one special. Buy the mother get the daughter half-priced.”

Yeah, I'm done with the empathy card.

“What do you want me to say, Ada? You want me to apologize for being born the way I was? Let me tell you something—you're no better than he was. You wanted your revenge on him for what he did to you. I could

understand that. Hell, I probably would have helped. They weren't my family; they were just the people who donated their DNA." I narrow my eyes at her. Well, as best I can with one eye being nearly swollen shut.

"But you murdered everyone in that house," I hiss. "Those people were my family, and they were yours too. They took care of you after your mother died. Made sure that you had everything you needed. They—"

"Didn't do a thing to stop it!" she screeches, finally losing the carefully crafted control she's been sporting. "No one did. That's why I killed my own mother. Jonah here told me how he'd planned to rescue her and take her away. She said no. She let him walk away without her. If she had gone with him, then none of this would have happened. I'd be happy and free and..."

The scream I release is long, echoing throughout the room. She'd swung a bully stick into my shins with enough force that I'm surprised it didn't break the bones. She swings again, slightly higher on my legs this time. Tears spill down my face as she does it again and again. What little support I had on my toes is gone and I slump down unable to support my weight under the brutal assault. My shoulders and wrists are burning as I hang there, struggling to breathe, think, and survive.

"Adrian's going to kill you," I promise, cementing the vow in my head.

She leers down at me, loving every moment of my torture. There is a sadistic gleam in her eyes that tells me I have no hope of reaching the bright-eyed, thirteen-year-old girl who was my best friend.

"He's never going find you." She licks her lips. "And even if he does, by the time my men and I are done with you, he won't want you back. He barely wants you now."

Her last sentence hits me harder than any of the physical blows she's dealt me. From the wicked glint in her eyes, she knows she's struck gold. There is a possibility that Adrian won't come for me at all. Maybe if we were married but even then, it would be more out of duty and obligation than the fact that he actually cares or loves me.

"Tell me." She leans in to whisper in my ear, her lips brushing up against the shell. "Does he call my name when he fucks you? Does he call you a good little girl? How does it feel to know I had him first?"

I'm silent for a moment and she leans back, a triumphant look plastered on her face. "It kind of feels like this." With what little strength I have, I rear my head back and smash my forehead into her nose. She cries out, her hands flying to her face.

Worth it.

She goes to strike me with the bully stick, again. A strike that is clearly meant for my face, when suddenly, all hell breaks loose. My eyes clench shut after the first shot is fired. Then there is another and another. I hear a wounded cry in front of me, but I still don't open my eyes.

I do scream, however.

"Vanya," I hear an angel's voice calling me through the fog of terror. "Baby, open your eyes. Please."

I can't. I'm dead. That is the only explanation for why he came for me.

"Please, *moya malen'laya I'vitsa*," the angelic voice begs, as gentle hands roam my body.

"Cut her down." Anton. My eyes fly open when I hear his strong command. Maybe this is real and not some death-fever dream. Adrian's blue eyes stare back at me, soft and concerned but I can see the predator lurking in the depths. He's angry but he's trying to stay calm.

For me. He's trying to stay calm for me.

The rope above me slackens and suddenly I'm falling, unable to slow myself down. Adrian's strong arms catch me, lowering me gently to the ground.

Adrian's crystal gaze darts all over my face and body. I relax in his arms, knowing I'm safe. My body jerks at the site of another man kneeling before me, a small knife in his hand. It takes me a moment to recognize him through my swollen eyes, but his caramel skin and wide-set eyes are hard to miss.

Kenzo Nakamura, one of the Sovereign Brothers and heir to the Yakuza throne.

"We've got to get her to a hospital," he says as he slowly cuts through the rope wrapped tightly around my hands. An agonizing moan slips through my lips as he unwraps the binds. Dried blood is stuck to the fibers and it's pulling out my skin reopening the wounds on my already shredded wrists. Adrian flinches at the sound, tossing the ropes aside as he gathers me closer in his arms. Anton and another man I know as Vitali, skid to a halt in front of us, their faces paling as they stare down at me.

"*Khristos*," Anton mumbles. One of Adrian's men comes in carrying a small black bag. He kneels on the other side of me and sets to work on patching up my wounds the best he can.

I struggle not to cry out with every touch. Adrian pulls my face toward his with a gentle hand. I don't turn away because I can see that the thread

holding onto his control is beginning to fray. His breaths are coming fast and ragged and even though he's looking at me I can tell that his eyes are unfocused. Physically he's here with me, holding me in his arms, but his mind is somewhere else entirely.

Adrian is a dangerous man. He doesn't need to work at it. Hell, he doesn't even need to try. He is built to inspire fear, but unlike others in his position, he doesn't surrender to that nature unless he's given no other choice.

"I knew you'd come." It's a lie because man did I have doubts, but it's a lie he needs to hear right now. He exhales harshly, the fog in his eyes clearing. He bends forward and brushes his lips against my forehead.

"I'll always come for you," he assures me earnestly. "I love you, Vanya. I was too afraid to tell you before because I didn't know if I could survive being manipulated and lied to again. But I realized that it was unfair of me to compare you to the one that came before."

My gaze moves to where Ada lies on the floor, her eyes open and lifeless. I should feel sad, right? She was my best friend. But then again, she took everything away from me. If she would have confided in me about what our father was doing, I would have helped her, but instead, she internalized her anger and her pain, and then she released it on me.

All the chaos she caused was simply so that I would feel the way she felt. She wanted to subject me to the pain that she was forced to endure for years. She wanted revenge, but instead of taking it out on the ones that deserved it, she thought I should be the one to suffer instead. I have a feeling that even though she got her revenge on our father, it was never truly him she was after.

"We need to go," the man treating my wounds tells them.

Adrian nods his head, putting his arms underneath me, and lifting me with ease. I cry out like a wounded animal, the pain from the simple movement sending shock waves of agony across my entire body.

"Fuck, I'm sorry." Adrian's voice is thick with emotion as he carries me from the motel room, clutching my body gently against his solid frame. My head rolls to the side, coming to rest against his chest.

"It's okay," I mumble. And it is. I'm in pain, but it's a pain with a purpose now. Every step he takes is carrying me further away from this nightmare. And that's all I can ask for.

Thirty-Nine



“We’ve got a problem, Volkov,” Lorenzo Gallo says over the phone.

Sighing, I lean back in my chair, my eyes still on the video feed of my fiancée sleeping in our bed. The temporary doctor I have filling in for Eric, while he recovers, had finally given the all-clear for me to fuck my lioness and I took full advantage of that last night.

“And what is that problem, Gallo?”

“You know what the fucking problem is,” he snarls. “Don’t play dumb. You are taking all the Castellanos’s assets for yourself.”

“Well, not exactly, since I did give a piece of it to the Spiridakoses as a goodwill gesture,” I tell him lazily.

“That’s against the code,” he hisses. “Territories of fallen families are to be divided equally among all of us. You know that. Yet you seem to be hoarding it all.”

He’s forgetting one very important detail, however.

“The Castellanoses are not a fallen family,” I remind him. “Vanya Castellanos is the sole blood heir to her father’s fortune and in approximately two months’ time, she will be my wife, which means all of her assets transfer to me.”

“You little fucking shit.”

I chuckle darkly. “Funny thing about that, too,” I continue nonchalantly. “It seems like someone was backing Ada and her Albanian family. There is no way she had the funds to do half the shit she did. Like hire a hacker to make it look like I paid the hitman out of my own accounts.”

His hesitation reveals that he knows exactly what I’m talking about.

“It would be really bad if the information I found on her computers

somehow landed in the lap of the other families, wouldn't it?"

"Be careful, Volkov," he hisses. Yep, I've touched a nerve alright. "I've been running my organization longer than you've been alive. Don't threaten me unless you want a war."

"By all means," I scoff. "Go right ahead and declare war. Just remember that I have the complete backing of the entire Sovereign Brotherhood and the Ivankov Bratva. How well do you think you'll fare against all our forces? You might get some of ours, but we'll take down all of yours."

"Watch your back, Volkov," he huffs. "Utter shit like that and someone might come for you and that pretty fiancée of yours."

"Mention my soon-to-be wife again, Gallo, and I'll come and personally rip your tongue out."

I end the call.

Fucking asshole.

The Gallos are known for their ruthlessness but so am I.

I set down my phone on my desk and go to find my woman. *My woman*. I like the sound of that. Not that long ago, the thought of her being my woman turned my stomach. Not because she isn't beautiful or amazing. Vanya is nothing but sunshine and laughter. She's the fresh smell of rain after a storm. But because I thought I cared for someone once and it nearly broke me when she betrayed me.

Anton has made me realize that those feelings weren't mine but rather, Ada's manipulation of my feelings. The moment Vanya had flung herself from the car, I regretted my words. She is more to me than just some trophy wife. She's everything to me and I will spend the rest of my life showing her how much she means to me.

Especially if it means I get to bury myself between her thighs every day.

Forty

Vanya



Sunlight spills through the gauzy curtains of our bedroom. It's been nearly six weeks since Adrian rescued me from my deranged and mentally unstable sister slash best friend. My heart still aches when I think of her, but I don't mourn her. Not anymore. I had six years to mourn the version of her I knew growing up and not the twisted version of her that had kidnapped me.

I snuggle closer to the warmth beside me, relishing in the feel of his hard muscles against my soft skin. Adrian lazily runs his hand through my hair, his eyes still closed. Since that fateful day, he's been doing everything to show me how sorry he is for everything he had done.

Well, most of it. I'm pretty sure he's still not sorry for any of the sexual misconduct, or even about selling me... shit... I'm positive that the only thing he is actually sorry for are the words he uttered in the car. He'd said he didn't care about me. That he didn't love me. Because he does.

Said so himself a few times.

I recorded it, too.

I spent a week in the hospital before I'd finally been allowed to come home and that's when he spilled how he found the letters while he was looking for me. He apologized for being so blinded by Ada that he didn't see the truth.

There is nothing for him to apologize for on that front. I'm sad that my friend took the years we could have had together away from us. Maybe if she hadn't, he would be a different man and I would be a different woman. Ada undoubtedly shaped him into who he is today. Unforgiving, relentless, and sometimes, distant.

The boy I wrote to for so many years is gone, but so is the girl who wrote

those letters. We have both been shaped by people who manipulated us. And that's alright. It's who we are. Outside these walls, he's every bit the head of the Bratva and one of the feared Sovereign Brothers. But in here, our home, he's just Adrik to me. The man I love with all my heart.

Adrian clears his throat and looks down at me.

"I—uh—I got you something." He's nervous and it's cute. I try not to giggle because I don't want him to feel uncomfortable.

"You didn't have to get me anything." I smile at him. He gives me a sheepish smile in return before leaning over to the nightstand and removing a black velvet box.

O.M.G.

"Is that what I think it is?" I squeak with excitement, shoving myself up the bed to lean against the headboard.

"I realize that I never got you one when I asked you to marry me."

I stare at him, a dubious expression on my face.

"You asked me to marry you?" I raise a brow at him. He chuckles.

"Miss Vanya Castellanos." He opens the lid of the box to reveal a large emerald-cut, pink diamond that looks oddly familiar. "Will you marry me?"

"Of... wait—" No. It can't be. He wouldn't be that crazy, would he? "Adrian Volkov, is that the Graff Pink diamond?"

The bastard gives me a smug smile. "Why, yes, it is."

"Are you kidding me?" I balk. "How the hell did you even get this? It's worth millions of dollars."

The Graff Pink diamond was once owned by celebrity jeweler, Harry Winston. The carat weight is rumored to be at least 24 carats and worth millions of dollars on the market, without being mounted on a ring.

Adrian has that sucker mounted on a wide black band. It's mounted in a way that it looks like there is ivy growing around the diamond. My favorite plant.

"Fifty-two million to be exact. Making it even more expensive than Grace Kelly's ring."

Whoever the fuck that is.

"*Christós*," I murmur.

A hand tugs at my hair and I moan.

"You never answered my question."

I smile up at him.

"Yes," I tell him. "Of course, I will marry you."

“Good girl,” he whispers and leans down to kiss me, his hand sliding the ring onto my finger.

“You’re going to have to get me some more bodyguards, though,” I tell him seriously as I admire the look of it against my skin. “Someone sees this thing on my finger and they’re going to try to cut it off.”

Adrian chuckles, turning toward me slightly. “I’d like to see someone try.” I laugh as puts his hands on my hips and pulls me to straddle him.

Circling my arms around his neck, I whisper, “I love you, Adrik.”

“I love you, *moya melan’keya I’vitsa.*”

Adrian’s hand wraps around the back of my neck and pulls me into a kiss. Soon, we’re dragging the covers off our bodies and I’m impaling myself on his hard cock, riding him like a stallion at the Kentucky Derby, our fingers linked together.

It takes us another hour to get out of bed and into the shower, and then another half an hour after that since he insisted on making me come on his tongue before we left. He isn’t telling me where we are going, just that it’s a surprise.

I sit in the back of the Escalade with him as Misha drives us just off the Strip. The building is one of the older constructions that somehow managed to survive the upscaling and rescaling era of newer Vegas.

“Mr. and Mrs. Volkov,” a young blonde woman greets us as we walk in. “Welcome. Mr. Trent has prepared the conference room for you. It’s all set up.” She guides us further into the building and into a large, glass conference room full of photos and blueprints.

“Adrian, what is this?” I ask, my eyes perusing the materials. He smiles down at me and gestures around the room.

“This,” he says. “Is where you and Trent will build our new home.”

“What?” My head snaps up to him in excitement. “Really?”

He nods. “The other house is a total loss, but the gardens and everything are all intact, for the most part,” he says. “You can build where the old house stood, or we can pick somewhere else on the property. We can even build it where your family’s house stands if you want.”

I grimace at the idea of going back there.

“No,” I tell him. “I have another idea for that space.”

He nods and doesn’t press me. Adrian is letting me have a complete say over all the Castellanos assets, except the illegal side. With the help of the remaining Spiridakos brothers, he’s already dissolved the flesh trade that my

father and Peter started. He's keeping the legal brothels and the half-dozen casinos and hotels my father owned, but everything else is mine.

I decided to turn it into a women's shelter. We'll house women who are leaving abusive relationships or situations as well as victims of sex trafficking. They'll be able to learn new skills to live and survive on their own. We'll offer new identities and everything.

But most importantly, I want to ensure that nothing, like what happened to Cora and Ada, happens again on my watch. I know that realistically I can't save everyone, but I can try. Svetlana has already put me in contact with a group of female bikers who are based out of Seattle, named the Vixens. Apparently, the MC's president's mother spent her life rescuing trafficked women. They've been looking at expanding and they offered to ride out here for a weekend so we could all chat and get to know each other.

"Ah," An elderly-looking gentleman strides into the room. I'm assuming this must be Trent. "Mr. and Mrs. Volkov, I am excited to finally meet you."

"It's nice to meet you as well," I tell him, shaking his hand with a smile.

"Come and take a seat over here and let's get planning that new home for you." He motions to two chairs at the table.

"A new home," Adrian whispers in my ear, his voice low and seductive. "Means new rooms I can fuck you in."

A blush creeps up my cheeks as I swat playfully at his arms.

A new home indeed.

And a new start with the man I love.

We didn't get the start we wanted, but I think, in a way, we got the start we needed.

Forty-One



I t's raining on my wedding day.

Some would call it a bad omen, but not today. The Nevada drought is now officially over, and I can't take it as anything other than a good sign that it landed on the day I am set to marry the man of my dreams.

Rain pelts the glass windows of my family home. I decided that I wanted our wedding to be held here, at the place where it all started. So much pain is within these walls, and I want there to be something good to remember going forward. We were originally going to hold the ceremony at the red willow tree, but the unexpected rain means we will be holding it in the old barn out back instead.

Yelena and Svetlana crowd around me as they primp, dab, and curl anything they can get ahold of. I've never felt more like a princess than I do right now. I've also never felt more loved. There's a familiar twinge in my chest at the thought of not being able to share this with Ada. This had been our wish growing up, to be in each other's weddings. That was before our hopes were tainted by our family.

I'm nervous. Wondering if this will all be some kind of figment of my imagination. My hands are shaking, and I can't stop sweating.

"You alright?" Yelena pauses in curling my hair, the smile on her face fading slightly. "You look white as a ghost."

Giving her a reassuring look, I shake my head. "I'm just nervous. Which is funny since this is all I've imagined since before we even met."

Svetlana comes up to place a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"It's normal to feel nervous," she assures me. "Adrian's father and I grew up loving one another and I was still sweating bullets walking down the

aisle.”

That makes me feel better.

Yelena and Svetlana help me slowly stand from the chair that is situated in front of the vanity. When I turn to stare at myself in the full-length mirror, I can't help but smile.

It's perfect.

Yelena had left my hair half down with large, voluminous curls. Gold ivy is snaked throughout the braid that hangs down with the curls. I really do look like a princess. The two women walk me from the dressing room to where Anna waits by the double doors.

“I know I'm not a man,” she says softly. “Or your blood family. But it would be my honor to walk you down the aisle.”

I'm trying not to ugly cry.

“I would love that.”

She takes my arm as the processional begins to play. It's a magic flow of violins and flutes that paint our love story. My nerves begin to calm as Anna slowly walks me down the aisle. The church is filled with people here to celebrate our marriage, our love.

This is the life I dreamed of for so long.

It's not perfect and the beginning was rough, but it's my story. My happily ever after.

Butterflies dance in my stomach when I see him. Everything around me fades away when my eyes meet Adrian's. His black tux fits snugly against his muscled body, his hair is slicked back, and his eyes are filled with a delicious fire.

I'm marrying this man.

Adrik. Adrian. Bratva boss. Son. Brother. Husband.

He's all these things and so much more.

Adrian's crystalline gaze holds mine as I walk toward him. He's smiling, holding his arms loosely in front of him. The proud look on his face warms me.

Anna kisses my cheek, as a father would, and releases me. She's been my most treasured friend and confidant. Adrian steps forward until we are practically touching. The officiant chuckles and Adrian narrows his eyes at him.

When Kenzo asked if he could preside over our wedding, I immediately said yes. He was as much family to me as Anton and Vitali.

“You look breathtaking,” Adrian whispers. I grin.

All eyes are on us as Kenzo begins.

We say our vows.

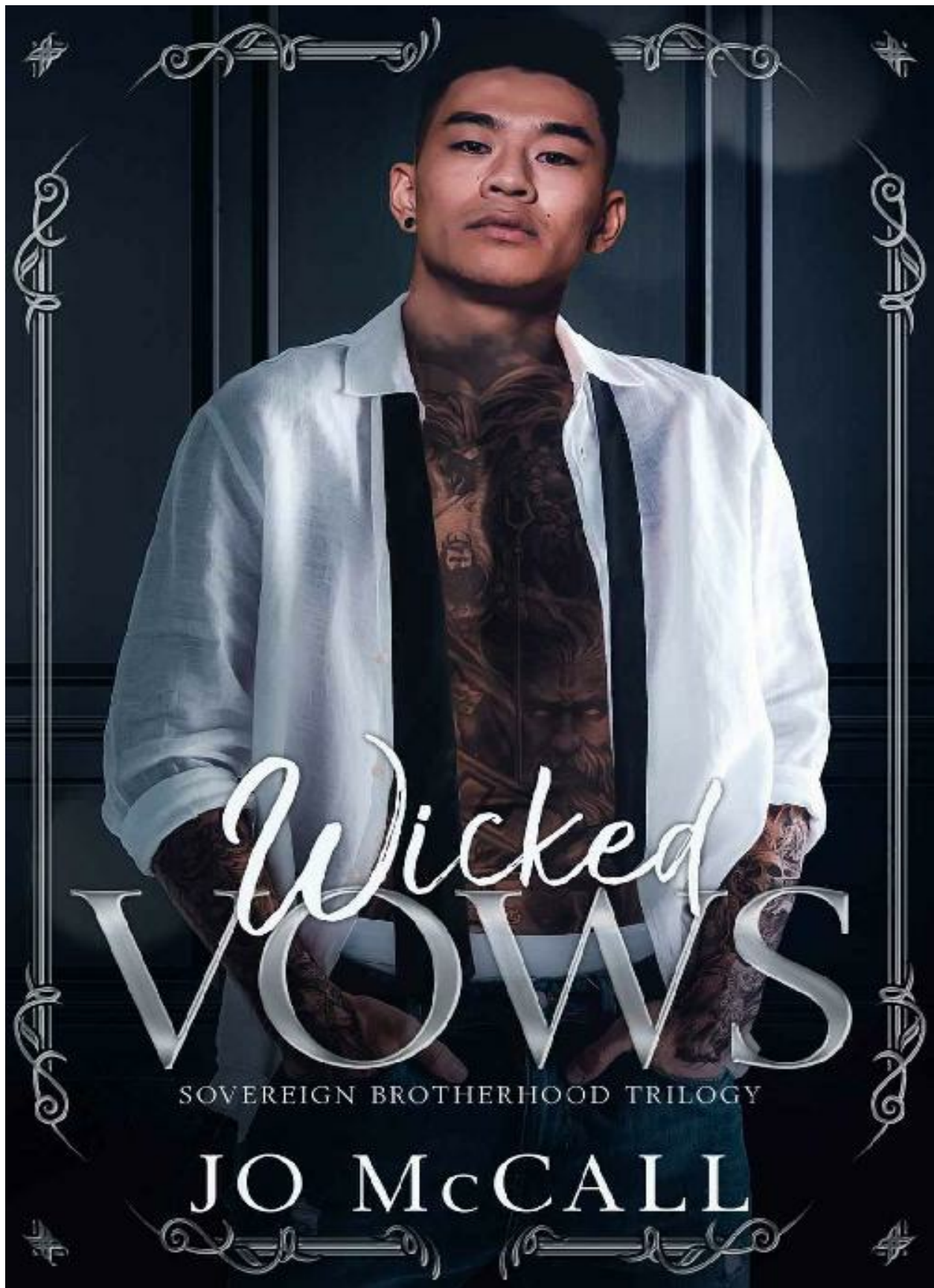
Recite the words *I do*.

Then he sweeps me in his arms and devours my mouth as the people cheer.

Adrian started out as the beast in my story. Until he became the black knight who slew the dragon. To the world, he’s a mob boss. A villain.

But to me—he’s my dark king.

My happily ever after that will last through the ages.



Wicked
VOWS

SOVEREIGN BROTHERHOOD TRILOGY

JO McCALL

Sneak Peak:

WICKED VOWS

KENZO

I watch silently as Adrian and Vanya's limo pulls away from the house. It is good to see my friend happy. When we'd attended Royal Elite, he'd been the carefree one. He'd written letter after letter to the strange girl he'd never met. Never exchanged real names with.

We thought he'd found his happily ever after with Ada when he married her. Looks can be deceiving. Just like with my little *senko hanabi*. We've been engaged since she was sixteen but promised to one another long before that. It is a business arrangement. A way for my family to make further strides into the legitimate business community in New Orleans.

Evaline La Montagne.

Utsukushī bakuchiki.

Her parents describe her as sweet, caring, and demure. She isn't the little sparkler I thought her to be. But a beautiful firecracker with a fiery tongue and molten gold eyes. For three years she's been running from me. I've given chase, just enough to keep her on her toes. I always knew where she was, until six months ago when she disappeared from my radar.

"Are you ready to head back to the hotel?" Vitali asks, a hand coming down on my shoulder. "If another rich asshole throws his socialite daughter at me, I might not leave here without slitting someone's throat."

I laugh.

Vitali is well known in the States. A prominent king on his Italian-American throne. Ever since his uncle usurped his father's position as Don in Italy, he's been building his empire in the States. He is refusing to go back to the place where he was born. His home where his mother and sisters still reside under the dictatorship of Angelo De Luca.

In all fairness, if he is to go back he would be immediately executed, so I can see why he hesitates. However, he isn't alone anymore. He has Adrian and me to watch his back and go to war with him. Only, he doesn't want to. But one day he will, and we will be there for him every step of the way.

"Yeah." I give a tired sigh and roll my neck. I'm exhausted. Vitali and I had been doing double the workload so that Adrian could stay home with Vanya while she was healing. It took weeks to track down all of the Albanians that still lurked within our borders. It was a rat infestation we

never realized was a problem. “Let’s get—”

A woman’s laugh catches my attention. It’s light and airy. Carefree. My gaze follows the sound until it lands on the target. Her back is turned to me. All I see is short blonde hair that has obviously been bleached. She’s wearing the white and black uniform of the catering company Adrian used for the reception. The woman is bent over a small table of champagne glasses, gathering them up to put on a large pallet for transport with one of her coworkers.

Vitali follows my gaze just as the woman turns to set the pallet aside.

She looks up, something catching her attention. It is then that I catch a look at her face.

It’s her.

My beautiful firecracker.

Her golden eyes widen almost comically when she sees me, her mouth dropping open slightly with a gasp. We are trapped in this moment together, each one simply staring at the other, the rest of the world fading away as we take each other in.

I can see the fear rising in her gaze like a river of gold, spreading through her. She knows what this means. I’ve found her and she will be mine.

Evaline jerks up from where she is bent over, inadvertently smashing into her coworker who is setting down a pallet of glasses. The pallet falls to the ground, glass erupting everywhere. Guests turn their eyes to the spectacle, pointing and staring at the sudden debacle.

My firecracker doesn’t stop to help pick up the remnants of wine glasses or even to see if her coworker is all right.

Instead, she runs without looking back.

“Is that who I think it is?” Vitali asks amused. I nod. “Are you going to let her just get away?”

A smirk plays across my lips. “She’s not going anywhere,” I tell him. “The only place she’ll be going is back to the tower she ran from.”

Soon Utsukushī bakuchiki, soon.

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STALK ME



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AND TO ALL MY READERS. You keep my going!

Also by Jo McCall

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