



I HAD EVERYTHING UNTIL
I HAD *nothing*

Devious
INTENTIONS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHANDI BOYES

DEVIOUS INTENTIONS

SHANDI BOYES

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2023 by Shandi Boyes

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Editing: Swish Design & Editing

Editing: Courtney Umphress

Proofreading: Lindsy La Bar

DEDICATION

*To all of us who like to get on our knees
and crawl to our men.*

ALSO BY SHANDI BOYES

Perception Series

Saving Noah (Noah & Emily)

Fighting Jacob (Jacob & Lola)

Taming Nick (Nick & Jenni)

Redeeming Slater (Slater and Kylie)

Saving Emily (Noah & Emily - Novella)

Wrapped Up with Rise Up (Perception Novella - should be read after the Bound Series)

Enigma

Enigma (Isaac & Isabelle #1)

Unraveling an Enigma (Isaac & Isabelle #2)

Enigma The Mystery Unmasked (Isaac & Isabelle #3)

Enigma: The Final Chapter (Isaac & Isabelle #4)

Beneath The Secrets (Hugo & Ava #1)

Beneath The Sheets (Hugo & Ava #2)

Spy Thy Neighbor (Hunter & Paige)

The Opposite Effect (Brax & Clara)

I Married a Mob Boss (Rico & Blaire)

Second Shot (Hawke & Gemma)

The Way We Are (Ryan & Savannah #1)

The Way We Were (Ryan & Savannah #2)

Sugar and Spice (Cormack & Harlow)

Lady In Waiting (Regan & Alex #1)

Man in Queue (Regan & Alex #2)

Couple on Hold (Regan & Alex #3)

Enigma: The Wedding (Isaac and Isabelle)

Silent Vigilante (Brandon and Melody #1)

Hushed Guardian (Brandon & Melody #2)

Quiet Protector (Brandon & Melody #3)

Enigma: An Isaac Retelling

Twisted Lies (Jae & CJ)

Bound Series

[Chains](#) (Marcus & Cleo #1)

[Links](#)(Marcus & Cleo #2)

[Bound](#)(Marcus & Cleo #3)

[Restrain](#)(Marcus & Cleo #4)

[The Misfits](#)

Russian Mob Chronicles

[Nikolai: A Mafia Prince Romance](#) (Nikolai & Justine #1)

[Nikolai: Taking Back What's Mine](#) (Nikolai & Justine #2)

[Nikolai: What's Left of Me](#)(Nikolai & Justine #3)

[Nikolai: Mine to Protect](#)(Nikolai & Justine #4)

[Asher: My Russian Revenge](#) (Asher & Zariah)

[Nikolai: Through the Devil's Eyes](#)(Nikolai & Justine #5)

[Trey](#) (Trey & K)

The Italian Cartel

[Dimitri](#)

[Roxanne](#)

[Reign](#)

[Mafia Ties \(Novella\)](#)

[Maddox](#)

[Demi](#)

[Rocco](#)

[Clover](#)

[Smith](#)

RomCom Standalones

[Just Playin'](#) (Elvis & Willow)

[Ain't Happenin'](#) (Lorenzo & Skylar)

[The Drop Zone](#) (Colby & Jamie)

[Very Unlikely](#) (Brand New Couple)

Short Stories - Newsletter Downloads

[Christmas Trio](#) (Wesley, Andrew & Mallory — short story)

[Falling For A Stranger](#) (Short Story)

One Night Only Series

Hotshot Boss

Hotshot Neighbor

The Bobrov Bratva Series

Wicked Intentions (Katie & Ghost)

Sinful Intentions (April 25)

Devious Intentions (June 13)

WANT TO STAY IN TOUCH?

Facebook: [facebook.com/authorshandi](https://www.facebook.com/authorshandi)

Instagram: [instagram.com/authorshandi](https://www.instagram.com/authorshandi)

Email: authorshandi@gmail.com

Reader's Group: bit.ly/ShandiBookBabes

Website: authorshandi.com

Newsletter: <http://eepurl.com/cyEzNv>

CONTENTS

Prologue

1. Polina
2. Polina
3. Polina
4. Polina
5. Yev
6. Polina
7. Polina
8. Yev
9. Polina
10. Polina
11. Yev
12. Yev
13. Polina
14. Yev
15. Yev
16. Polina
17. Yev
18. Polina
19. Yev
20. Polina
21. Yev
22. Polina
23. Polina
24. Yev
25. Polina
26. Polina
27. Yev
28. Polina
29. Polina
30. Polina

31. Yev

32. Polina

33. Yev

Epilogue

Also by Shandi Boyes

PROLOGUE

“*K*nees. Now.”

You have no fucking idea how hard it is not to bang my chest when a woman as effortlessly refined as Polina Kotova immediately follows my command. Her flawless face, dick-aching body, and knee-weakening smile made her my first official spank bank inductee eight years ago, but now not only do I get to sample *everything* she has to offer, but I also get to boss her around.

The remembrance makes my dick leak with pre-cum, which doubles the hungry gleam in Polina’s icy blue eyes since her kneeled position puts her in direct line with my erect cock.

We’ve been fooling around for the past few weeks. It wasn’t meant to be anything serious, simply the release of the bottled-up tension we were forced to lock away for years when her older brother requested I follow his girl to Sicily.

Don’t misconstrue what I’m saying. Alek isn’t a complete fucking tool. He knew what I didn’t want to acknowledge at the time.

I had no right chasing a woman like Polina.

I had nothing to my name, attitude in abundance, and was way too fucking young to realize why those two points were my biggest issues.

I would have fucked everything up, so Alek nabbed the opportunity before I could.

I hated him for it the first couple of weeks in Italy, but as all the bullshit artists say, absence makes the heart grow fonder. It also matured me, stuffed my bank account with enough funds to impress a woman with tastes as honed as Polina's, and ensured I knew after smearing the sheets with perfection not to go searching for her replacement before the sheets had gone cold.

I'm not saying I would have stepped out on Polina if she had given me a chance all those years I'd chased her like a lost puppy, but I can't offer any guarantees, either.

What can I say? I was a dick.

I still am now, but luckily for me, Polina craves dominance in the bedroom. She is a princess on the streets but a whore between the sheets, and I fucking love that I get the privilege of seeing both sides of her.

Lust hangs heavily on my vocal cords when I demand, "Now crawl to me."

A throbbing surge pulses through my dick when the quickest flare of defiance gleams through her eyes before she slowly crawls my way. Her luscious blonde locks swish around her gorgeous face as her knees—that don't look like they've been scuffed by hard work once in their life—redden from the thick carpet pile digging into them, but the need in her eyes keeps my cock firm enough to bounce a nickel off.

Christ, she makes my dick ache.

Pure.

Fucking.

Dynamite.

As Polina stops at my heel, kneeling in front of my erection standing tall and proud, I picture the many ways I've taken her the past four weeks—in my car, in the dressing room of her boutique clothing store, and in the dusty lot of one of the underground fight circuits I've frequented since my return to Kronstadt.

I've fucked her seven ways from Sunday and still can't get enough.

I'd almost given up the chance when weeks of chasing resulted in nothing but blue balls, but I got there in the end—eventually.

Thank fuck for weather events not even God can control.

It gave me an in and saved me from months of torment.

Every painful jab my cock endured when I faked how good she'd feel wrapped around it was instantly worth it the first time I took her against the wall of her boutique. A typhoon was raging, but it set the backdrop for a romp that can only be classified in two ways.

Perfect and bewildering.

Just like her.

I'm a cocky fuck who knows he has the world at his feet, but my underhanded acknowledgment that I'm bedding a girl way out of my league rings in my voice when I ask, "Do you want to swallow my cum now, Polly, or after I've stuffed my cock in every hole you own?"

She's miffed about the nickname she hates, but she's on her knees, inches from my dick, so her lips only part for one reason.

To suck my cock.

“Mouth it is.”

While swiping the glistening crown across her red-painted lips to gloss them up more, I recall the time Alek found her in a room with a low-ranked member of his crew. Polina's brother is a take-no-shit Russian gangster who ran the streets long before I started living on them. When he put an official do-not-touch order on his baby sister, he meant it, so picture his response when he found Polina semi naked in the bed of a bottom-dweller.

Pavel's face didn't have a smattering of bruises like I'm confident mine will when I confess to Alek that I want more than messy sheets from his baby sister.

It didn't fucking exist.

Alek beat the living shit out of him, and I would have backed up his campaign with my gun if Feo hadn't dragged me out of the party before I commenced digging my grave alongside Pavel's.

Feodor is my brother. We have different fathers, but you wouldn't know that by looking at us. Our mother had a type—high cheekbones, solid jawlines, thick dark locks, and a shady reputation.

I got the quartet from my father, but Feodor only borrowed his father's looks. His personality is our mother's to a T. He's more subdued than me but a woman-killer in his own way. He merely smiles, and women stroke the stupid fucking tuft of

hair his cowlick forever kicks up like their tits are about to nurse him to sleep.

He gets the nurturers.

I get the screamers.

It works for us, though I'd love a chance to prove to Polina that I can tick off *all* her requirements. She's already a screamer—I've verified that more than once in the past few weeks—but I reckon she'd happily rake her fingernails over my scalp until I fell asleep, if she'd quit fucking running.

It doesn't matter where we hook up, she's gone, vanished, and nowhere to be found in the morning.

I'd be pissed if the game of chase wasn't so goddamn enticing.

It is as enthralling as the euphoria that pumps through me when I fist Polina's long glossy tresses and tug her head back. She's tall for a woman, but I still swamp her, meaning she needs to tilt her head back so I can feed my cock to the very back of her throat.

“Open up, baby girl. I've got something you need.”

Baby girl is also on her list of ick nicknames. It isn't that she loathes terms of endearment. It's the fact she is six years older than me that has her cringing.

Our age gap was the biggest hurdle I had to drag her over. She'd always seen me as the grubby-faced kid she met when she rocked up to her brother's new crib with a ton of greasy takeout bags and a promise to return the following week with more.

She had only just moved back to Kronstadt after getting lucky with her second foster care placement and living the

high life for the remainder of her youth. I was fifteen, starving, and hating on everyone, except the blonde-haired beauty who put me on my ass with only a fleeting grin.

I was fucking obsessed.

Still am.

And now she's on her knees about to devour my cock.

I am a lucky, *lucky* man.

After tightening my grip on her hair, I pull her head down on my rock-hard dick that's glistening with wetness. "Swallow me down, baby girl. Suck the cum from my cock with those lips I stroked to for years on end." When she accepts me in deep, her gag vibrating on the crown of my dick, I flex my hips and groan. "Ah, fuck yes. Just like that." I push her head forward, forcing her to take another inch. "That. Fucking. Mouth."

Jesus.

I could blow my load right now.

Her eyes are watering, the scent of her wet cunt is filtering into my nostrils, and she has me at the very back of her throat.

This is pure fucking heaven.

As she tests her gag reflex, I try to get better control of the jerks of my hips. My instinct is to ram and thrust in so deep and hard her throat won't stop aching for a week, but I also want to relish the feeling of her lips around my shaft and the warm, inviting temperature of her mouth.

"Fuck. There. Do that," I demand through grunts when she swivels her tongue around the tip of my cock, mining more pre-cum from my balls. "Such a dirty little whore sucking me off like you've never been fed."

Polina likes giving head.

I fucking love it.

I'm sure she'll reach the same conclusion when I return the favor.

I am not a selfish lover. Reciprocation is very much a part of who I am. Does that mean I'd get down on my hands and knees and crawl to Polina if she demanded it?

Fuck yes, I would.

Hasn't happened yet, though.

Doubt it will.

In the bedroom, Polina wants to let go of the control her life is governed by, and I'm more than happy to make sure her every fantasy is answered. The knowledge has me doubling the rock of my hips. I pump my cock in and out of her mouth fast enough for her moans to be interrupted by gags, but nowhere near brutal enough to lessen the lust burning through the air.

I fuck her mouth like a man possessed until cum crests at the base of my cock. Then I pull her off, toss her on the bed, curl her thighs over my shoulders, and bury my head between her legs.

Sweet.

Fucking.

Christ.

She tastes so damn good, and her clit is so sensitive. With only a handful of flicks, she adds to the ardent flavor making my cock bend the springs in my mattress. She comes with a

hoarse cry, her body shuddering as her thighs clamp around my head.

As she thrashes against the sheets, I keep the energy high by rubbing circles over her clit with my thumb. My fingers are calloused from years of hard work and gritty enough to stretch her orgasm from enjoyable to draining.

“Stop, Yev. Oh god, please stop.”

She pushes at my head as she thrusts her hips upward and back.

“Fuck no.” I drag her back down until her drenched pussy is an inch from my face. “We’re not even halfway done yet.” Her moan is barely audible when I blow a hot breath over her clenching slit. “I’m still fucking starved.” As I peer at her over the sweat-glistening mounds on her chest, a ghost-like grin tugs one side of my mouth higher. “You don’t want me to go hungry, do you, Polly?”

A reminder that the tension was just as bristling from her half of our duo shines bright when strands of her hair cling to her hued skin as she shakes her head.

“Then open up for me. Give me another helping.”

She does as asked but keeps one hand weaved through my hair to control my movements, leaving me no choice but to slip off the bed and yank my belt out of the ugly-ass trousers she forces me to wear.

Polina is obsessed with fashion. However, she didn’t dress up Barbie dolls when she was a kid. She had Ken under her thumb, so when I rocked up after a four-year absence that only included the occasional voicemail and text message, she took one look at my sweatpants and ordered me into the dressing room of her boutique.

She was meant to measure me for a new outfit.

I took the opportunity to show her I wasn't the scrawny teen she remembered.

What? Measurements are always more accurate when you're not wearing a snick of clothing.

That afternoon in the dressing room wasn't the first time sparks flew between us, but it was the first time I truly believed I had a shot.

As I recall that day, I order, "Up."

Anyone who hasn't been bedded by me might believe I'm asking for her wrists.

I'm not.

After tethering her ankles together, I hook them around my head before scooting forward until the head of my cock rests at the entrance to her pussy. Now anytime she tries to get away from me, she will ram herself back onto my cock.

"Jesus... friggin'... ah," she moans between thrashes when I slowly inch inside her.

Her sexy legs are flattened against my chest but almost minus a thigh gap, meaning she has no choice but to take every inch I'm offering. I don't give her all of me to start with. From what I'm told, no girl likes their uterus jackhammered until it feels like it is going to drop out of their ass. I take it slow, giving her uterus time to move up and out of the way while also stopping any unwanted tears from occurring.

"So. Fucking. Tight."

I flex my dick, loving that the walls of her pussy massage my shaft in return as her moans grip my sack. I love how differently she acts when being thoroughly fucked.

When she's not being filled by a cock, she's prim and proper, some may even say a little icy.

I don't even feel a draft of her coolness when I'm balls deep inside her.

Polina keeps her exterior hard to ensure she doesn't get hurt. She just struggles to maintain an impenetrable being when her every want is being answered.

"You like that, don't you, baby girl? You love being filled by me."

As Polina arches her back, her eyes rolling, I groan through the sensation that grips my sack from the husky deliverance of her reply. "Yes... god, yes."

"Then what are you waiting for? Swallow my cock like you were born to do it. Take every inch I'm offering." Her ankles drop to the middle of my back when I wedge my torso between her legs so we meet eye to eye. "Fuck me as I've dreamed about fucking you since the moment I laid eyes on you." I drag my teeth over her fleshy bottom lip before releasing it with a pop. "In case you're wondering, this is ten times hotter than any dream I've had."

With a thrust of a woman with double my strength, she yanks my ass forward with her feet, forcing another two inches of my cock inside her.

"Yes, baby girl," I hiss like a snake, loving that her need is so violent she smashes our groins together with no concern of injury.

As the need to fuck pummels into me, I catch Polina's wrists with my hand, pin them above her head, then use my spare hand to adjust the tilt of her hips. My eyes never leave hers once, though. She wants to be dominated and fucked so

hard she double-thinks her wish to flee every single time we hook up, but a lack of eye contact is a huge no from her. It is a hard limit, and I'd be a lying fuck if I said I don't want to beat the shit out of the person responsible for her neurosis.

From what I heard, Alek already stole the rights, but a small part inside of me wonders how accurate the rumors are. If Polina's first foster care father was taken care of, why does she still cower when the quickest adjustment of our position loses my eyes for only a second?

"Stay with me, Yev." The groggy deliverance of my name assures me my quick wander down memory lane hasn't dampened Polina's eagerness in the slightest.

She's still desperate to be fucked, and even after being granted the privilege at least thirty times over the past couple of weeks, I'm just as desperate to fuck her—*after* I've made her come again.

With a groan, she kicks out when I withdraw, bury my head back between her legs, then eat her as if I didn't leak a gallon of pre-cum inside her. "Yev... oh god... It's too much."

Within a handful of licks, her protests switch to pleas. "Don't stop. Please. Do that. More." Her words turn labored as her breaths are limited. "I need to come. Please make me come."

"Say it again," I demand, "but tilt your hips. Bring your pussy to me. Let my tongue in deep."

As she complies, I hit her clit with back-to-back hits while stuffing two fingers inside her. The walls of her vagina tremor around my fingers when I drag my tongue up her slit and around her throbbing clit before sucking it into my mouth.

Her juices drip off my palm in minutes, but no number of thigh crunches will remove me from between her legs.

“I’m not done yet. I need more.”

As Polina’s head thrashes side to side, she murmurs out a faint, “Can’t. Oh god, I can’t.”

She mumbles something about dying if she’s forced to come again, but I pay her ramblings no attention. I’m far from a dom. I don’t practice or preach the BDSM lifestyle several members of the Bobrov crew regularly embrace, but if I had to be given a title, it would be a pleasure dom.

I love getting women off and forcing them over an axis of pleasure they never thought possible. Their pleasure gets me off even more than having their lips wrapped around my cock and their juices dribbling over my balls, and hearing Polina murmur my name on repeat is the greatest glory of them all.

This is the woman I masturbated to for years, the one I pictured while sowing my oats with girls nowhere near her standards. I couldn’t ask for more than this.

“One more. Come on. I know you have it in you.”

My lips raise against the drenched lines of her pussy when she replies, “If I orgasm one more time, I won’t be able to move.”

“Perhaps that’s the point?”

She heard what I said but acts ignorant. “It’s not possible. I can’t come again. I’m done.”

“Bullshit.”

Forever determined to prove people wrong, I push and push and push until she is screaming my name into the cool night air and is too fucking spent to go anywhere.

She's so floppy and limp, when I return from the bathroom with a washcloth to clean her up, she's still in my bed even with me removing the belt holding her hostage an hour ago.

She'd usually be halfway to the door by now.

"You all right?"

Her moan vibrates through her naked body when she answers me nonverbally. I probably pushed things a little too far, but I wasn't being a chump earlier when I said I want to tell Alek I want more from his sister than sex.

Feelings have been there for years, but they've crept under my skin now.

They're like a tattoo.

They'll never leave me.

Once I have Polina cleaned up, I nudge my head to the far side of the bed. "Scoot over. I don't want to wake you when I crawl out of bed in a couple of hours to make you breakfast."

"You're going to make me breakfast?" Don't mistake the clearness of her reply. It is still as husky as fuck and has my cock priming for round two.

"Uh-huh. I'll make you breakfast... then eat mine off you."

The plumpness of my pillow does little to hide her smile. It beams as bright as the moon creeping through the drapes, its size doubling when I pull her into my arms a second after slotting my ass onto the portion of mattress she was splayed over before I suggested she scoot.

"You better watch out, kid." This time around, I'm the one groaning about hideous nicknames. "Only men in love sleep on the wet patch."

Her giggles only last as long as it takes for her to realize I'm not firing off an objection.

As her pretty blue eyes bounce between my dark, moody pair, she murmurs, "Yev... I thought we agreed this was just casual?"

I lick my dry lips before replying, "We did... then you went and sucked the marrow straight out of my bones, so if this is anyone's fault, it's yours." I wave my hand between us during the "this" part of my statement.

"This? We're a this?" She scoffs but does nothing to put distance between us except a highly possible threat. "Alek will kill you. He promised my father he'd keep me out of this world."

Her eyes shoot to mine when I mutter under my breath, "You don't need to be a part of this world to be with me."

After a handful of sharp breaths, Polina says, "Don't do that. Don't let lust impair your vision."

"*Your* vision, Polly. Mine has always been clear."

She rolls her eyes as if I'm speaking out my ass. "All we've ever done is fuck."

"Because you leave my bed, car, and warehouse within a second of cum erupting from my cock."

She socks me in the stomach but doesn't deny my claim.

She can't when it's true.

"You even left your apartment once. Don't ask me where the fuck you went for those five hours I wandered butt-fucking-naked around your space, but I'm fairly certain you didn't have a bird's-eye view of your bedroom, or you would

have had something to say about me messing around in your panties drawer.”

Her angry tone slices through my laughter. “You’re giving them back. That lingerie set cost me a fortune.”

“Fuck no, I ain’t. If you’re not wearing them for the pleasure of *my* eyes, you’re not wearing them at all.”

Polina scoffs, as if our closeness will have me missing the alteration of her scent. “You’re acting like a Neanderthal.”

I bang my chest, proud to be associated with such a clear-cut display of machoism. “And you want to gobble up every damn morsel of my testosterone...”—I lock eyes with her, aware lack of eye contact is a hard limit for her, but also aware it is one of her biggest weaknesses—“from my cock with your mouth *and* from my heart with the withered-up black one hiding somewhere behind your fantastic tits.” I wait for her eyes to lose their fight before saying, “If that ain’t true, tell me so, and I’ll back the fuck off.” Her hungry gleam breeds tenfold when I lift her chin with my finger. “But if it is, we’re going to go round two, and then you’re going to eat breakfast at *my* goddamn table with *my* goddamn fork and *my* goddamn food.”

Some could say I am showing my hand way too quickly.

I don’t give a fuck what they think.

I’ve been chasing this girl for years and consuming every inch of her the past four weeks, so I am the first to admit I am snowed. Fucking. Under.

I am done.

“Do you want this, Polly?” Sparks of the boy who had struggled to understand why his mother left him on the side of

the road with nothing but the clothes on his back flash in my tone when I ask, “Do you want me?”

I think I have her over the fence. I convince myself there is no other answer to my question but yes, and then my stupid-ass phone hollers.

When my eyes drop to my phone’s screen and I see who is calling, I scan my room for cameras.

I won’t find them. I learned the hard way that the Bobrovs’ surveillance cameras are the size of a pinhead.

The fight they recorded between Alek and me weeks ago circulated amongst the crew the past month. He didn’t kick my ass as well as he did the first time I tried to place distance between Ana and him, but since I get more pleasure pissing him off until his cheeks are the color of beets, I couldn’t hit him back, so it wasn’t close to a fair fight.

I’ll do more than thump him with my fists if he tries to get between Polina and me, though. Although not certain that is what he did four years ago when he asked me to follow Ana to Sicily, I have an inkling some of his decisions resided around that.

I didn’t play it cool after Polina hooked up with one of my bratva brothers.

I was pissed and didn’t care who knew about it.

It also happened to occur the weekend before I left for a European stint of isolation.

“I need to take this. Things are tense.”

Polina nods, fully aware the tension in the Bobrov crew at the moment is thick enough to cut with a knife.

When I slide my finger across my phone's screen and squash it to my ear, Alek doesn't bother to issue a greeting. "Where is she?"

"Ana?" I query, hopeful as fuck I'll have the chance to explain myself in person instead of over the phone.

I breathe easier when the rustle of a head nod sounds down the line.

"With you," I preempt.

Alek has had Ana on lockdown ever since a rival mafia association tried to collect payment with Ana's body. Alek paid what was owed, but the head of their crew wanted more since Alek took down four of his men for the thoughts lingering in their deprived minds.

They wanted to share Ana amongst several bratva organizations in Kronstadt *after* they tortured and raped her.

Alek responded how any man would.

He killed them where they stood, which sparked a mafia war he would have won if the rival's head hadn't sought shelter with the Gottles.

Henry Gottle is the boss of all bosses, and he has a major grudge against the Bobrovs. He wouldn't help Alek even if his life depended on it.

When my assumption that Ana is with Alek is met with a painful exhale, I slip out of bed. "You said you didn't need me anymore?"

I watched Ana every day of the four years she lived abroad, and for several years before that. It's why chasing Polina was utterly pointless back then. I barely had time to scratch my nuts.

That all ended when Alek yanked me off Ana's watch, which inevitably thrust his sister back into my line of sight.

He'd be kicking himself if he weren't brimming with worry.

Alek is only ever silent when he's terrified.

Even Polina is aware of this.

"Go," she offers, as panicked by Alek's lack of reply as I am. "I'll show myself out."

"No." I forcefully yank up the bedding before using it to make her one with the mattress. "I'll be back." Don't ask me why I'm whispering like a soft cock. I know how to take care of myself. I'm just not sure now is the right time to tell Alek I've been horndogging over his sister for years, let alone having my every fantasy answered the past few weeks. "Don't fucking run this time. I've been chasing your ass all over Kronstadt."

"Because you can't take no for an ans—"

I shut her up by kissing her. It is as PG as fuck, and I keep my tongue in my mouth, but it silences Polina better than my cock since it screams "couple."

My mouth has spent more time on her pussy than on her lips the past month.

What can I say? I love giving head.

As I tug on a pair of pants and the ugly-ass shirt Polina convinced me to buy earlier tonight, I ask Alek, "Where do you want me to check first?"

I arch a brow when he replies, "Home."

“Your apartment?” You can’t miss the shock in my tone. “I thought you’d check there.”

The whoosh of a headshake sounds down the line. If what I saw last month is anything to go by, I don’t think he should be rattling his brain around his big head. “No, the projects. She always goes home when she’s feeling lost.”

I *tsk* him. “Her home isn’t in that shitbox with her dad, Alek.” I lock eyes with Polina. “It’s with you. It’s *always* been with you.” When my reply stuns both the Kotova siblings into silence, I mutter, “I’ll check the penthouse.”

Alek jumps back into the conversation with a stern bark. “I’ll check there. You cruise any old haunts. The depot her catering trucks are at, the park she once called home, and...”—his groan almost gobbles up the rest of his reply—“the strip clubs she worked at. Keep in touch, and I’ll do the same.”

“All right.” As I yank my phone down from my ear, I say to Polina, “You better stick around. If you leave before I serve you breakfast in bed, I’ll tie you to my bed next time.”

“Next time?” She drags her teeth over her plump bottom lip, instantly making me hard. “Who says there’ll be a next time?”

I twist my lips. “You have a point.” Not one to go down not swinging, and before she can comprehend how desperate I am to make her a permanent fixture in my life, I snatch up the belt I used to restrain her earlier while muttering, “So I guess I better secure you now.”

“Yev...” When her first warning doesn’t get through to me, she gives it a second shot. “*Yev!*”

She kicks out with all she has, but it's too late for her. Her wrists are tethered to the headboard, and her mouthwatering breasts are exposed to my famished eyes.

They fortify my wish to keep her tied to my bed for eternity.

“Let. Me. Go.” She breathes out slowly.

“I will.” I scoot off the bed, grab my keys off the dresser, then head for the door. “When it's time for breakfast.”

“Yev!”

Feo's eyes pop up to mine when Polina's demand rumbles through my bedroom door as I dart out of it. He watches me stalk to the entryway to fetch my gun from a safe hidden in a table we had specially made. Although running is Ana's go-to tactic when she's snowed under, my instincts are telling me to keep my guard up.

When I check that the ammo cartridge is full, Feo arches a brow in silent question.

“Ana,” I murmur, like it will answer all his questions.

It doesn't.

“Who I know sure as fuck isn't shouting for you to untie her.” He hooks his ankle onto his knee before he slouches low in his seat and takes a sip out of a foreign beer he's nursing. “You love stirring Alek, but you've never seen Ana as anything more than a sister.” A grin barely twitches on my lips when he hones in on the reason for the cockiness silently beaming out of me. “His sister, on the other hand, you've been chasing that tail for years.” He slings his eyes to my bedroom door, which is doing a great job of concealing Polina's shouts, before returning them to me. “I knew you were full of shit last

week when you made an excuse to stay back after your fight. You weren't eyeing the competition. You were—"

"Annihilating it," I interrupt, smirking.

He *pffts* me. "The only thing about to get annihilated is you when Alek finds out. You know he's super protective of her. Pavel's face must still be wearing the scars of his beatdown. Don't ask about his body. He'd probably wear long-sleeve shirts even during a Mexican summer."

"Did you have to mention that fuckface?" I scold like I didn't bring him up myself an hour ago.

His Elvis curl bounces as he shrugs. "Just trying to warn you what could happen when Alek finds out." His next words are whispers. "Especially if he finds her like that."

I stray my eyes to my bedroom door before returning them to Feo.

This kills me to admit, but he has a point.

"If she doesn't calm down in a couple of minutes, I give you permission to free her. Though I don't recommend you enter without protection. Her aim is precise as fuck and maiming." I double back on my offer when jealousy smacks into me hard and fast. "And a blindfold. You better wear a fucking blindfold." When I can't breathe through the possessiveness stealing the air from my lungs, I mutter, "Fuck it. I'll free her myself."

My stomps back to my room are loud and thunderous, yet they have little effect on the blonde-haired beauty snoozing in the middle of my bed. The pillow Polina tried to hide her smile with earlier is propped up under her shoulder and neck, and the leather strap holding her hostage cradles her head.

She looks peaceful—in a sexy-as-fuck BDSM kind of way.

And the visual has me determined to never let her go.

POLINA

SIX MONTHS LATER...

“*I* searched all those boxes. We’re out of micro-dick belts.”

As I blow a wayward hair out of my eye and struggle not to laugh at Natalya’s witty comment, I dig through a box of stock in the storage closet of my boutique clothing store.

Most of our stock is on the racks, so the only boxes stored in this dingy, cold room are the consequences of poor decisions. I get a little eager when a rep offers me a shipment at a drastically reduced cost. They taught me that the saying “it’s too good to be true” is gospel. None of the products in the boxes are designer, and more times than not, they’re accessories an average person can’t use—such as a man’s belt in a size most women would struggle to fit into.

“Yes,” I shout when my rummage through my fourth box this evening has my hands landing on a bunch of smooth leather belts. “What is his waist size again?”

“Twenty-eight,” Nat replies. She’s been working at the boutique for the past couple of months. She is a great girl, but she can’t tell the difference between a Valentino and a Saks Avenue rip-off if her life depended on it.

She is not here for the love of fashion. She needs a paycheck that doesn’t come from any industry her parents run. Since I understand the desire to live outside your family’s safety net, I only glower at her when she confuses my designer babies with the mass-produced garments her roommates get around in.

When I find a belt that'll give our customer a bit of leverage to let out if his waist size expands, I'm shocked by its short length. Yev wouldn't have been able to hold anyone hostage with a belt this short. It wouldn't have made it around the wooden knobs carved in his headboard, let alone leave enough strap for a headrest.

I was so angry that day I was determined to kill Yev in the most painful way possible. Then Feo entered his room with his hand covering his eyes and his face as white as a ghost.

Alek had kept me out of the life our father forced him to live when he killed our mother, but I knew the lockdown situation he drummed into my head the instant I returned to Kronstadt meant something big was going down.

When Feo left me to help his brother, my anger shifted to fear before it eventually grew into panic.

The men Alek trusted to keep me off his enemies' radar rarely spoke around me, but there was one lot of gossip I wish I hadn't heard while waiting for Yev and Feo to return.

For days, the Bobrov crew believed Yev had been killed by Kirill. It was only after Alek stormed the ship Ana had been held hostage on did the gossip mongers discover their error. It wasn't Yev Kirill gunned down for no apparent reason other than standing up for his God-given rights.

It was Feo, his younger brother.

Yev is alive, but you wouldn't believe that with how absent he's been. I haven't seen him since the night he tied me to his bed. He's been a ghost, and I'd be a liar if I said I haven't been grieving him as much as I have Feo for the past six months.

I knew Feodor, but nowhere near as well as I do Yev. When their mother shipped herself off to rehab, Feo was sent

to live with his father. Yev was dumped in front of a boys' home. I only caught part of his story in the lead-up to him moving abroad with Ana, but from what I heard, Yev didn't know the boys' home was his implied destination. His mother made out his breathing was too noisy, so she told him to get out and walk home.

It was pouring rain, and he was miles from town, so he sought shelter under the awning of a dated mansion.

The nuns were expecting him.

He gave trouble a run for its money his first couple of weeks until they called in one of their star recruits. Alek told Yev to either pull his head in or ship out.

Stubborn as ever, Yev shipped out.

That's how he met Ana, and although I wish I could continue with my trip down memory lane, Nat's shoulder is propped on the doorframe of the storage closet, and she's staring at me with the same suspicious glare she hits me with anytime Vasily is in my presence.

She knows there is more to our budding relationship than I'm letting on, but since I've been struggling to determine who I can and cannot trust, I act as if her intuition is phony.

Upon noticing her watch has been busted, Nat asks, "You were thinking about him again, weren't you?"

I brush off her assumption with a huff before standing and wiping the dust the boxes coated my dress with. "If you're talking about my boyfriend, of course. He's always on my mind."

The lights in the main part of the boutique shine brighter than her maturity when she sings, "Liar, liar, pants on fire." She watches me add the belt to the suit package a customer

ordered last week. “The only time your face gleams like it did in the storage room is when you’re thinking about Yev. You loved him.”

“I did not.”

She’s right. I am a liar.

Being with Yev scared the shit out of me. He was too young for me. Too cocky. Yet I couldn’t seem to stay away. Take the last night I saw him as an example. I should have been so angry, the adrenaline alone would have kept me awake for a week, but within minutes of him leaving me tied to his bed, I snuggled up to his aftershave-scented pillow and fell asleep.

I was a lovesick idiot who thought handing control to a man who had his stripped so cruelly early in life would cure world hunger.

I’ve been paying for the consequences of my stupidity for months on end.

I can’t afford to make the same mistake twice. Hence my face not lighting up when my newly forming relationship enters my thoughts.

Vasily is a prop to fix my crumbling heart. Nothing more.

Tired and ready for bed, I ask, “Is that everything? My bed is calling me.”

Our ratio of staff to orders means we’re busy, but it is nothing compared to how run off our feet we were when we clothed the Bobrov “stock.”

Dressing trafficked women didn’t sit well with me, but when presented with either closing the boutique or letting

beaten women feel like a princess for a day, I went with the latter.

I wouldn't have accepted a dime for services if it were taken from the women, but the money we siphoned from their owners with overpriced gowns was donated to charity for the victims and families of the trafficking trade, so I charged high and often.

I love my brother, and I want to see him succeed, but after everything I'd faced in my life, I refuse to profit from trafficked women.

Nat steals me from my thoughts for the second time tonight. "That's everything." She alters my relieved expression with five sharp words. "But you're not going home." She stomps her foot like I would if I were once again twenty-two without a single matter holding me back. "You promised you'd come out with me tonight."

"I didn't promise anything." I move throughout the store, switching off the non-emergency lights and making sure the deadbolts are in place. Things haven't been the same since the Bobrovs left town. Many entities are vying to take their spot, clueless that Kronstadt will always be Alek and Ghost's home. They'll eventually come back, just not until everything is settled stateside first. "I said I *might* come out with you."

"Might and yes are the same thing." When I glare at her in disbelief, Nat throws her hands in the air. "It is. When you ask your mother for something and she says maybe, what does that mean?"

In my house, that meant no chance in hell, but clearly Nat grew up in a different environment than me.

“It means yes. Just like might. Might is a maybe. Maybe is a yes, and yes means you’re coming.” She barges me toward the back exit door like I don’t sign her paycheck each week, her shoves filled with a strength I didn’t know she had. “Millie and Taylor are waiting for us out back. Maria will meet us at the dance club.”

“Vas—”

“Doesn’t get a say. We’re dancing, not pimping ourselves out.”

Although I agree with her, she doesn’t understand all the hard work one night out could unravel. “Can I at least invite him to join us?” Her groan rumbles through her hands plastered on my back. “I doubt he’ll come, but he will be less pissed if we toss him an invite.”

“Fine.” She gives in quicker than expected. “Hand me your phone. I’ll text him the deets while you fix whatever the hell is going on with your hair.”

My hand shoots up to defend my hair from her harsh words. “What’s wrong with my hair?”

She doesn’t need to answer me. The lifeless mane that hasn’t circled anyone’s wrist for the past six months reflects in the tint of the SUV.

I once thought my voluptuous hair was an asset.

I was an idiot.

“Does anyone have a brush?”

One text message later, along with a mini blowout with a battery-operated hairdryer, and a handful of expletives from the driver maneuvering us through a packed nightclub area, we arrive at a new club at the end of the entertainment district.

If you don't like mingling with your neighbors, Kronstadt's nightlife district is not the place you want to be. All the nightclubs, restaurants, and taverns are within a three-block radius, and the streets are forever littered with the who's who of the social circuit.

"Hold on," I announce when Nat stuffs my cell phone into the middle console. Saka, her bodyguard/driver, will monitor while we dance the night away.

Nat refuses her parents' money, but she'd be a fool to give up their offer of protection. They have a lot of enemies, and Nat would be an easy target without her security detail since they're unaware of their two-year-long tiff. Not even moving to Russia lessened the threat.

"I want to see what Vas said before you store my phone away."

Lines sprout from her nose when she screws it up like a bunny. "He said something about cruising by later and to have fun."

I cock my brow as suspicion runs rampant through my veins. "Vasily Cabanow told me to have fun?"

When she nods, I call her bluff by tossing open the console lid and snatching up my phone.

"All right!" she shouts before she yanks my phone out of my hand, dumps it back onto the stack of four, then plonks her scarcely covered booty onto the console, slamming it shut. Yes, that's how tiny she is. "Those weren't his exact words." I

wait and wait and wait for her to spill the beans. It feels like two lifetimes before she eventually confesses, “He said he’ll be here to pick you up at ten.”

“A.m.?” She must mean in the morning because it is twenty to ten now.

Nat laughs as if she has a few screws loose. “Puh-lease. Like he’d let you off your leash for that long.” That is a low blow, and she knows it. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for. I get bitchy when I’m horny.”

I was once known to hold a grudge.

Not anymore. Life is too short for pettiness.

Needing the focus off my fucked-up life, I say, “I thought you were dating that sergeant guy. What was his name?”

“Dud.” She slips off the console, then slides out of the car. “His name should be Dud. I swear I could draw a map to my clit, and he still wouldn’t know how to find it.” After leaning in like we’re not surrounded by a hundred men silently pleading for a chance to access the map she referenced, she whispers, “And get this...” She builds the suspense with a slight pause. “He wanted me to crawl to him, on my hands and knees, like some kind of baby. It was so gross.” I swallow to relieve my burning throat, but her next whispers are more effective than spit. “Though I doubt I’d feel the same way if he’d known what he was doing when I reached his feet.” She shakes her head as her expression switches to disgust. “He thought I was wet for him.” Her expression deadpans. “I was covered with *his* spit. Even while kissing the lower lips, there is such a thing as too much tongue.”

I get whiplash from our conversation when she loops her arm around my elbow and drags me toward a nightclub at the

end of the street while asking, “Have you ever?”

“Ever what?”

With half the patrons of the bar spilled onto the street, it is so noisy, Nat has to shout her answer. “Crawled to a guy.”

“Um...” *How the hell am I meant to answer that?* I crawled unashamedly, but anyone left in my minute inner circle now thinks I’m saving myself for marriage.

I lose the chance to reply when a deep, gravelly voice mutters, “If she says no, she’s lying.”

My head slings to the voice so fast my whiplash shifts from fictitious to factual. I’d recognize that voice anywhere, although it is more pained than I’ve ever heard it. Not even while sporting fractured ribs did his voice sound this distraught.

“Yev,” I murmur when the tormented and dark eyes that keep me awake at all hours of the day and night are present before me. A thick beard hides his jaw, and his eyes are sunken and lifeless, but it is him, the man I grieved before he was officially dead. “What are you doing here?”

Certain I’m dreaming, I sling my arms around his neck and hug him tight before a syllable can leave his mouth.

He isn’t a mirage. He is here, back in Kronstadt, returning my embrace. But his hug is nowhere as electric as it was in the weeks he chased me before his second trip abroad. It is the cold, empty embrace I gave everyone when I thought an icy demeanor was the only way I could protect myself.

Could Yev be doing that now? Is he guarding himself from additional pain? Or did I foolishly forget one of the biggest accelerants of our hookups was the secrecy behind them?

Embarrassed that I threw myself at him like a desperate harlot in need of saving, I inch back before saying more respectfully, “I’m glad you’re home. You’ve been missed.” Since my reply is honest, it sounds that way.

Yev was family long before we messed the sheets, and although I was devastated when my army of supporters dwindled to none in less than a month, none of the blame for that belongs on his shoulders, so I won’t place it there.

When Yev remains quiet, his focus on someone behind me, I say, “It was great seeing you again. If you’re ever on my side of town, stop by the boutique. I’m sure I can find some loafers even Ana would approve of.”

He doesn’t laugh at my witty comment. He doesn’t even flinch. He continues to stare, which leaves me no choice but to peer over my shoulder to see what’s captured his attention. Only six months ago, his focus never veered from me. I’d be a liar if I said it didn’t make me feel butthurt.

I don’t know what’s hotter when I lock eyes with a narrowed pair half a block down—my throat or the glare Vasily hits me with when he drinks in who I’m standing across from.

He doesn’t know about my affair with Yev. No one does but Nat. He simply hates when another man touches me, and he has no qualms ensuring everyone in his vicinity knows it.

He looks set to go on a verbal tirade, and as much as I wish I could use Yev as a shield, I can’t. His gruff exterior shows he’s still struggling with his grief, and I learned quick smart six months ago that my happiness is no one’s responsibility but mine.

After returning my attention to Yev, I say, “I need to go. We’ll catch up soon.”

He attempts to snatch up my wrist, but I slip out of his hold before I race down the packed sidewalk like I’m finishing the last half mile of a marathon.

Vasily doesn’t wait for me to reach him before starting his interrogation. “Who the fuck was that?”

“He’s an old friend... *of Alek’s.*” I add on my last two words when my confession doubles the anger narrowing his sable eyes. His attitude reeks of superiority, and his breath is as pungent with the odor of liquor as Yev’s, but I’m not in the mood for a fight. I’m too shocked about Yev’s unexpected return to respond in the manner needed to keep my tattered heart in one piece. “How did you get here so fast? I thought you were working late tonight.”

The nightlife district is forty miles from Vasily’s workplace, so there’s no way he could have made it here before me if he was where he stated he’d be. He’s deflecting his guilt. I’d put money on it.

A headache presents fast and painfully when Vasily angles his head and says, “I suggest you lose your accusatory tone. I’m not the one who got caught smooching a random stranger in public.”

“He’s not a stranger.” I ignore his warning growl. “And I wasn’t smooching him.” To me, a smooch implies a kiss. Yev and I cuddled—if you can call it that. “Please don’t make a scene. It was nothing—”

Vasily silences me with a brutal backhanded slap.

POLINA

While nursing my throbbing cheek with my hand, shocked by Vasily's unexpected response since we're in public, I become aware of a dangerous situation emerging from the crowd.

Yev's speed is unchecked as he charges for Vasily. He hits him with so much force the air in the lungs of the twenty people surrounding them leave in a hurry when they slap the concrete with a hearty thud.

A painful groan overtakes the murmured whispers of the crowd when Yev throws his fists into Vasily's face before he dislocates the hand he used to slap me.

After contorting his wrist in a manner that leaves no doubt he'll need surgery to regain full function of his hand, much less use it to slap me again, Yev stands over Vasily with a heaving chest. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Like an idiot with no wish to live, Vas snarls, "What happens between my girl and me is none of your business—"

Yev silences him in the same way Vas silenced me, except his hit will keep Vasily's pulse ringing in his ears for over a week. It also causes blood to ooze from his nose and stains his teeth with the same murky red coloring. "Alter your fucking tone. Speak to me as if you're speaking to your father." He

leans in close to ensure the slur of his words won't cause Vas to miss the threat in them. "And if you don't like him, I suggest you act as if the sun shines out of his fucking ass."

I mentally call Vasily an idiot when he says, "Do you have any clue who I am? I could destroy you."

"I know who you are."

Vas looks proud about Yev's reply.

He shouldn't.

"You're the dumb fuck who thinks he can throw around an authority he doesn't have, and I'm the man more than happy to show you how it really works."

"And why would I—" He's silenced again. This time by Yev yanking back two of the fingers he's using to keep Vasily on the ground. Alek taught me this hold years ago. It subdues a man quicker than a knee to the nuts and keeps them down long enough to make an escape—though Yev doesn't look eager to leave anytime soon.

I can barely hear Vasily's howls over the wailing of sirens in the distance. The police are on the way, and despite a lot of locals mistaking them as the good guys, I know whose team they belong on.

It isn't with men like Yev.

"Yev, you need to go." When he continues shouting a heap of drunken words into Vas's face, I wedge myself between them before repeating my warning. "You need to go. *Now.*"

My heart breaks when Yev locks his eyes with mine.

They're so lost.

So empty.

He is only a shell of the man I once knew.

I'm not surprised. He and Feo weren't just brothers. They were best friends, and at one stage, Feo was the only person who could get through to Yev when his head was spiraling.

That doesn't mean I won't try, though. "Please. I don't want you doing time for protecting me." I nudge my head to Vasily whimpering on the ground. "He also isn't worth it. No one here is."

He looks set to argue, but before he can, Natalya proves her tactical maneuvers work on people of all sizes. Within a handful of hearty shoves and a promise that Saka will take us anywhere we need to go, she directs Yev into the back seat of her SUV, then slots me in next to him. "I'll deal with Vasily."

"He's—"

"A piece of shit who will keep his mouth shut for the right amount of money."

My bewildered eyes dance between hers. "You can't access that account." She has a trust fund bigger than Prince William's, but she doesn't touch it because she knows it's dirty money that will cause more trouble than it's worth. "If you do, they'll think you're back in."

"I'll be fine." She steals my chance to reply by slamming the door shut and tapping on the SUV's roof.

I stop watching her tiny frame shrink in the side mirror when Yev mutters, "His girl." He sucks in big breaths that double the wooziness in my head. "You're *his* girl." My heart freezes in my chest when he drifts his eyes to mine. They're even more lifeless now than they were in the alleyway, and the very reason I walked away instead of welcoming him into the

mess my life has become the past six months. “You don’t take long, do you?”

Even startled by the snarkiness of his reply, I can’t harness my response. “I beg your pardon?”

My warning tone doesn’t slow his response in the slightest. It snaps out of his mouth like a whip. “How long did it take you to get over me, Polly? A week? A month? One fucking day?”

“It’s been six months, Yev. I’ve seen neither hide nor hair of you in six friggin’ months—”

“Because my brother died! He was fucking murdered protecting your soon-to-be sister-in-law. Yet here you are, whoring yourself out to the first fuckface to show an interest in you.”

I slap him so hard his face flings in the opposite direction, and my hand burns as painfully as the hole his comment charred into my heart. I want to call him a liar before demanding he apologize, but that would make me a hypocrite.

I am whoring myself out. Just not for any reason I can tell a man barely holding on by a thread.

Slowly and purposely, Yev returns his head front and center. He doesn’t look at me. He doesn’t even project his anger in my direction. He just sits in silence, peering down at his bruised hands, until Saka pulls up to his apartment building like he has the address of every member of Nat’s inner circle programmed into his GPS.

I have no intention of following Yev inside until he says, “They wouldn’t let me bring him home. Said some shit about it not being safe for us to venture back to Russia yet. Feo had to stay, so I had to stay too. It was our agreement.”

Oh, Yev.

When he stalks to the front door of his building, his shoulders low and his chin balancing an inch from his chest, I remember the reason he never purchased an apartment in the more desirable areas of Kronstadt.

It took Feodor a year to find out where Yev had been left when he was shipped off to live with his father. By then, Yev had been jumped by gang members wanting to prove they were tough, spent a month in juvie for theft, and was so skinny he weighed half what his brother did, even with him standing an inch taller than Feo.

He was a mess, but Feo's father didn't see a boy crying out for help. He saw a runaway, a street kid, a boy he didn't want his son to become.

He thought he was helping Feodor by trying to keep them apart.

All he did was make their bond stronger.

It was Feo who learned about an underground fight ring that didn't have any weight or age restrictions. He was the one who pleaded with the nuns to take Yev back. He never stopped fighting for his brother, and the only thing Yev could give back those first couple of years was a promise to do the same for him if he ever needed it.

Feo needed it four and a half years ago when his father died in a traffic accident. He was eighteen and drowning in the debt he inherited from his father. Yev paid it off before making out his brother's university fees didn't almost deplete his bank account of every penny he had each term.

Part of me wonders if that's why he accepted Alek's offer to become Ana's shadow abroad. The pay was so good it

ensured Feo would stay in school, and then Yev wouldn't need to admit how he left me high and dry when I needed him the most.

After a deliberation nowhere near as long as it deserves, I thank Saka for the ride before telling him I'll find my own way home. I have no clue what I'm going to walk into at Yev's apartment, but I'm reasonably sure I don't want anyone witnessing our confrontation.

Ten seconds too late, I remember that my cell phone is locked in the middle console of the SUV. It's too far gone for Saka to spot the frantic flap of my arms, and he's probably deafened by the roar of the highway still packed with vehicles, even at this late hour, to hear my shouts for him to stop.

It's for the best. No one but Vasily blows up my cell phone, and after his disgusting performance tonight, he is the last person I want to speak to.

There's no doorman in Yev's building, no smiling person in the foyer to greet me. That isn't the way things work around here. This building is for hardworking people who understand life isn't handed to them on a silver platter—people like Yev and Alek.

After taking a moment to breathe out some of the nerves in my stomach, I ride the elevator to Yev's floor. They're still fluttering in abundance when I knock on his door. It's locked. I checked before searching under the mat for the key.

When the door handle jiggles, I steady my breathing and brace myself for World War III.

It arrives as expected, but it isn't Yev standing on the other side of the door, staring at me in shock. It is a pretty blonde with vibrant green eyes and an angry snarl.

“I should have known,” she murmurs with a childish roll of her eyes. After snatching up a fringed purse with a set of keys, she darts by me. “Good luck with that. You’ll need it.”

Her abrupt departure has me regretting my decision to chase down Yev until I glance into his apartment. It is a mess. Bottles of alcohol and beer coat almost every surface. There are numerous half-eaten takeout containers, and the smell is horrendous.

Rats don’t live here.

They come here to die.

Yev didn’t live like this before Feo passed away. He was house proud, mainly because he knew there wasn’t a chance in hell I’d go to his apartment if it resembled a bachelor pad, but proud, nonetheless.

This is worse than a group of young men partying twenty-four-seven.

It is a dump site.

My head shouts for me to spin on my heels and walk away, but my heart has an opposing opinion. It sees me entering his apartment and seeking him amongst the mess.

“Yev...” I step over discarded pizza boxes on the entryway floor before making a beeline for Yev’s room. It’s not as bad as the living room, but there are enough empty liquor bottles to expose how Yev is coping with his grief. One bottle at a time.

My heart clenches in my chest when I spot Yev in the middle of his bed. It is still squashed against the wall, and the leather belt he used to hold me captive dangles off the headboard, but the sheets have been stripped, and the half-

consumed bottle he's clutching is being absorbed by the mattress instead of his liver.

He doesn't realize he is making a mess, because he's passed out.

After removing the bottle from his grasp and covering his shirtless back with a blanket I find in the closet, I head back to the living area. I followed him to ensure he made it home safely, so I could leave, but once again my heart won't let me.

This isn't Yev. He's just too consumed by grief to remember that.

Also, what he said earlier is true. Feo died because he was protecting Ana, so the least I can do is help tidy up the mess my family inevitably caused.

It won't bring Feo back, but it might remind Yev that he has plenty to live for, and that alone will be worth getting my hands dirty.

It isn't like they can get any more stained.

POLINA

Several long hours later, I hook the tenth bag of rubbish into the industrial bin at the back of the apartment block before trekking back inside. It's been a long night, and I'm exhausted as hell, but it's done. Yev's apartment is back to a presentable order.

When I enter the corridor in the middle of the foyer, I step back three places. The mailboxes are at the back of the empty space. Yev's box is so bursting at the seams you no longer need a key to access it. The door has been left open, which means anyone could rummage through his mail.

I hate myself for looking, but the red writing on the top of several envelopes can't be missed even at a distance. He has several overdue notices, and some are threatening legal action.

Once I've pulled out what appears to be nothing but a bundle of bills, I close Yev's lockbox, then head for the elevator. The envelopes weigh heavily on my shoulders when I place them on the entryway table. Almost every request for contact has a take-action warning printed across the top. Only one doesn't. It appears more personal than from a business seeking money. The writing across the blotched pink paper is handwritten, and it is addressed to Yev, not Yevgenyi like the rest.

Hopeful it is good news, I place that envelope onto the top of the stack, then hunt the drawers below it for a cell phone so I can organize a ride home.

Yev used to have several burner ones, but do you think I can find a single phone?

Peeved, I slam the drawer shut before hesitantly entering Yev's room. He's still flat on his stomach, snoring off the whiskey he guzzled down in a hurry, so I search his room without hindrance.

I find nothing.

Not a single thing.

Desperate, I stray my eyes to Yev's slumbering frame. He's still wearing the trousers he was donning earlier. His phone could be in his pocket, but I don't know if I'm brave enough to search for it. We did many naughty things on that mattress, and even while angry, I can't trust myself not to get caught up with those stupid emotions again.

I need to be heartless to survive, and Yev was the only man who made me believe I wasn't.

Determined not to make a fool out of myself twice in one night, I march into the living room before dropping my eyes to the uncomfortable couch.

"It's either Lumpy Lucy or waking one of Yev's neighbors," I drone to myself, disheartened by my choices. "Considering the neighborhood and the late hour, I'd rather risk a kinked neck than a lobotomy."

With my mind made up, I snatch a blanket from the closet I fetched Yev's from, then settle in for a restless couple hours on the couch Yev made look sophisticated when he slouched across it.

Tonight, it is lumpy and cold.

Leather wasn't designed for comfort. It is purely for aesthetics, like silicone boobs and collagen-filled lips.

I'm conducting my umpteenth roll for the night when the pokey leather stud giving Yev's sofa an artistic flare is replaced with something smooth but as equally grabby.

When I'm lifted from the couch, my first thought should be panic. The room I'm walked into isn't pitch black, but since my eyes haven't adjusted to the conditions, it may as well be, but fear isn't surging through my veins. Lust is.

I recognize the scent of the man carrying me—even more so since it isn't being suffocated by fresh gulps of alcohol. He smells fresh and clean. As scrumptious as the cut line of his recently shaved jaw.

“Yev...”

He remains quiet, his focus elsewhere.

My brows scrunch when he places me in the middle of his bed before he slips in next to me.

The bed is made.

It is no longer sheetless.

What the?

An ill-timed smile tugs on my lips when Yev's expression mimics mine. He isn't surprised by a bed magically being made in the middle of the night. He's grimacing about the wet patch his shirt is soaking up.

It is from the bottle I removed, but before I can announce that, my vision adjusts enough I can see him in the dark room. His eyes are as tormented as ever, but sparks of the Yev I remember are hidden behind his grief, dying to be freed.

That's what I seek when returning his stare.

As we lay across from each other, our closeness tethering us, the heat that forever swallowed me whole returns stronger than ever. It cracks and hisses until the tension becomes so potent I have to do something before I combust.

The grief he'll never fully let go of sees me reaching for the empathy I wanted to issue him months ago. "I'm so sorry for everyth—"

Yev forces my words into the back of my throat by pressing his lips to mine. It is a sudden, fumbling embrace that causes our teeth to clash together, but it makes the world fade before it takes me back to that night six months ago when nothing but my needs were on my mind.

He kisses me with a tenderness I didn't know I needed but very much crave. It is savage and demanding but also nurturing and sweet. It is everything you'd ever want in a kiss, and it has me wishing for so much more.

As he weaves his fingers through my hair, I slide my hand under the shirt he wasn't wearing when I stomped out of his room earlier, tickling the muscles flexing in his lower back.

With his big, hard body pressed against mine and my thigh curled around his hip, we kiss until my pulse throbs and his touch sets my skin on fire.

It is a blinding, mind-hazing embrace, yet Yev can still maintain some sense of normality. He breaks away from my

mouth with a groan, his body hot and still pushed up against mine.

Several prolonged minutes later, I glance up at him, panting and out of breath. His eyes are closed, his lips wet and parted, but the pained expression I'm sure his face hasn't stopped wearing the past six months is nonexistent.

This will sound pretentious, but so be it. I truly believe our kiss settled some of his grief. That it made him forget the pain and suffering he's endured the past six months. It reminded him that he still has a lot of life left to live; he just needs to push through the barriers suffocating him first.

I can help him do that.

My touch isn't magic, but to Yev, it could be.

When I circle my hand around the obvious bulge in his pants, he groans. A current runs through me when I slide my hand up and down his twitching shaft through his pants, but before it becomes electrifying, Yev snatches up my wrist, halting my movements.

“Don't.”

I never knew rejection could hurt so much until now. It isn't something I've ever really faced, and I won't lie. It stings.

“This isn't... that's not why... *fuck!*” He slips out of bed faster than he entered it, then heads for the door like he is desperate to place distance between us. “I just wanted to make sure you slept, and I know you couldn't do it on that fucking couch.” After whacking on the light, he thrusts his hand to the couch in question. It shakes when his eyes follow the direction of his hand's shunt. “What the fuck?”

When he enters his spotlessly clean living room, his eyes bulging and filling with shock, I slip out of the bed and pad

toward the door.

I'm expecting a heap of gratitude to be tossed my way.

I am *way* off the mark.

“What the fuck did you do?” Yev’s voice is a vicious roar, and it shudders my heart out of my chest.

While fiddling with my shirt to make sure my hand doesn’t wipe the contemptuous look off his face for the second time tonight, I reply, “I cleaned up. Your place was a mess.”

“Yes, Polina, you’re right.” He cranks his neck to look at me. “My place was a mess. *My*. *Fucking*. *Place*.” He bangs his chest for each of his last three words.

Too stunned by his odd reaction to speak, I watch him march to the coffee table that had been housing hundreds of beer caps and dozens of empty bottles.

Its sparkling surface doesn’t fill him with gratitude. His hand shoots up to tug at his hair before his foot sends the thick chunk of wood sliding to the other side of the living room.

I school my features when he pins me in place with an angry glare. He will never physically hurt me, but mentally is another story. He’s more than capable of tearing my heart to shreds. “Where are they? Where are his things?” he spits out, his mood temperamental and hot even from a distance.

I’m lost to the cause of his rage, so the only answer I can give him is an uncertain shrug.

My confusion pisses him off more. “Where are Feo’s things, Polina! Where the fuck did you put them?”

That was Feo’s mess?

As Yev demands an answer with a heartless stare, a sound I am certain spells the end for us trickles into his apartment. The bins at the back of his building are being emptied. The clatter of the hundreds of alcohol bottles I dumped in them can't be mistaken, not to mention the thousands of bottle caps I tossed out with them.

"You didn't," Yev says with a slur as he sprints to the window facing the back of his building so fast, his steps thunderous. "Please tell me you didn't throw out his things?"

"I thought it was rubbish." My voice is the most timid it's ever been.

"No..." he mutters in a painful groan, his hands once again in his hair.

Only once the truck rumbles away does he spin around to face me. His expression breaks my heart. He is absolutely gutted, and the blame for his latest downfall lies solely on my shoulders.

"I swear to God, I thought it was trash. I would have never touched them if I'd known they were Feo's—"

"Get out," he interrupts, his voice low and quaking.

"Yev, I—"

A vein in his forehead pops when he shouts, "Get out. Get out. Get. *Out!*"

Needing to leave before I double his grief, I sprint out the door, down the hallway, then through the emergency stairwell doors, my speed only slowing when I crash headfirst into a firm chest.

POLINA

*A*s I wipe up the mess the flowers Vasily arrived with earlier this week, Nat groans under her breath. “You know he wasn’t there that morning for no reason, right?”

She’s cautioned the same thing multiple times the past week, but I’ve yet to take her advice with the credit it deserves. Vasily is an ass. I know that better than anyone, but my time with Yev last week verified with the utmost certainty that Vas is my *only* salvation from a predicament I’m sure will gut me as well as Feo’s death did Yev.

I hate relying on anyone, but this is about more than me now, and despite my heart’s pleas, I can’t be selfish.

When Nat glares at me, waiting for an answer, I give her one of the many excuses Vasily gave me when he bruised my nose with his chest. “He said he was worried about me and wanted to be close by in case I needed him.”

“And you believed him?” The words whipping out of her mouth don’t give me a chance to announce I don’t believe a single thing Vas says. “Vasily Cabanow cares about nobody but himself.” After placing a returned dress onto the discount rack, she spins to face me. “And you didn’t see the way he reacted last Friday when you left with Yev. He gave arrogance a new name.”

I continue with excuses. It is easier than facing the truth. “Because his wrist was snapped in two places. He needs surgery, Nat. Have a heart. Not every man handles pain in the same manner.”

She stuffs a second dress between the many on sale with more force than needed. “He wouldn’t have a broken wrist if he had kept his hands to himself.” Her next words are a whisper, but I still hear them. “If only Yev were more violent.”

She can say that. She hasn’t met an angry Yev. She remembers the playful goofball he was before his personality did a one-eighty.

Vasily thinks Yev is reflecting his anger at me because he believes my family is responsible for his brother’s demise. I told him he was being utterly ridiculous until I recalled the brief conversation I had with Yev in the SUV.

He was quick to toss out that Ana was my soon-to-be sister-in-law.

Only six months ago, he would have referred to her as his best friend.

They’ve always been close, but now it appears as if he thinks everyone is his enemy.

With my exchange with Yev still in the forefront of my mind, I ask, “How did you go with my request?”

The annoyance on Natalya’s face is exchanged for relief. “Good. Tyler was more than happy to put away any foreign caps he finds.”

Aware nothing comes without a penalty, I ask, “What will it cost me?”

Nat arches a manicured brow. “You, nothing. Me...” She leaves her question open for me to interpret how I see fit.

It adds to the guilt I can’t let go of, no matter how many times my heart assures me I wasn’t in the wrong. I had no clue the bottle caps I tossed out with the rubbish were from Feo’s private collection. He had been importing beers from across the globe for the twelve months prior to his death, and the ones spread across the coffee table were only a handful of caps away from being resined on top of the chunky piece of wood he carved into a tabletop during a woodwork class at his university.

The keys I hung on the rack near the door could be returned to the kitchen cabinet, and his shoes stuffed back under his bed, but the bottle caps became needles in a haystack the instant the garbage was collected that fateful morning one week ago.

“I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do to help me fix my mistake. I’ll start importing beer. I’m not a fan of malty drinks, but I don’t have to drink it to collect the caps.”

Nat shuts up my ramblings by placing her hand on mine and giving it a gentle squeeze. “Believe me, it isn’t an injustice. Have you seen the guy running Tappers?” She physically drools, spit bubbles and all.

I try to downplay the relief her offer fills me with. “You’re disturbing.”

She flutters her lashes at me, her smile mammoth. “Don’t be jealous.” Once the last returned garment has been placed back onto the sales floor, she says, “Tyler said he’ll have a good collection for you to pick up tonight.”

“Already?” When she nods, I twist my lips. “Should I wait until I have them all or give them to Yev in dribs and drabs?”

Her brow gets lost in her hairline. “Do you wait for the entire collection of designer babies to be finalized before you start showcasing the latest piece? Or do you jump the gun before everyone else?”

“You jump the gun. Fashion waits for no one.”

Her girly laugh rumbles through me. “Exactly. So why don’t we go grab them before Tyler loses them?” When I agree to her suggestion with a nod, she fetches her purse from the break room behind the changing room, then meets me by the door. “Can I ask one teeny tiny little favor?”

I hate being asked favors. The odds rarely swing in my favor.

This one, however, seems to tilt the needle toward the positive. “Will you hold off telling Vasily what you’re doing to ease Yev’s guilt until after you’ve done it?”

A sigh whistles through my teeth. “I’m collecting beer caps for a friend. I’m not sleeping with him.”

My heartbeats surge from a slow trudge to a gallop when she murmurs, “So you told Vas about that moment of weakness when you kissed Yev before you attempted to give him a handy over his pants?”

I clamp my hand over her mouth before straying my eyes up and down the street. It is empty, but my panic remains high. Vasily knows everything about everyone. You’d swear he has eyes on every Kronstadt local.

Once I’m confident we’re alone, I let Nat become a mouth breather again. “I’m not that stupid.”

“Because you know Vas would overreact?” When I nod, finally picking the honest route, she smiles a ghost-like grin. “Then please take my advice and leave this off the table for now. Once Vas realizes you’re not a hussy who throws her pussy at every deliriously delicious half-Mexican in the vicinity, he might warm to the idea of you two being friends.” I realize I’m not the best at hiding my feelings from people I care about when she rubs my arm while muttering, “We both know you could use more of them.”

I roll my eyes to ensure no wetness pricks in them, then deflect her attention with a maturity unbecoming of a woman nearing her thirties. “Yev’s heritage isn’t known.”

“Um... yeah, it is. You’ve felt his dick, much less drooled about its outline when he showed up here in fitted gray sweatpants. That imprint was the reason you locked me in the storage room before taking his measurements with your tongue.”

“We were due for stock take,” I deny, loving that my ploy to shift the focus off me worked. “And you shouldn’t have been looking. You were a taken woman back then.”

“Have you ever seen a ring on this finger?”

When she holds up her empty ring hand, her attitude high, I shake my head. “No.”

“Exactly. I can look all I want.” She leans in so close her hot breaths bead condensation on my neck. “I can probably touch now too.” Her groan is throaty and long, and she looks upset. “But please remind me of the consequences of that before I stupidly do something I’ll later regret.”

“Single forever. I get it.”

Looping my arm around hers, I drag her down the street, hopeful my fast pace will stop her from announcing it is my volatile relationship with Vasily that has her trigger-shy.

YEV

The drumming of my heart in my ears dulls after a line of coke, but I do a second line just in case. I don't want my head in the clouds, but I don't want it in reality, either. The world is a cruel fucking place, and it took me being dragged down a long hard road to learn that.

I'm still hitting the occasional speed bump now. Take my shit performance last week as an example. I should have been stoked someone as glamorous as Polina Kotova rolled up her sleeves and got her hands dirty for a man as undeserving as me, but since I was riddled with guilt about how alive Polina's kiss made me feel, I took out my remorse on the wrong person.

I fucked up, but instead of manning up and admitting that, I continue reaching for a crutch that will kill me long before it will ever save me.

What can I say? Grief makes you a fucking imbecile.

After a third and final line of cocaine, I kick away the table that wasn't clean enough to snort snow off only a week ago, before slouching low in my chair.

My designer leather sofa could fuck any man's back. It is hard and lumpy and has me feeling sorry for any woman who attempts to snuggle with a man with washboard abs.

Why the fuck would anyone want to lie against something so rigid and uncomfortable?

As I drag my hand under my nose to make sure I didn't miss any of the white powder I can no longer afford but can't seem to live without, I stray my eyes around my apartment.

It's packed with people. Some I know, but most are strangers.

The latter are the fuckers who trample mud across the floorboards with no concern that they cost me an arm and a leg to have installed. They don't know me or understand my grief. They're here for the free liquor and drugs that depleted my bank account of over a million dollars in under a year.

I'm tempted to kick them out, but the last time that happened, I ended up on Novaya Avenue, seeking the woman I swore I wouldn't track down until I had my shit together.

Bringing Feo home was meant to be step one of my recovery process, but since it took so long to initiate, I now have a list an arm's length long to battle through.

Henry Gottle, the boss of all bosses, backtracked quick smart on any orders associated with Kirill when he found out he'd been played, but his pardon didn't stretch to Ghost, Alek, and their crew. If Kirill hadn't admitted to Feo's murder with the hope his confession would show remorse for his crimes, my little brother's body would still be stored in the freezer of the Bobrov containership.

Kirill isn't remorseful.

That fucker doesn't know the meaning of the word, but I trusted Ghost and Alek when they said they'll make him pay, so I crossed off the first item on my list by bringing Feo home and laying him to rest next to his father.

I would have pissed on Diego's grave if I hadn't finally understood why he fucking loathed me.

He didn't try to keep Feo and me apart to get back at our mother for gatekeeping years of his son's life. He knew I was bad news and that I'd drag Feo into a mess he couldn't get out of unscathed.

He was right.

One hundred fucking percent.

I asked Feo to go to the docks.

I asked him to watch out for Ana until Alek or I got there.

And he took a bullet through the skull because Kirill thought he was me.

He's dead because of me, so aren't I meant to be dead without him?

I truly believed I was until Polina's kiss told me otherwise.

She made me believe I have something to live for, that my life didn't end with Feo's.

I don't know whether to be angry or happy about that fact.

The decision would be nowhere near as hard if Polina were here.

Needing air before I make the same foolish mistake I made last week, I head for the balcony. It's hidden behind a thick pair of drapes. No one knows it is here but me, so it will be a good space to gather my thoughts.

As usual, they're quick to steer toward Polina. Fuck me, that woman doesn't seem to age. She is like a bottle of wine—she gets finer the older she becomes. I knew seeing her again would lessen the heaviness on my chest enough for me to

breathe without pain, but my fucking god, it smacked me with a ton of remorse as well.

For the first time in a long time, not all the guilt revolved around Feo.

Polina looked tired and as emotionally drained as me, and I can't help but wonder if part of her angst is compliments to the douchebag who glared at her the instant her arms curled around my neck.

Alek rearranged faces just for looking at his baby sister a certain way, so there's no way he'd let her be around a bottom-dweller like Vasily Cabanow without having something to say about it.

It means he's as clueless about Polina's budding relationship with Vasily as I was when I rammed him to the ground.

I've considered updating Alek multiple times over the past week. The only reason I haven't is because I want to hear from Polina herself what the fuck is going on.

Only six months ago, she was a ball-busting take-no-shit-from-no-one kind of woman.

Now I struggle to recognize her. It is as if she took the submissive woman she is between the sheets and gave it a whirl on the streets.

I hate how much she's changed, but part of my response may be because she's test-running her new features with a fuckface like Vasily Cabanow. He shouldn't be allowed to breathe in her direction, much less associate with her.

She deserves better than a dickhead with half a brain. That's why I stopped her last week. I'd still give my left nut to have a woman as devastatingly beautiful as Polina stroke my

cock, but I want her to do it because she's desperate to be reacquainted with the taste of my cum, not because she thinks it will lessen my grief.

It will never leave me, but neither will the feelings I developed long before I realized they ran deeper than lust.

I'm drawn from my thoughts when glass splintering booms out onto the balcony. As I scrub a hand down my tired face, I cuss under my breath.

When I enter my living room to discover my television hanging off the wall bracket used to mount it above the fireplace, my fists are at the ready. I just need to work out who to direct them at first. A dozen people circle my broken television.

“What the fuck?”

“Sorry, man,” says a drunken baboon with an ugly face tat. “I didn't know she was your girl until Micah told me. I wouldn't have groped her if I had known.”

I take in the obvious head imprint in the ruined device before slinging my eyes to Micah, eager as fuck to work out who the hell the stranger is referencing.

Those couple of pumps Polina issued before I stopped her is the most action I've had in the past six months. Not even the blonde waiting for me naked in my bed last week could entice me.

She thought me walking in on her fondling her dripping cunt with a vibrator would entice me.

All it did was enrage me.

I kicked her out of my room, stripped my sheets so I didn't have to sleep near her skanky scent, then guzzled whiskey

until the wish to rip Vasily Cabanow a new asshole faded to a possibility instead of an outright certainty.

Micah's reply knocks me on my ass better than the three lines of coke I snorted. "Polina."

There's way too much hope in my tone when I blubber out, "Polly was here?"

I don't need to see Micah's head bob to know his answer. Peering past his wide shoulders tells me everything I need to know.

A bag of beer bottle caps is on the coffee table.

Every one of them has a foreign stamp on the top.

I'm the first to admit I fucked up last week when I confused sentimental value and material worth. I knew it the instant Polina fled down the emergency exit stairwell, but it smacked into me full force when she ran into Vasily's outstretched arms.

He saw me standing in the shadows and knew I'd be able to comfort her more than he ever could, even with me being the cause of her hurt. But still, he guided her toward his chauffeur-driven ride like I was chasing her down with a gun instead of a ton of apologies, and I let him.

I was a damn coward.

I won't make the same mistake twice.

I'm partway out the door when I remember what the goon with the ugly face tat said.

He groped her.

He. *Groped*. Polina—a bratva princess in her own right.

That isn't just assault. It adds "sexual" in front of his infringement, and it leaves me no choice but to ensure he is prosecuted to the fullest extent of the bratva law.

POLINA

*M*y hand shoots up to clamp my mouth when my entrance into my apartment has me stumbling onto a shadowed figure in the corner of the large space.

When he switches on the lamp, my heart strives to return to a safe level.

His angry scowl doubles its effort.

“Jesus Christ, Vasily, you scared me half to death.”

He leans forward until his elbows rest on his knees, his right arm extended a little further so his bandaged hand can dangle between his knees. The surgeons can’t operate until the swelling goes down, which is taking longer than expected. “I could say the same.” He licks his lips like they’re not glossed with the contents of the half-empty bottle of whiskey on the side table. “Where have you been, Polly?”

His nickname throws me off. Only a handful of people call me Polly. Two, to be precise—Yev and my father.

Not the sperm donor.

The one who raised me.

The reminder has me acting as if I must keep my on-again-off-again boyfriend in the know about all aspects of my life. It

pisses me off, but users can't act morally. "After work, I went for a drink with Nat. There's a new brewery on Nova—"

"And after that?" he interrupts, his voice stern. "What happened after you switched off your phone so it couldn't be traced?"

He's tracking me?

It takes everything I have to keep my voice neutral during my reply. "I didn't turn off my phone. The battery ran out of charge." I twist my phone to face him before tapping on the black screen, so incredibly grateful I kept it switched off during my cab ride back from Yev's apartment. "But I'm glad you couldn't track me. It would ruin the surprise if you knew where I was."

"Surprise?" He sounds like a kid who was told since birth that Santa Claus didn't exist. "You're planning a surprise for me?"

"Of course. It's your birthday next week." I toss my purse onto the entryway table hiding the knockoff watch I planned to give him for his birthday, before storing my keys on the key rack. "We're still having dinner with your father, right?"

"That's the plan." He sounds hopeful while asking, "Unless you need me to change it?"

"No." I inwardly cuss about the eagerness of my reply before icing it over with another lie. "What I have planned is for *after* that. We will call it dessert."

My pulse ticks in my ears when he smiles a slick grin before he stands and moseys my way. "Dessert, hey? I like the sound of that."

When he spins me to face the wall, then pulls me onto his crotch with his good hand, I cringe. I hate being taken from

behind, and my neurosis worsens when the man's breath reeks of alcohol.

Mistaking my shudder as excitement, Vasily buries his head into my neck, which forces more horrid thoughts to fill me. He grinds his erection against my ass while nibbling on my neck. I'm only saved from probing fingers because his hand is bandaged.

As I peel myself away from him, my voice shakes along with my legs. "Not that kind of dessert." He groans when I mutter out a well-versed line. "You know I'm not ready for us to take that step yet."

"We don't need to fuck to uphold your wish to save yourself for marriage."

Don't look at me like that. He came to the assumption I'm a virgin on his own. He prefers that theory than believing I don't want to sleep with him by choice.

"There are plenty of things we can do that don't require penetration."

When he stalks my way again, I scrub at my eyes. "I have a massive headache, and my feet are aching." After toeing off my shoes, I move to the single-seater couch, plop on it, then massage my supposed "aching" feet. "Maybe we can watch a movie and cuddle?"

"Cuddle?" I don't believe he meant to say that out loud, but it arrived with a frustrated groan. "I can't. I just remembered I have that... ah... conference tonight. I can't believe I forgot about it." He truly believes he's showcasing the qualities of a gentleman when he says, "It is understandable when you realize how worried I was that something terrible had happened to you. What if I wasn't

waiting for you last week? Who knows what he would have done if he had caught up to you.”

“Yev isn’t violent.” The only time he’s ever directed a bad word my way was in the bedroom, and that’s because I like things edgy when overwhelmed by need.

Vasily *pffts* me. “That wasn’t my conclusion last week. I could hear his shouts all the way in the foyer.”

Yet you were still in the foyer when I dashed down nine flights of stairs.

I snap my conniving mouth shut when Vas asks, “What was that?”

“I said...” It takes me a moment to finalize my reply. I’ve never been good at thinking on the spot. “I’m sad you have to go.” I stand, my feet magically no longer aching. “I’ll miss you.”

“Aww. I’ll miss you too, babe.” His kiss is sloppy, wet, and one hundred percent with too much tongue. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

While fighting like hell not to wipe his spit from my face in front of him, I nod before opening the door for him. “I wouldn’t miss it. You can invite your father if you like. I haven’t seen him in weeks.”

My shoulders slump when he replies, “I would, but he’s out of town.”

I hide my disappointment by mustering a fake smile. “That’s a shame. See you tomorrow.”

After a final peck, I practically push him out the door.

It only stops rattling in the aftermath of my force when someone knocks on it.

As I yank it open, I say, “What did you forget this time, Vas?”

I chew on my words when they gargle in my throat.

Vasily isn’t standing on the other side of the door.

Yev is.

He didn’t miss the short name in my question. His expression announces this, not to mention his balled hands. “Are you busy?” He doesn’t give me a chance to answer. “I won’t keep you long. I just wanted you to know that the man who groped you tonight has been taken care of. He didn’t know who you were, but he won’t make the same mistake twice.”

Anyone who didn’t have Alek Kotova as a brother would be confused by his response.

I’m not.

“He didn’t hurt me. He barely touched me.”

I scoff out a brittle laugh when he replies, “That doesn’t matter. He touched what he shouldn’t have, so he must be punished.”

He stops galloping down the stairs that side my boutique when I ask, “Is that why you yelled at me last week? Did I touch what’s no longer mine?”

This building replicates many in Europe—shops on the lower levels and homes on the top. My loft is airy but homely. It has a bathtub, and one-third of the floor plan is above a bakery, so not only do I smell fresh bread every day, but it also keeps my heat bill low since hot air rises.

I also love the fact that an emergency generator backs up the power source if it were to fail.

No blackouts for me.

I had wondered last week if alcohol was Yev's only crutch. I don't have to ponder anymore when he drags his hand under his nose while twisting to face me. The insides of his nostrils are sprinkled with a white powder I'm all too familiar with. Cocaine is Vasily's favorite nighttime entertainment.

"I didn't yell at you."

He stares at me deadpan when I reply, "Yeah, you did." I fold my arms under my chest, which forces his eyes to my breasts for the quickest second before they return to my face. The lust in them slackens the battering my ego endured a week ago, but it doesn't wholly end it. "Why did you stop me?"

Yev licks his lips before giving honesty a whirl. It is a nice thing to hear after denying it to anyone for months on end. I've not even been truthful with Alek. "Because I don't want you to fix me. It's not your job."

"Even with you believing my family is responsible for what happened to Feo?"

Confusion mars his handsome face. "What?"

"Vas said—"

"Vas is a fucking idiot who doesn't know what he's talking about. And the fact he's still in the picture after he hit you last week proves Alek has no clue you're messing the sheets with him."

"I'm not messing the sheets with him." It feels like he stabs my chest with a knife when he brushes off my reply with a *pfft*, but I keep my expression neutral and my anger high. It may be the only way I won't succumb to the numerous pleas of my heart to tell him the truth.

I wouldn't hesitate if I believed he could handle it. Since he can't, I continue with my ruse that everyone is my enemy. "And Alek has no say on who I date. I thought you'd know that better than anyone. Or was the whole 'I want to tell him' merely a ploy to get into my panties?"

When my frustration that I want him to be the bad guy to lessen my guilt gets the better of me, I storm into my living room.

After slamming my front door shut behind him, Yev follows me. "If I needed a ploy to get into your panties, Polly, I sure as fuck wouldn't use your brother."

He walks up to me until he's so close that if there were a storm raging outside, I wouldn't know it. The only lightning striking right now is between us, and ninety-nine percent of its cracks are caused by his ability to maintain eye contact.

He doesn't wilt from my angry glare or cower like many men before him. He gives back as good as he is getting, then reminds me there were times when our power wasn't close to even.

"I would have ordered you to your fucking knees and told you to crawl to me long before I did."

My slap doesn't get close to his face this time around. He snatches up my wrist before it can redden his cheek more than his anger and uses it to pull me to his fit, tight body.

Hating that his closeness drops all my defenses in an instant, I lash out. "I hate you."

His cocky smirk drives me wild with desire. "You might, but your pussy *loves* me." His nostrils flare when he sucks in a big whiff of air through his nose. "I'm barely touching you,

but I can smell how hopeful you are that I'm here for more than a conversation."

I'd be scared of the fury on his face when I fail to deny his accusation if I weren't so turned on. Tension has always burned between us, but right now, it is catastrophic. It is going to burn everything it touches, including my panties when Yev tears them off my body a second after he wraps my legs around his waist and pins me to the living room wall by the bulge struggling to be contained by his zipper.

While kissing me deeply, he frees his fat dick from his jeans. It should be a challenge for how snugly they're plastered around his cock, but he faces not a single issue.

Faster than I can snap my fingers, his jeans and boxers are huddled around his feet, and his engorged cock is nudging at the opening of my pussy.

When a quick bite of pain zaps through me, I gasp in a tense breath.

I'm not worried about what we're about to do.

This is the clearest my mind has been in months.

I am petrified by his size and the damage it could do if I'm not properly prepared.

Luckily for me, his kiss made me drenched, but Yev isn't a man to put his needs first.

After rolling his tongue over his teeth to hide his smile, he falls to his knees and pushes up the hem of my dress until it resembles a belt. My hand shoots out to brace myself on the glass window that stretches from one side of my living room to the next when he blows a hot breath over my pussy before he stabs his tongue inside.

His groan adds to the shudders warning that my legs are close to being pulled out from beneath me. It is sharp, throaty, and as rumbling as the sensation that darts through me when he sucks my clit into his mouth.

My orgasm builds faster than ever before when he scrapes his teeth over the hood of my clit. I'm trembling and on the brink in an instant, and then Yev pushes me over the ledge by stuffing two fingers inside me while staring straight at me.

His grief is nonexistent.

His desire to make me come is the only expression he holds.

“So fucking sweet,” he murmurs as his tongue laps at my pussy like I may be the last meal he'll ever consume.

Once his recently shaved chin is as drenched as the wet heat between my legs, he inches back so I can't miss the throb of his cock as he pushes his fingers in and out of me. He finger fucks me like he has until eternity to get me off, his pace equally enticing as it is torturous.

“You're so fucking wet for me.”

My legs lose their fight not to buckle when he yanks my pussy back onto his mouth by a groping grab of my backside. When his tongue returns to my clit, his fingers never stopping their mind-hazing pumps, I can barely see his eyes through the fireworks igniting in mine, but a lack of eye contact won't stop the freight train attempting to run through me. It is too strong to control. Too blinding. It is the very epitome of the violent sparks that forever bristle between Yev and me when we're in the same room.

My second orgasm hits as quickly as the first when a droplet of pre-cum drips off his cock and lands on my panties

crumbled on the floor. It is so powerful it pulls my legs out from beneath me and forces me to release a long series of moans that Yev draws out until I can barely breathe.

I'm panting and red-faced by the time the head of his cock returns to the opening of my pussy, and I'm almost certain I've never felt as hot as I do now.

"Breathe, baby girl," Yev demands as his thumb on the hand lining his dick up with my opening swipes past my still-throbbing clit. "Let me in. I promise I'll make it feel good. You'll be clawing at my back in no time, begging me to take you harder and faster with every moan you release."

As my lungs expand to fit in a heap of fresh air, Yev's hips lurch upward, and he enters me with one quick thrust.

"F... far out." I struggle to swear even when I really need to. "I forgot how damn big you are."

In an instant, his smile lessens the pain tearing through me. It is cocky and so on par with the man I fought my attraction to for years before eventually giving in. "It's because you're so fucking tight. You'd swear no one has touched you here in the past six months."

His eyes dance between mine when I mutter, "They haven't."

"Polly..."

I don't know what he sees on my face, but it has him thrusting into me hard and fast until my moans switch from breathless whimpers to frantic shouts.

Within minutes, a kaleidoscope of colors reforms in front of my eyes, and my thighs shake.

Another orgasm is imminent. And it is going to be blinding.

“Fuck yes, baby girl. Give it to me.”

He sinks his cock in deep, moaning with me when he bottoms out at my uterus. It should hurt taking him so deep. I’m stretched beyond my limits in both girth and length, but it feels amazing. I am steamrolling toward another release, and Yev appears only a few steps behind me.

“Take me harder. Please. Make me come again.”

When my demand reaches Yev’s ears, he grunts before giving me the works. He pumps his hips in rhythm to the frantic beat of my heart, flexing his cock with each thrust while also filling my ears with a heap of dirty words.

The sensation demanding every nerve I own is mind-hazing. His husky words and the brutal slap of our bodies slick my skin with sweat and make my insides a sticky, gooey mess. I’m hot all over, trembling, aching, and so turned on the feeling of being wholly claimed almost overwhelms me.

I beg him to stop, to slow the grind of his hips, but Yev knows it is a ploy.

As he stares me dead set in the eyes, he plows into me in rapid succession, taking more than I knew I could give while also giving me more than I’ve ever wanted.

I act icy and standoffish because I think a cool demeanor will protect me.

Yev is the only one who’s ever broken through my bluff.

He thawed me by teaching me that it is okay to want more than gentle, slow-paced lovemaking, and I shouldn’t be

ashamed to admit my desires. We're not born to act a certain way. Every person is different, and so are our needs.

"Yes," I breathe out with a grunt when Yev's pumps grow so frantic his balls slap my ass. "Harder. Take me. Make me yours."

He takes me hard against the wall like he did the first time I gave in to the tension forever bristling between us.

He makes me his—*again*.

As a deep grunt of pleasure rumbles up my chest, I once again give in to the tingles darting through every inch of my body.

I climax like I never have, and Yev follows quickly behind me.

As his cock throbs through a brutal release, he continues driving into me, over and over again, uncaring that the paintings on the walls are tilting on their axis as well as he spirals my mind. He fucks me without remorse, his fingers digging into my backside firm enough to mark.

After stretching my orgasm from one to two, he surrenders to the silent screams of his muscles. With one of his hands on my backside and the other buried in my hair to stop my head from smacking into the wall during his breast-jiggling pumps, he balances his sweaty forehead on mine before slowly fluttering his eyes back open.

Eye contact is huge for me. It is one of my biggest requirements, but I only get half a second to relish the wish to live re-sparking in Yev's hooded gaze before I realize we're not alone.

POLINA

“*P*olina.” The stomps of a heavy-footed man boom up the stairwell as Yev withdraws from my still-clenching pussy and takes a step back. His jeans are huddled around his ankles, and his thick cock is covered with evidence of our exchange, yet he looks sickened when Vasily adds, “Our grind-up on the entryway table put my head in such a tizzy, I’d forget it if it weren’t attached.”

When Yev’s eyes stray to the table Vasily mentioned, mere inches from our impromptu romp station, I shake my head.

None of the lies swirling in his head are true.

I was turned off by Vasily’s grind-up.

He made me wet, not Vasily.

Though he will have a hard time believing that when I demand he hide in the bathroom.

“Please,” I beg when “fuck no” sits on the tip of his tongue. “He can’t see you here. It will ruin everything.” I take a lesson from Natalya’s book when I barge him into the bathroom. “I’ll get rid of him, and then I will explain everything. I promise. I just need you to wait here until then.”

I give him a final pleading look before closing the bathroom door.

Its lock has only just clicked into place when Vasily bursts through my apartment door. As he drinks in my flushed cheeks and wide eyes, I step onto the scrap of material I once called underwear before kicking it under a side table. I'm not ashamed about the event Yev and I undertook, but I can't have it ruining months of hard work.

"You look exhausted," Vasily eventually says, shifting my focus back to him instead of my remorse.

I nod. "I said I was feeling off. I think I have more than a headache." I swallow to ease the burn of my lies. "Why are you back? Did your conference get canceled?"

He waits a beat before shaking his head, freeing me to release the breath I am holding in. "I forgot my cell." As he walks toward the chair he was seated on earlier, I flatten the strands of hair Yev's hand mussed, before crossing my legs. The product of our exchange is seconds from dripping down my thighs. From the buildup, you'd swear Yev has forgone sex for as long as me. "I got halfway to the restaurant before I realized I won't be paying for anything without my phone."

He pays with his phone because he has no idea how easy it is to track your every move with that payment method.

Vasily freezes with his hand halfway into his pocket when something he said smacks into me. "Your conference is at a restaurant?"

I'm confident his business dealings aren't legit, so the last place he should discuss trade is in public. I usually wouldn't care what he gets up to, but I have a lot riding on his family's reputation. A misdemeanor on his record is the last thing I need.

“Ah...” I’m glad to learn I’m not the only one struggling to be a two-faced liar today. “Yeah. Um... the buyers wanted to meet there. If they’re paying, we may as well eat.” He laughs like I believe a single word he speaks before he joins me in the entryway. “I really should get going. They bill by the hour, and I’m already late.” He leans in to press a kiss to my cheek, freezing when he notices how wonky the paintings on the wall are. It is the fight of my life not to barf on his shoes when he asks, “Was that me? I can be a little rough when excited. You just have a way of raring me up.” He sounds desperate when he asks, “Maybe we can finish what we started tomorrow?”

“Maybe,” I squeak out, willing to say anything if it will see him leaving sooner rather than later.

I’ll never forgive myself if Yev has overheard any of our conversation.

I remember Natalya’s notion that some people see maybe as a yes when hope flares through Vasily’s hooded eyes. “Great.”

Again, he presses his lips to my cheek before he hotfoots it outside.

This time, I make sure he can’t burst in unexpectedly by fixing the lock in place, and then I head for the bathroom.

My legs wobble with more than exhaustion when a draft whips around my ankles upon opening the bathroom door.

Yev also exited my building, but unlike Vasily, he used a window instead of the door.

Although there are a hundred things I want to say to Yev, I keep my text simple when I realize anything shared between us needs to be done in person.

ME:

Please don't tell Alek.

I wait with bated breath when ellipses trickle on the screen.

YEV:

I thought we agreed to keep this between us?

As the panic swirling in my stomach makes room for confusion, my fingers fly across my phone's screen.

ME:

Yes, but that was months ago. Before we... you know...

Mayhem smacks into me when he bombards my phone with cocky, condescending replies.

YEV:

Organized after-dinner entertainment?

I also told you you have nothing to worry about.

Alek and I are business associates.

I doubt he will have an issue with us dating.

You could do far worse than me.

And I have no issues ensuring he knows that.

These replies can't belong to Yev. He's cocky, but there is a big difference between cocky and arrogant.

My heart rate slows to a sluggish beat when I stray my eyes to the single-seater couch, and I spot a cell phone on a

table to its left. It looks a lot like Vasily's cell.

Oh, God, please don't be so cruel.

With how hard I'm shaking, it takes three times the usual length to type out a quick text to Vasily.

ME:

I forgot I have to work late tomorrow. Nat has a date. Sorry.

My heart slips to my feet when the cell on the table buzzes and vibrates.

If that's Vasily's cell, that can only mean one thing.

Vas has Yev's phone.

Shit.

Shit!

Shit!

YEV

“*H*ow many fucking times do I need to spell it out for you?” I tighten my grip on my phone before snarling out through clenched teeth, “I. Do. Not. Pay. For. Prostitutes. I have an eleven-inch cock. Women would pay me if I entered an industry like”—I check the name of the business that charged a little over three thousand dollars to my Mastercard last week—“Spanks.”

My comment about my cock’s length is a *slight* exaggeration, but give me some leeway. I’m pissed as fuck. The charges I am disputing were processed within thirty minutes of my cock reacquainting with Polina’s pussy. Even frustrated as fuck by Vasily’s unexpected arrival at her apartment, I wouldn’t seek the help of a hooker to get over my annoyance.

Cocaine worked perfectly fine.

The bank clerk’s tone is nasally when she says, “The payment was made with your phone. We have the sim card and the phone’s IP address on file.”

“It’s not possible,” I tell her again. “My phone was on me the entire time, and I was nowhere near that area of Kronstadt.”

That's a lie. My phone magically arrived on my coffee table the morning following my impromptu romp with Polina. Since I assumed it fell out of my pocket when I yanked my jeans and boxers to my knees, I didn't consider checking to see if it had been used.

Polina isn't a thief. She won't even borrow a single article of clothing from her boutique without paying for it in full.

"Can you at least give me the address of the fine establishment I supposedly blew three Gs at?"

The clerk's sigh is more in relief than frustration. "Of course. Do you have a pen?"

After jotting down the details, I tell her to have a pleasant fucking day before ending our call and collecting my keys off the entryway table. It isn't for the convertible I was getting around in before I pushed my brother toward his untimely death. It is the piece-of-shit car the dealer refused to trade in, even with me spending close to half a million for a car Polina's rich clients gloated about. The AC doesn't work, it's rusted and beat up, and I can't wind down the driver's side window, which makes it a real fucking shitshow when the cops pull me over.

My car screams Gangbanger 101, and I'm more embarrassed of the title than proud like I was a couple years ago.

A title like "gangbanger" won't get me a woman like Polina.

It is a pain in the ass to find a parking spot when I reach Novaya Avenue. The streets are forever littered with drunk, horny idiots, but it is worse on a Friday night.

I give up on a prime spot and settle for an alleyway a block back from the action. I'm about to exit the dark alley when a flurry of blonde captures my attention.

Blondes are in abundance in Kronstadt, but none are as ravishing as the beauty being possessively grabbed by a douche not close to her league next to a restaurant that charges thirty dollars for a glass of tap water.

Vasily Cabanow would spend more time in front of the mirror than with his head buried between any woman's legs. His suit is vomit-worthy, his shoes over-polished, and he stands like he has a stick shoved up his ass, yet he's holding Polina possessively at his side, making every chump in a five-mile radius jealous as fuck.

Myself included.

I don't know what I was thinking when I took Polina hard and fast against the wall of her apartment, but I sure as fuck didn't expect her to push me into the bathroom like she's ashamed to be seen with me seconds after cum finished erupting from my cock.

She's always been about fashion and only ever presenting your best self, but I thought her snooty stance ended the instant I stabbed my tongue into her dripping cunt for the first time.

Furthermore, she acts untouchable to protect herself, so how the fuck did a douche like Vasily break through her once impenetrable shell?

When I spot Vasily dragging his unbandaged hand across Polina's forehead like he's checking for a temperature, I pretend to tie my shoes. I don't give a fuck if Vasily spots my

stalk. I merely need a moment to work out what to say to Polina when I stand across from her again.

I'm pissed about how things ended last week, but I also feel like there's more going on than she's telling me.

I'd have a better idea if I read the texts she sent me the past week.

I had no clue grief made you an insensitive ass to other people's issues until now.

My assumption that I'm missing something gets a boost of actuality when Polina murmurs, "I'm sorry, Vas. I don't want to ruin your birthday." She's a shit liar. Always has been. "But I really think it is best if I go home alone. I don't want you to catch whatever I have." Her sneeze is as fake as her pout. "I think the baker who made your cake had a cold. She sneezed on me." The moon's rays bounce off my teeth when I grin after she shoves a cake box into Vasily's chest. "I better not eat it. It could be riddled with germs." Most devoted spouses toss a potential hazard into the trash. They don't hand it to their supposed better half to consume.

My brow quirks when Polina farewells a man I didn't notice hiding in the shadow of the restaurant's awning with a peck on the cheek. I swear I've seen him before, but he has a face that doesn't stand out in a crowd, so I could be wrong.

Since the man with a ring of salt-and-pepper hair is distracting Polina, she misses Vasily's head bob to a prostitute across the street. It could have been construed as a greeting if he didn't place a business card between the folded-up bills he hands the valet. I guarantee it has the address of a seedy motel scribbled across the back, and within seconds of Vasily leaving with Polina, the woman across the street will be bundled into a cab and delivered to the address stipulated on the card.

How do I know this?

I worked valet on these blocks for years. It gave me access to the who's who of Kronstadt and saw me spending my evenings driving the luxury vehicles the Bobrovs stole, stripped, and sold for parts the following month.

Second to grand theft, the prostitution trade is a big part of a valet's job. It earns more than tips and ensures workers arrive for every shift.

I drift my focus from the blonde across the street to Polina when she says, "No, it's fine. Truly. I can take myself home." She flattens her hand on Vasily's chest, then pushes him back from the cab idling at the curb. "Enjoy the rest of your birthday."

I can't hear what he replies, but a second after farewelling him in the same manner she did the elderly gentleman, Polina slips into the back of the cab, then signals for the driver to go, leaving Vasily red-faced and angry near the valet.

My watch gets busted seconds after Polina's taxi merges into traffic. Vasily looks pissed, but his bandaged hand keeps the arrogance in his tone at a manageable level. "The restaurant's skips are around back. You'll find something more enticing than scraps there."

I stand to my full height, ready and willing to bounce, but before I can, the older man behind him doubles my assurance that we've met before by jerking up his chin in greeting. "You're that fighter guy. Um... what's your fight name again? Fie... Tye... Lie..." I'm about to put him out of his misery when he does what many other spectators did the years Feo and I worked the circuit side by side. He mistakes me for my brother. "Feo the Flatliner." He steps out of the shadows, moving closer to me. "I haven't seen you fight for well over

six months. You've been missed." His comment fills me with pride that I got to call Feodor my brother. It pisses Vasily off. "Will you be participating in this weekend's event? I hear some big money is on the line."

I hadn't considered getting back into fighting until now. It isn't like I couldn't use the money. Partying like you only have six months to live is expensive. I'm one deal away from bankruptcy.

"Where is it being held?" I ask.

The man digs a business card out of his pocket. "Same location as your last fight." He scribbles something onto the card before handing it to me. "Tell them it's a rematch, and you won't be required to pay a buy-in." When my brows furrow, I almost give away that I'm not my brother until he murmurs, "I take it your last fight was the first one interrupted by the authorities?"

"Yeah." I wet my dry lips. "Usually the events are hosted by them, not raided by them."

He laughs as if I said something funny. "That is true." After storing his wallet in his breast pocket, he says, "Hopefully I'll see you there."

"Maybe."

His smile announces he took my response as a promise. He practically skips away, leaving me standing at the side of the restaurant with a man with similar looks but a ton more attitude and nowhere near as many wrinkles.

There is a heap of room to maneuver past Vasily, but since I'd rather ruin his night, I shoulder-barge him before inconspicuously slipping my hand into his pocket to remove his wallet without permission.

Good luck paying for a prostitute without money, fuckface.

As Vasily grumbles a cuss word under his breath, I head down the packed street while removing the cash from his wallet. He has only a couple hundred, but the peddlers begging for food outside restaurants that charge an arm and a leg for half a plate of food gleam with joy when I hand it to them.

It'll feed them for a month.

Once I've distributed the bills hiding Polina's picture nestled between them, I place her photograph in my pocket, then dump Vas's wallet in a trash can. I don't hide it under a day's worth of trash. If someone stumbles onto it while searching through the rubbish for food, they've earned the right to use his credit cards.

As I enter Spanks, I'm spotted by an overexuberant blond. He greets me with a head flick before demanding me to his side with a furred finger. His nail polish sparkles in the mood lighting above his head.

"First time?" he asks when I join him by the bar.

"Supposedly not..."—I dig out the bank statement that shows my account is in arrears—"according to this."

"Oh no." He snatches up the paper. I have no clue how his nails don't hack it to pieces. "Did the missus find out? We do have a discreet method. It should have been offered. Oh, look..." He drags a nail under the three-thousand-dollar charge. "You used it. We don't sell timeshares."

I'm completely fucking lost, so I blurt out, "I've never been here before, so I don't give a fuck how well you hide it. The charge is wrong."

"It can't be."

“It is.” His eyes snap to mine. Now that I have his attention, I ask, “Do I look like a guy who needs to pay?”

“Well...” He adjusts the collar on my shirt, then pats my chest like Polina did Vasily only minutes ago. “No. But there must be an explanation. Did you loan your phone to a friend?”

“No.” I’d need to have friends to be able to loan them stuff. The people in my apartment every night aren’t there for friendships. They’re to drown out the silence slowly killing me. “Do you have surveillance? It will prove I didn’t make that transaction.”

“Yeah, but I can’t give you access to that. Not unless I want my nuts cut out with a blunt knife instead of a surgeon’s scalpel.”

Once again, I am totally fucking lost, but before I can announce it, the bell above the door chimes, and the blond’s face lights up like a Christmas tree.

When I crank my neck back, interested to see who has captured his attention, my jaw tics. Vasily is standing in the doorway of Spanks. His expression is busted until he misconstrues my visit. Then he looks downright smug.

He moseys in like he owns the place as the guy at the bar asks, “The usual?”

I wait in anticipation for his hunt for his wallet to come up empty but am left disappointed when he pulls out his sleek black cell phone. It is identical to the one that burned a hole in my bank balance last week. One swipe of it over a modified tablet the blond is holding out gains him instant access to Spanks.

“Head straight to your room. Make yourself comfortable until Tatiana arrives. She’s finishing her set.”

Vasily jerks up his chin in response to the blond's offer before he barges past me in the same manner I used on him in the street.

I grin when I realize how weak his hit is. For a man with wide shoulders and a bucketload of arrogance, his shove is the equivalent of a mosquito landing on my arm.

Spotting our exchange, the blond waits until Vasily is out of earshot before asking, "Bad blood?"

"More like stale."

He eyes me curiously. "What was the date of your transaction again?" He finds the answer himself by dropping his eyes to the sheet of paper in my hand. As he twists his red-painted lips, he strays them in the direction Vasily just went. "Same time every week. His order never alters." While pretending he's spinning to speak to the bartender, he twists the tablet's screen my way. It shows Vasily's bill. It is the exact amount I was charged last week.

Once he's certain I've gotten the point, he focuses his attention back to me. "So what will it be? A hundred-dollar bar credit or a private *dance*"—he air quotes his last word—"with one of our performers?"

This is fucking shit to admit, but I can't even charge ten dollars to my card. It is overdrawn, and I only have a handful of bills in my wallet.

Instead of answering his question, I ask one of my own. "Where do guys like him exit once the deed is done?"

He looks queasy over me using "deed" for sex, but he doesn't shut down my interrogation. "Out the same door the dancers exit." His lower lip drops into a pout. "Say it isn't so? You truly don't remember me?"

As my brow arches, I ask, “We’ve met before?”

“Not officially, but since you seem more like a protective detail than a robber, I stopped trailing Ana the instant you picked her up.”

I take a step back before slinging my eyes around my location. I could slap my forehead when features register as familiar. Cut me some slack. It is a completely different experience entering a strip club from the front than it is when you’re mingling at the back, waiting for someone. Ana also only worked here for one night.

I lock eyes with the blond when he asks, “How is Ana? She hardly calls me anymore.”

“She’s good,” I answer. “I think.”

I’ve not been the best company for the past six months.

I have pushed away more people than I’ve let in.

Needing to leave before my grief makes itself known, I say, “Thanks for your help.”

I make it halfway to the entrance before the blond interrupts, “If you’re going to wait, I suggest doing it somewhere comfortable. He pays in three hourly blocks.”

His reply burns the back of my throat with bile, but I keep my expression neutral while lifting my chin in thanks.

When I enter the packed sidewalk, I toss up between storming the room Vasily entered to gather proof of his cheating ways firsthand or using the evidence I have stored on my phone.

Polina is the only one who could have swapped our phones back, so she’d know any charges placed on there between our fuck and the following morning weren’t made by me.

Deciding to save my eyes from irreparable damage, I settle on the latter.

Since Polina's apartment is attached to her clothing store, the streets during my drive are isolated. No one comes to these parts of Kronstadt at this hour.

I knew Polina was acting earlier when she said she was sick. Ill women don't sit on their windowsills, eating ice cream out of the tub. Her hair is wet and combed back, and her face is without a smidge of makeup, but I'd be a lying fuck if I said I wasn't contemplating how delicious it would be to lick ice cream off her smooth thighs.

The thought pisses me off more than I already am.

Where is that ball-crushing woman who laughed in my face when I demanded she crawl to me for the first time? The one who sniffed out the cheaters within seconds of them entering her boutique? She could read people, so how come she hasn't read Vasily as the cheating scumbag he is?

I'm disappointed, but not all the blame belongs on Polina's shoulders. All the people she relied on left her at the same time. Alek and I, and from what I've heard on the streets, her foster father returned to the States not long after us.

In the silence of the night, I take a few minutes to settle my agitation.

The quiet isn't as calming as expected. It can't muffle the sound of a droning tick. It replicates the click of the paparazzi cameras Tomosso's family regularly endured in Sicily, except there aren't a dozen cameras snapping at once. Just one.

When I stray my eyes in the direction the clicks are coming from, a spasm hits my jaw. A blacked-out sedan is parked a couple of spots up from where I'm hiding. A long-

range camera is stretched from the driver's seat to the passenger window.

Even if I wanted to pretend the lens isn't facing Polina's apartment, I can't act ignorant to who they're monitoring when Polina's slightest movement causes the camera's clicker to go mental.

She isn't doing something as bland as eating ice cream anymore. She's racing for the front door of her apartment, her expression as stunned as mine when she pulls open her door to discover Vasily on the other side.

Unless he drives twenty over the limit like me, he had to have left Spanks before me.

"You fuckin' rat," I mutter under my breath when the truth smacks into me.

I thought I was going to rat him out.

Turns out I'm the mouse of our duo.

When Vasily moves to close the drapes, the corners of his lips tug high.

Anyone would swear he could see me.

I realize my error when a deep voice on my left says, "Smug fucking prick."

I sprint for the car with surveillance equipment more expensive than its showroom price tag when its engine kicks over. It whizzes out of the parking spot before I can take in any details of the driver.

Vasily exits Polina's apartment just as fast.

"Leave before I call the police."

“For what?” I fire back, my mood ropeable. “Standing on the street?”

I laugh when he says, “For stalking.” He nudges his head to a camera fixed above a shop frontage across the road from Polina’s boutique. “I have proof this isn’t the first time you’ve done this. It’s enough to prosecute.”

I’m tempted to ask if his proof includes Polina begging me to take her hard against the wall her shoulder was braced against only minutes ago, but I keep my mouth shut. I can’t do Polina wrong like that, but I also don’t want to admit I was someone’s side dish.

From what I heard in the bathroom, I wasn’t the only man Polina was getting hot and heavy with that evening.

This fuckhead was in on the action as well.

The realization makes it extremely hard to keep my fists balled at my sides and not in his face. The only reason I maintain my cool is because our exchange is being watched by more than the people monitoring the security system. There’s a crack in the thick drapes covering the living room window of Polina’s apartment, and I’d recognize her heated glare from any distance.

“You owe me three thousand dollars.” I cross my arms over my chest, my attitude rife. “I expect it by the end of business tomorrow... *with* interest. If I don’t get it, I’ll do more than break your hand.” I fight the smile dying to spread across my face when panic flares through Vasily’s eyes. I knew his pricy suits were bought off the rack. He wants to be wealthy, but he’s nothing but a shitkicker who does as ordered, which doubles my assurance he will adhere to all my threats tonight. “I also suggest you have an early night. We don’t want you too exhausted to earn the big bucks tomorrow doing the

shifty shit that makes you believe you deserve a woman like her.” When I nudge my head to the window, the gap minimizes as Vasily follows the direction of my head jerk.

Assuming we’re alone, Vasily shifts his eyes back to me before saying, “You have no fucking clue what you’re walking yourself toward.”

“Perhaps not.” I shrug. “But do you think I care?”

He hits me where it hurts, even with his hands remaining glued to his sides. “I bet your brother would have liked more warning.”

I’ve only just grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt when the wail of police sirens suspends my fist midair. Their spotlight is on me, and their noisy arrival gives Polina an excuse to no longer hide her watch.

She eyes me with panic, like she’s worried I’ll hurt her douchebag of a boyfriend.

The knowledge sees my fist landing in the brickwork behind Vasily’s head before I stalk down the alleyway in search of the closest watering hole.

POLINA

“*W*hat do you mean you lost half a consignment?” Vasily slides through the back passenger door of his ride, grumbling a cuss word when he can’t hold his cell phone to his ear and shut the door at the same time.

His attitude is as predominant as it was when he arrived at my apartment earlier this week to disclose his supposed shock that he had spotted Yev entering an establishment known for prostitution.

He was attempting to act surprised. All I was slammed with was haughty superiority. His aim was to announce that he’s a superior man to Yev, but when he left my apartment before a single excuse left my mouth, he landed in his own trap.

Yev isn’t a man who’s done and dusted in five minutes. Even our hard-and-fast romp against the wall lasted well over twenty minutes, and before we were interrupted, his expression exposed that it was only the commencement of our night.

If Vasily had spotted Yev after I left him on the sidewalk, he would have only been inside Spanks for ten minutes maximum. That was nowhere near enough time for my worry about how close Vasily is watching Yev to switch to jealousy.

Don't get me wrong, some jealousy was there, but it was more in response to Vasily associating with Yev instead of me.

I texted him multiple times the past week, requesting to speak with him. He's yet to return a single message. It's made me a little spiteful. I was usually the one who ran when Yev and I fooled around. It made the game of chase oh so enticing.

I don't feel the same when I'm the one doing the chasing.

As Vasily plonks into his seat, he tugs at the cast circling his wrist and hand. Even with Yev breaking his wrist three weeks ago, he still hasn't mastered the skill of using only one hand. The damage to his wrist required him to have two separate operations in the past week—his birthday week.

Karma at its finest.

When Vasily's frustrated roar bounces through the cab of the car his father sent to collect us, I roll my shoulders back and harden my features. Tonight is not the night for me to act nonchalant. We were meant to meet constituencies of his father's office at a restaurant two hours ago. As usual, Vasily is late. "Check again! You don't lose a ton of inventory from a foreign country unless some cunt stole it out from beneath your damn nose."

Although skeptical the Bobrov crew had anything to do with the Lenkovs' missing stock, I send Alek a quick message so he's aware of an impending investigation. The Lenkovs once distributed a lot of the Bobrov stock—including women—so they could be biting back at the Lenkovs' attempt to go it alone since they're no longer importing.

ME:

Half of a Lenkov consignment is missing. Vasily assumes foul play.

Alek's message pops up a second later. It dries my throat.

ALEK:

What the fuck are you doing hanging around the Lenkov crew?

Before I can get mad that he didn't give me much choice when he up and left town with everyone of importance in my life, he adds,

ALEK:

Are you okay?

Although certain Ana is behind his sudden empathy, I reply as if I'm clueless.

ME:

Of course. Why wouldn't I be?

I read my reply over and over again when his face pops up on my phone's screen instead of a text message notification. Nothing I said should have set him off, but Alek is more perceptive than most men, although nowhere near as much as he was years ago.

He changed the day his daughter was born not breathing, and although Ana's return to his life has been a godsend, I'm not sure he will ever fully recover. It is like an alcoholic. Just because they quit drinking doesn't mean they're no longer labeled an alcoholic.

I guess the same could be said for men drowning in grief. It doesn't vanish after a set amount of time. It stays forever. You merely learn to live with it, not get over it.

The remembrance has me hopeful Yev's lack of contact this week is because of his confession that he doesn't want me to fix him.

After hitting the end call button on the FaceTime app, I revert our communication to the text messages that's kept us in contact the past six months.

ME:

Can't talk. About to attend an event. Speak soon.

My huff ripples through my lips when his reply pops up.

ALEK:

FaceTime me tonight or I'll find another way to stop you from lying to me. You can't fib to my face.

Needing to end our conversation before he drags Yev into my mess more adeptly than I already have, I tap out a reply.

ME:

I look forward to it.

I'm such a liar. The last time he confronted me in person, I had to admit my first foster father was inappropriately touching me.

When our father killed our mother, Alek went to a boys' home, and I was "gifted" to a foster family who only took in girls. I learned why when the bathroom door wouldn't lock, and my foster father "accidentally" walked in on me changing my first night there.

The first time, I excused it as a mishap, but when it continued each evening, I became extremely wary.

Not even stuffing a laundry hamper under the door handle stopped him from entering.

I told the foster lady who came to check on me. She didn't believe me. She said I was only a baby, so why would a grown man be interested in anything I had to offer.

"You don't even have boobs yet," she shrieked out, her words choked by laughter.

When he realized he could get away with it, it only took weeks for looking to switch to touching. I was eight and petrified. Alek was twelve and ready to go on a warpath with anyone.

Our communication was sporadic the first few months of our placement, but it was clear he knew something was wrong because the last message he sent me that snowy winter's night was that he'd be over to visit me the following day.

He showed up at the doorstep of my foster home an hour later with a bat and an angry sidekick with a scarred face.

No one wants to admit they let someone hurt them, but Alek eventually coerced it out of me.

I was placed into another foster home the following afternoon.

When I found out the placement was with an English teacher from abroad who was only a decade older than Alek, I was guarded, but that placement was a blessing. Mr. Fleming never did anything inappropriate. He treated me like a daughter and still does to this day.

I just wish he wasn't forced to live so far away. His work visa ran out six months ago, so he had no choice but to leave. We stay in regular contact, but it isn't the same as having him

here. His wife misses him, and he's only ever seen his precious baby girl via FaceTime.

“Polina.”

I twist my torso to Vasily, the person interrupting me from my thoughts. “Sorry. I spaced out.”

When he rolls his eyes, I smile sweetly at him like I don't want to drag my nails down his face. Nat isn't the only one who knows Vasily is a vile, arrogant man who thinks the sun shines out of his ass. I usually wouldn't be caught dead with someone as pompous as him, but his father is a minister who works closely with the visa facilitators. He could grant my father's visa faster than the slow channels Hannah and I have been using for the past six months.

“I need to run an errand before we eat. Do you mind?”

The fact he's seeking permission surges my suspicions, but I act ignorant by shaking my head.

“Good.” Like an owner to an obedient dog, he pats my hand, then returns his focus to his cell phone. “We will be there in thirty.”

The butterflies that haven't quit since I bumped into Yev ramp up when our pricy SUV slides down a dark and isolated road. People usually come out to these parts to dispose of something or collect something they're not meant to have.

Vasily's reasons seem different this time around. He directs the driver to pull up close to an open warehouse door at the right of a long line of pricy cars. “Keep the engine idling. I doubt we'll be here long.” He tosses some notes over the lowered privacy partition before he slides out of the door, then pops back in to offer me a hand.

His chivalry rings more loudly in warning than the knowledge that I'm not appropriately dressed for the muddy, slug-coated grounds, but I save my nose from being covered with wrinkles by masking my expression as I have many times the past three months.

The only person who has seen the true me in years is Yev.

I brought out my designer babies tonight to assure Mr. Cabanow that I'm not dating his son for his money. What I want costs nothing more than a signature scribbled on a piece of paper.

When long strands of hair fall back from my face, I mutter under my breath, "What the hell?"

The warehouse is brimming with the who's who of Russia. There are as many female spectators as there are males, but none are dressed as affluent as me. Their hem lengths are minuscule, bras are optional, and they're butting shoulders with men who enter my boutique store with women decades older than them.

I wonder if we're attending one of the auctions I overheard men discussing while waiting for their wives to pick garments for charity galas, until the distinct sound of skin slapping skin booms into my ears. It isn't the spine-tingling whack that has my mind merging to how easily Yev held me against the wall while taking me hard and fast. It is the noises I heard leaving the basement of my first foster home the night Alek and Ghost arrived.

Knuckles against bone.

Fists on muscles.

Bare-knuckled fighting that has the audience so rapt, I startle when Vasily presses his lips to the shell of my ear.

There's something going on with him tonight, but I can't quite pinpoint what it is.

"Go ahead. I'll be there in a minute." He nudges his head to the row of chairs a couple back from the ring. "We're three seats in."

I'm about to say I'll wait for him, but when I spot the shiny head of the man in the seat next to ours, I nod like obedience is my forte before taking off for Mr. Cabanow.

Anytime I tried to bring up my father's visa application during Vasily's birthday dinner earlier this week, Vas cut me off by saying business should only be discussed during business hours.

He'll have a hard time doing that if he's not part of the conversation.

"Polina, darling, you look ravishing." Mr. Cabanow greets me with a chaste kiss on the side of my mouth.

"Thank you, Mr. Cabanow." I place my hand on the lapel of his jacket, playing the devoted soon-to-be daughter-in-law ruse to perfection. "You also look fetching. The tailor did a wonderful job customizing your suit jacket."

"Tailor?" He *pffts* me. "This was all your doing. You have quite the eye for fine things. I guess that's why you're dating my son." He continues talking, saving me from mustering up a fake laugh. "And please, call me Leon. We're practically family."

I see this as my in. "Talking about family, my father—"

He shushes me a second before the crowd's roar shudders my heart out of my chest. The fight keeping them riveted during my arrival was announced by the referee as I zoomed down the bleachers, so that isn't the cause of their excitement.

A new contender is, and I fullheartedly understand their fascination.

Yev was barely a boy when he packed up and left town with only a handful of words spoken between us. Although I learned weeks before his second stint abroad that he isn't a kid anymore, not to mention our fuck against the wall of my living room last week, I'm still flabbergasted when he bounces around the boxing ring, jabbing the air with his tape-covered fists.

I'm not seeing the skinny boy who followed me around like a puppy when Alek seconded me to Kronstadt not long after my twenty-first birthday to see if my father would consider taking in another runaway. He had tried to get Ana into a good foster program for weeks, but she either found her way back on the streets within hours or was fighting off men like my first foster father.

With Ana's story replicating mine so well, I offered for her to stay with me. I was hardly scraping by, but I was willing to give it a shot like my father had with me.

Alek didn't consider me as an option. He didn't trust himself around Ana, so he believed placing distance between them would be best for all involved.

Nothing he did worked. Ana wanted him, and Alek eventually gave in to the tension burning between them.

It took me several years longer to give in to Yev.

Sometimes I wish I hadn't been so stubborn. I might not have faced some of the issues I had if I'd given Yev a chance. But also, I'm not sure we would have made it through the flames unscathed.

When Ana and Alek's relationship fell apart, they took down everyone with them.

People I once classed as family became strangers, and strangers became friends.

Only one good thing came from months of prolonged absences. I threw myself into my business, believing that the only person I needed to control my destiny was myself. It worked well until my sister was born.

A baby changes your perspective in an instant. I became more family-orientated, but my wish for her to be raised by the best father on the planet also taught me that if I don't make sacrifices for what I want, I'll never get it.

Dating Vasily is one of those sacrifices.

Reluctantly, I drag my eyes away from Yev's impressive six-pack to lock them on Leon. I can't let go of the reins just as I am steering the carriage around the final curve. "My father's visa application has been in processing mode for over eight months. Is there anything we can do to speed up the process? He has secure employment, numerous references, and a family desperate for him to come home."

Leon glances at me for two seconds before his attention returns to the ring. When he hisses in sync with the crowd, I follow the direction of his gawk.

Air whizzes through my teeth when I learn the cause of the crowd's fret. Yev's opponent is entering the ring. He is the size of a house. His biceps are wider than Yev's head, and the tuft of hair Yev left unslicked tonight barely reaches his opponent's nipple.

My heart drops to my feet when Vasily slips onto the seat next to me while murmuring, "This looks like an interesting

pairing.”

Even with his wallet appearing as flat as his cock when he stuffs it into his pants pocket, he can't hide the smugness on his face. He's mentioned getting revenge on Yev many times over the past week. I assumed he meant with the skills his Mai Tai instructor taught him, so I didn't consider tracking down Yev in person to warn him. I left it up to the numerous text messages I sent him.

I won't make the same mistake twice. Yev was defending me, so even if I believed his tactics were a little excessive and that he set my plans back by a couple of weeks, he doesn't deserve to be hurt for doing what any respectable man would do.

I barely get two steps away when Vasily snatches up my wrist. “Sit down.” He yanks me back onto my seat, his tactics cruel and demoralizing. “Or you can kiss your father's visa application goodbye.”

My heart stops beating as my wide eyes bounce between his. “What?”

His lips curve up at one side. I don't know if his smirk is in response to my shocked expression or Yev's opponent's first punch landing with the accuracy of a missile. It shunts Yev back three places before it forces blood to ooze out of a fresh cut above his brow. “You don't think I notice you mentioning it every single time my father is in your vicinity?” His *pfft* dots my cheek with spit. “Your endeavors to sink your nails into him are as obvious as every prostitute this side of Antarctica.”

As Yev dodges back-to-back swings, I say, “If you truly believe I'm only with you for your father's connections, why haven't you ever said anything? We've been dating for almost three months.”

I realize the player is getting played when he slings his head to me and grins. “I can’t inherit what is rightly mine until I’m married.” With his father’s attention solely focused on what should be an uneven pairing but is more matched than first thought, he explains, “My father seems to like you, and he believes what we have is genuine. So much so, he’s having our prenup drafted as we speak.”

“I haven’t agreed to marry you.” He tossed out the word a handful of times the past three months, but I never took his hints. I was planning to dump him the instant my father’s visa was approved.

“No, but you will.” He drags his finger down my nose in a way people could misconstrue as cute if they didn’t know him as well as I did. “And you are hundreds of thousands of dollars cheaper than the pro who offered to take your place two weeks ago.”

I knew that wasn’t his sister’s perfume in the cab of his car when he collected me before his first surgeon’s appointment.

When I pull away from his touch, he laughs. “Don’t be like that, Polina. When he loses”—he nudges his head to the ring—“you’ll be entitled to ten, maybe even twenty percent of the money I bet against him.”

As I return my eyes to the ring, Vas’s growl rumbles through my chest. Yev isn’t losing as predicted. He’s prancing around the ring like he did in Alek’s bedroom when Anastasia used him to make Alek jealous. The smile he wore back then is nowhere to be seen, but his attitude is in excess, and he has the attention of every female in the room—even the taken ones.

He only has eyes for one, though. As he drags them over my flushed cheeks, parted lips, and crinkled brows, his lips

droop lower before he shifts his focus to Vasily. I don't know what he sees, but within a minute, his opponent is flat on his back, seeing stars, and Feo the Flatliner is announced the winner of this match.

POLINA

The crowd goes hysterical when the referee raises Yev's arm into the air, and Vas's father is just as jubilant. He leaps into the air, hooraying and clapping like he didn't take his son's advice on which opponent to bid on.

His overjoyed nature grows when Yev thanks the crowd by bowing at them.

I'm awarded with a prolonged gawk not even a blind man could miss.

That's how scorching it is.

I'm saved from lifelong scars when Leon butts shoulders with me and asks, "Do you know him?"

While unconsciously nodding, I sling my eyes from Yev to Vasily's father. I'm shocked and incapable of processing more than that at this moment. Yev has always been cocky, but I had no clue he had the skills to back up his reputation. I thought he was all talk.

Most street kids are.

Upon spotting my head nod, Mr. Cabanow mutters, "You'll have to introduce us." When my head bob freezes, he doubles the likelihood of it returning. "Perhaps after that we can discuss your father's visa application?"

“That’ll be wonderful. Thank you so much.”

He touches my hand gripping his arm before fetching his coat from the back of his seat and signaling to a man in a dark jacket at the end of the bleacher to fetch his car. “Perhaps at your engagement party? I hear that is imminent.” After connecting his eyes with his son’s, he pretends to twist his lips closed. “I hope I didn’t spoil tonight’s surprise.”

When Vasily assures him the cat is already out of the bag, he farewells me with a cheek peck before telling Vas to call his secretary in the morning to organize a meeting. “Your inheritance is making millions in interest each year, so I wouldn’t recommend taking it all out at once, but once you’re married, those decisions will no longer be mine to make.”

He leaves Vasily to mull over his words by exiting via the same entrance we used to enter.

He’s barely out of eyesight when Vasily’s attention shifts from the money he doesn’t have yet to money he’ll never get if he pisses off the man slowly making his way toward us.

Sasha is one of the Yurys’ main bookies, and he accepts payments in only two ways.

With cash or body parts.

“What did you do?” I ask Vasily when Sasha’s hand slips under his trench coat to brace his concealed gun.

My stomach swirls when he snarls out, “He was supposed to fucking lose, and I wanted to double the glory.”

I could slap him, but that would only hasten the process of my father’s latest application being denied, so instead, I think tactically. “How much did you bet?”

“Ten thousand.” I stupidly believe things aren’t as bad as they seem until he adds, “As a down payment. The total bet was two hundred thousand.”

“What? You idiot!” I whack into him before reserving my breaths for not passing out. That’s far more than I have access to, and although I could ask Alek, he’d never hand over that amount of cash without a thorough explanation in person. “Call your father. Ask for his help.”

As he scrubs at the back of his sweaty neck, Vasily mutters, “He won’t fucking help me. He won’t even let me touch the inheritance my grandfather left me, for fuck’s sake. He said marriage taught him to be a better man, so until then, he won’t give me a single cent.”

“Then call Mr. Lenkov.”

I realize I am saddled with the wrong Cabanow son when he says, “Can’t. I already owe him over three hundred thousand.”

“How the hell do you owe him so much money? You work for him. He’s meant to pay you, not the other way around.” When his sleazy gleam tells me everything I need to know, I thank my lucky stars that at the start of our courtship he wrongly concluded that I was saving myself for marriage.

Who knows what I would have caught by now if he hadn’t?

While struggling not to fold in two from wondering how many of the women who walked through the doors of my boutique also spread their legs for my supposed boyfriend, I spot Yev collecting payment for the fight he just won. The bundle of cash he stuffs into his backpack looks thicker than

the one a man with a vibrant neck tattoo is handing over at the registration table, and it pops a brilliant idea into my head.

“Ask for another line of credit.”

Vasily stares at me as if I lost my marbles. “Why the hell would I do that?” He assumes I am digging the hole he started years before I entered the picture. “Without me, you won’t get close to my father. His secretary doesn’t deny your requests for a meeting for no reason.”

Through grinding teeth, I reply, “Ask for another line of credit for an upcoming fight, but this time, put money on Yev.”

He’s certain I’ve lost my scruples. “He can’t fight again. It is a one fight per night rule.”

“He fought as his brother. This time, he will fight as himself.” I walk him toward Sasha as if my legs aren’t shaking a million miles an hour. “Yev won’t let me down.” Vasily has the hide to gag. “What would you rather? Me owing Yev a favor or you owing the Yurys two hundred thousand dollars?”

He picks wisely when he mutters, “You better get him on board,” before he cozies up to Sasha like they’re long-lost buddies to make out the night is young and his pockets are lined with money.

While he convinces Sasha to give him an additional run of credit, I make my way to Yev, who’s standing at the side of the boxing ring.

My knee-knocking walk gains me the eyes of many, but the most heated stare belongs to Yev.

“Hey,” I greet, acting as if I’ve not once fallen to my knees and crawled to him. “I need a favor.”

He slants his head but remains quiet, aware I don't ask for assistance even when there are no possibilities I can go it alone.

"I need you to fight again."

His reply is short and blunt. "Can't. This circuit is one and done."

"I understand, but you fought as Feo." He flattens down the tuft of hair that convinced everyone he was his brother while I say, "This time, you will fight as Yev."

"Why would I do that, Polly? So your fuckface boyfriend can try and rig another fight?"

His reply stings since his accuracy is so on point, but I play it cool for my little sister. "Because I need you to do this for me." Once again, he goes the quiet route, which forces me to lie. "I didn't realize you were fighting on behalf of Feo, so I put a day's taking on your fight. There are no refunds. If the fighter bows out, the bidders lose." When he looks set to deny my claims, I say, "That's the way things work around here now, Yev. They don't play fair."

He doesn't look happy, but I'm certain I almost have him over the fence, so I flutter my lashes at him before pleading, "Please. I need your help. Business has been slow since the Bobrovs left town."

After a prolonged bout of silence that has me sweating, he says, "Okay..." I think all my Christmases have come at once until he tacks on, "On one condition."

I swallow to sooth my burning throat before asking, "What's that?"

I realize I'm not the only one giving the performance of my life when he pauses to build the suspense. He waits until

the sweat on the back of my neck has dribbled halfway down my spine before he finally grants my lungs permission to accept air again. “If I win, you have to kiss me.”

“What?” I swear my vocabulary is usually far more extensive than I’ve depicted tonight. I’m merely too shocked he went for the bargaining chip he regularly tossed on the table when he wasn’t old enough to gamble.

It was moves like this that regularly saw him on Alek’s hitlist.

It was just lucky he also let me renege on our bet as often as Alek threatened to kill him.

With his thick arms crossed and his brows still dotted with sweat, he repeats, “If I win, you have to kiss me.” The reason behind his bid makes sense when he adds, “In front of him.” He nudges his head to Vasily, who is still in negotiations with Sasha.

Twenty minutes ago, I would have been panicked out of my mind that he was about to ruin my plans to get my father back to his family this month. Now I’m not so worried.

Vasily doesn’t want me.

He wants his inheritance.

It doesn’t mean I’ll act as if I am worthless, though.

“And if you lose?” I can’t believe I’m even contemplating this, but my father isn’t the man who murdered my mother and almost killed my brother. He is the man who raised me for the past twenty-one years. The one who handed over every penny of his life savings so I could open a clothing boutique. Brecken doesn’t have my last name or an ounce of the same blood, but he is my father, and I will do anything I can to give

him the opportunity to raise his daughter with as much love and respect as he instilled in me.

Yev's grief doesn't budge in the slightest when he replies, "That's never going to happen, so you've got nothing to worry about."

YEV

*A*s the crowd moves in close to the ring, I squash down the tuft I forever gave Feo shit about with gel before making my way to the registration table. Although the fret on Polina's face is genuine, I don't believe a word she spoke earlier.

I fought in these circuits for years with Feo before I bolstered my skills abroad, and every single tournament refunded the bidders if a fighter forfeited.

There would be no bidders if the bookies scammed their clients of money.

Although I'm super curious to work out what the fuck is going on with Polina, I went along with the scam she instigated solely to see how Vasily would react to my barter. Does he give a shit his girl may be stepping out on him? Or does his interest in her have nothing to do with sex?

It is clearly the latter because no man with Polina Kotova in their sights will pay for her doppelgänger. That would be the equivalent of the screamers slipping into Feo's bed instead of mine.

The remembrance that I lost my brother the chance to work out how fun the loud girls are, I toss down double the amount needed onto the registration table, then nudge my head to the ring.

“I want to be next.”

“The fighters have already been paired.”

I pull out the three thousand Vasily returned to me this morning before saying again, “I want to be next.”

The man with sable eyes licks his lips while dragging the bundle to his side of the desk. “Next it is.”

Pretending I can't feel the hungry eyes of over three dozen women on me, I strip out of the Italian tourist sweatshirt I tossed on to authenticate my ruse that I'm not my brother before tying my laces and climbing through the ropes.

As I warm up my muscles for their second undertaking tonight, I keep my eyes front and center. I can feel Polina's eyes on me. I don't need to see them to know she's watching me.

I also don't want to acknowledge who she is seated with.

My job as a fighter is to give the crowd a show, but I was too fucking pissed when I spotted Vasily schmoozing up to Polina to give them their money's worth. I knocked my opponent out in the first round and was warned by the fight organizer that he doesn't care how much money I've made him—by me, he meant Feo—I'd be out on my ass if I did it again.

“Where the fuck are they growing these men?” The words tumble from my mouth as my opponent enters the ring from the other end. He's bigger than the man I fought only twenty minutes ago and appears just as docile. “I thought Frankenstein's lab was a myth. Shows how much I know.”

My opponent proves he's all brawn and no brains. “Fe-fi-fo-fum—”

“That’s *Jack and the Beanstalk*, dumbass,” I interrupt a second before the referee signals the start of our fight.

To keep the invitations coming my way, I let my opponent get in a few hits, before stunning him with a left swung jab. I barely put any weight behind my strike, but he stumbles back like he drank too much moonshine in the swamp he was dragged out of.

When his groggy stagger excites every spectator surrounding me, my Spidey senses activate. Feo and I always wooed the crowd when we fought, but I couldn’t miss an obvious heckler my last match. He grinned through every punch my opponent hit me with and rubbed his hands together like he had a ton of money on my competition.

This time around, his actions are on the opposing end of the spectrum.

Dollar signs flash in his eyes when I punish the brute with my fists.

They fade when I prance around the ring like I’m too tired to fight.

What the fuck are you up to, Polina?

Just her returning to her seat next to Vasily pisses me off, but the thought of her conning me to help that jerk earn a single fucking dime has me considering throwing the fight.

I wouldn’t hesitate if the quickest click of a camera shutter didn’t leave me open to back-to-back hits from my opponent. Cameramen are documenting the fight to snuff any disputes, but they have me recalling what I stumbled onto before I clouded my smarts with several bottles of liquor earlier this week and multiple lines of cocaine.

Polina is being watched. By whom, I don't know, but there is a way I can stop it.

“I want to renegotiate.”

“Is too late for that now,” my opponent answers before swinging around his fat arms that are so slow-moving they leave his face unprotected for three rapid-fire jabs.

“Not with you, dipshit.” I bounce around on the mat to make sure the person I'm referencing can see my face, before saying, “With him.” Polina's eyes widen when my head nudge gains Vasily the attention of hundreds of spectators, but she remains as quiet as a church mouse. “Because I'm fairly fucking certain this is more about you than her.” Polina shakes her head, wordlessly dismissing my claim, but she isn't the only one who can act ignorant. “So since you're going to get far more than the kiss I'll get from her if I win, I want to renegotiate.”

The crowd's shocked hiss almost drowns out Vasily asking Polina if our agreement included a kiss.

When she fails to deny her lips locking with mine is part of our negotiation, Vasily slings his eyes back to me. “If she agreed to a kiss, I'm fine with that. It's a bit of fun, but she won't be giving you more than that.”

“Fun?”

I don't dodge the giant's next hit.

I let him smack me up the side of the skull, which sends birds flying around my head.

I can't believe I didn't consider returning to fighting sooner. I thought a bottle and a couple of lines of coke each day would lessen my grief enough I could function with some normality.

I was wrong.

In the past six months, there have only been three days I've breathed without it hurting. The two times Polina's body melded with mine, and tonight when I took my anger out on a man who thought size was the only skill needed to fight.

“Fun for who?”

Polina knows what I'm doing—she can spot a bullshit artist from a mile out—so instead of fretting like Vasily, she sinks low in her chair and hides her flaming red cheeks with her hand.

My ribs will pay for Bigfoot's next two whacks, but I'll suffer the injustice when the possibility of losing has Vasily acting like he might die if I don't win.

“What the fuck do you want? A cut of the profits? A hooker for the night? Tell me what you want, and I'll give it to you!”

My short fuse that he's going to profit a bunch of money from me tonight almost fucks up my ruse, but I regather the reins—barely. The anger I distribute to my opponent's face has Vasily tasting victory so adeptly he barely balks when I deviate from a schoolyard wager to wanting the fucking works. “If I win, Polina comes home with me.”

Before Polina can announce her shock, much less warn me about the giant sneaking up on me, Vasily counterbids. “How many nights are we talking?”

After evading Bigfoot's swing that would have a second set of birdies circling my head, I reply, “A week.” When Vasily laughs as if humored I didn't ask for eternity, I add, “She won't need longer than that to realize she deserves someone far better than a snake like you.”

When the crowd hollers in sync, Vasily remembers we have many witnesses to his desperation. Too fucking bad for him I can smell his rank-ass breath from here. He's so damn thirsty for me to win, his throat is as dry as a desert.

He tries to play it cool, though, which means I act as if my brain rattling against my skull is how I get my kicks. I don't dodge any of my opponent's next lot of swings. I accept them all, and the third one knocks me around so much that blood dribbles from my nose.

"Yev!" Polina shouts at the same time Vasily slowly makes his way to his feet.

When my challenger punishes my ribs and spleen with a punch firm enough for the crowd to cough with me, I finally get the answer I'm seeking. It isn't from Vasily, though. Polina takes matters into her own hands. "Okay. All right. I'll go home with you."

"Tonight?" I double-check, not wanting to leave one stone unturned. "You'll come home with me tonight?"

"Yes!" Polina shouts, her chest heaving like mine. "But only if you win."

For a second, I forget the grief I've been treading in for the past six months. I smile and wink at Polina like the possibility of that occurring never existed before I swing my focus to the crowd, who seems more fascinated by our exchange than the match.

"You all heard that, right?" I bob down low, sending Bigfoot skidding to the other side of the ring when his feet can't keep up with the overexertion of his swing. "I'm not hearing things? I did take a couple of knocks to the head, so I might not have heard her right."

“Yev!” Polina shouts again, her face as red as a beetroot.

“What? I’m just checking.” After a grin too blinding considering how much blood is smeared on my teeth and that I buried my brother only weeks ago, I act like a contender instead of a round announcer.

The hold I place on the brute’s neck doesn’t have a name. It is a choker maneuver Feo and I made up when we commenced training for this very circuit. It won’t kill him, but it saves me needing to beat him senseless until his owner throws in the towel. There is no tapping out in this circuit. You’re either carted off the mat on a stretcher or left on it to rot.

He’ll sleep off my clutch in a couple of hours.

I’d say right around the time Polina stops hitting me with the stink eye to rival all stink eyes.

YEV

Sasha plants his big, tattooed hand across my chest when Polina shouts in Vasily's face, "Oh, please. You were five seconds from pimping me out to him for a month before I agreed to his offer."

After grabbing a clutch purse from the back of his pricy-looking ride, she slams shut the back passenger door, then gets up in his face like I might skip some of the shitfest tonight.

She's pissed.

Majorly so.

"And you know we have to abide by the terms now since you ran to Sasha so fast to collect your payout, everyone in there"—she waves her hand to the warehouse slowly emptying—"knows our wager was for far more than an innocent sleepover. How much did you profit tonight, Vas? A million? Two?"

"Let me go, Sasha," I grumble under my breath when Vasily stops Polina from leaving in the same manner Sasha stops me from intervening. His grab would be more painful on an arm as delicate as Polina's, though.

I shrug out of Sasha's hold when Polina's numerous requests for Vasily to let her go fall on deaf ears. His girlie

nails dig into her skin, which ensures mine will shred his from his fucking bones.

I've barely made a fist when Polina's head slings my way. Her eyes have the same glossed-over appearance they wore when I bounced around the ring for the first time tonight, but her stance is as strong as her snarled demand. "Walk away, Yev."

"Polly..."

She wedges herself between Vasily and me before locking her pleading yet still lust-filled eyes with mine. "Walk. Away."

There's the ball crusher I conjured up multiple times over the past eight years—all pretty and high-strung. She's just wearing a heap more clothing than my deviant mind imagined while stroking one out.

After drinking in the slightest furl of my top lip no amount of grief could hide, Polina lowers her tone a smidge before assuring, "I'll be there in a minute."

I maintain my ground until Vasily lets go of her arm, and then I only take half a step back. A scar on Polina's cheek I didn't notice weeks ago exposes this dick got the jump on me once.

It won't happen again.

Realizing she's waging a war she won't win, Polina exhales a harsh breath before she spins to face her douchebag boyfriend. It is no easy feat with how close I'm standing. Her ass has to butt with my crotch, and her glossy locks tickle my chest, but she acts as if she can't feel my cock twitching against her while she presses her lips to the corner of Vasily's mouth. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"That wasn't our deal. I said a week."

Polina's hair slaps me in the face when she cranks her neck back to me. "I have to work."

"And what the fuck does that have to do with him?"

As if accustomed to him trampling both her private and personal life, she struggles to find a response. After a beat, she murmurs, "He shops at my boutique."

"Then he'll have to hold off on splurging for a week." I grip her arm nowhere near as firmly as Vasily did earlier, before spinning her toward my ride. "We had a deal. Your ass is mine for a week."

"Over my dead body," Vasily shouts loud enough for even Sasha to hear like I'm not two seconds from decking him. He's pushed all my buttons tonight. There isn't one left to push. But I know the instant I react, Polina will renege on our deal.

As much as Feo's death changed me, I'm not a man who will ever force her to do something she doesn't want to do, so if I want her out of her apartment for a week, I need to maintain my cool.

After glaring at Polina in more threat than the annoyance of a scorned lover, Vasily slips onto the driver's seat of a flashy car before tearing out of the lot like a maniac.

I roll my lower lip between my teeth to hide my smile when sparks of the Polina I would give anything to fight with shines bright. "Is that enough machoism to keep your chest inflated for the next week, or do you need a few more scenes?" She nudges her head to the warehouse. "Perhaps we should go back in there so you can bang your chest in front of an audience. I've heard chimpanzees work for free when their egos are inflated. I'm sure it will be the same for you."

The angry lines hardening her face soften when I ask, “You mad at me or him? Because I can sure as fuck tell you whose side I’d be on if anyone bartered for time with my girl.” A vein in her neck flutters faster when I step closer. “It wouldn’t be the lawful side, that’s for sure.”

When she remains quiet, I remove her clutch from under her arm, then nudge my head to the ride that seems even more rusty now after taking in Vasily’s gleaming car. The beat-up piece of shit I was getting around in before I followed Ana to Europe is covered with so much dust you’d have no clue the paintwork is blue.

“Let’s get out of here before they start throwing peanuts at my feet. I don’t want to embarrass myself by gathering them up like I did when I was starving, and the half-eaten nuts on the tavern floor were my only source of food.”

“Yev...” Polina cusses under her breath before slowly trudging to the passenger-side door Sasha is holding open for her.

He smiles at her praise before locking eyes with me over the top of my car. “Should I send someone over to your place tonight to make sure you two haven’t killed each other, or do you think you’ve got a handle on this?”

“I’ve got a handle on it.” I sound on the opposite end of my reply. “Do you want me to drop you off somewhere?”

Sasha throws his head back and laughs. “In that piece of shit? I’m good.”

I’m green with envy when he pushes a button on his keys, and the headlights flash on a sports car I’m certain wasn’t meant to be released until next year.

The tuft of hair my gel successfully held down the past two hours springs free when I shake my head. “I’d be envious if my win didn’t lose you a ton of money tonight.”

His laughter is thunderous. “You think Vasily was the only dweeb who put money on you? Every cent I paid out tonight was siphoned from the other bookies.” He leans in close so his next set of words is only for my ears. “No one was sure you’d have a second round in you. From what I’ve heard around the barracks the last couple of months, the only opponent you’ve been fighting is depression.”

He’s spot fucking on, but I’m never going to admit it.

After a quick farewell head bob, I twist the keys in the ignition, then sling my eyes to Polina. My quick movement wafts up the scent of unwashed socks and underwear, but I act ignorant since this is my *only* mode of transport, and my apartment block is twenty miles from here.

Being poor doesn’t bother me. I didn’t have a cent to my name for so long, I often forget that my bank accounts were once sporting seven figures. But if it did, my earnings from tonight’s fight still wouldn’t be referenced when claiming victory. The angry grunts of the woman wrangling a disobedient seat belt would be the only thing mentioned.

My gym bag is puffed out with money, yet I’d give it all away in an instant to watch Polina fight with my seat belt for a few more minutes. She gets in such a tizzy while trying to get the lock mechanism to disengage that the scent of her heated skin overtakes the rotting gym bag I forgot I tossed in the back seat when Alek rang me, begging me to find Ana over four and a half years ago.

He sounded groggy as fuck, which was surprising since he’d barely touched drugs once Ana moved into his apartment.

Recalling the bag I packed in a hurry for Ana when she was stretchered out of the laundry room of our building covered in blood, I still Polina's tugs by placing my hand over hers, gently pull the seat belt latch into place, and lock my dark eyes with her pretty blue ones.

I don't give a fuck what the critics say. Sexual tension is greater than a mountain of remorse. It zaps from my balls to my toes before recirculating through my groin for a second run and makes it almost impossible to keep my hands to myself.

The only reason I do is because Polina deserves more than a romp in a dirty car and against a paint-peeled wall. She should have a castle, Prince Charming, and all the fancy shit to go with it.

I'm no Prince Charming, and I'll never own a castle, but I'll have no issues occasionally sticking out my pinkie finger while drinking tea if it will convince Polina otherwise.

I might even splurge on some satin sheets.

I can't remember the last time I smiled without feeling guilt, but the quickest tug to my lips can't be held back when Polina mutters, "Whatever dirty thought you're thinking, Yev, stop. It can't happen again." She wipes the smile from my mouth with a handful of whispered words. "I have too much riding on my relationship with Vas to stuff it up for sex."

"Is that so?" My voice is as groggy as the husky deliverance of her lie. She's not thinking straight since she's angry, so she has the villain and the hero of her story confused. "Because if I recall correctly, you also once said you'd never be caught dead in this death trap again. Yet here you are, sitting in my passenger seat... *again*. So maybe my bed still has a chance." Her knees pull together when I mutter under my breath, "And perhaps even my face."

Certain some of her anger has been pushed away for want, I say, “This has also never just been about sex for me, Polly. If it was, I would have given up chasing you the instant you dished up the goods. So do you want to tell me what the fuck is really going on? Or are we going to keep playing the game that gets innocent people killed and has fuckheads like Vasily believing they own the board and all the players on it?”

“Can we just go, please? I’m freezing, and although the rust holes do an awesome job ventilating whatever the hell that smell is, they have me regretting my decision to wear toeless pumps.”

Her reply would have you convinced she is a coldhearted bitch. The tears welling in her eyes tell another story. She’s hurting, but she just has no clue who she can trust anymore, so there’s no way she will express herself freely.

Her response is partially my fault. I forced her so far out of her comfort zone the weeks we fooled around that I left her open and exposed. Then I was the asshole who refused to return her messages after taking her hard and deep.

She feels used.

After firing up the engine and cranking the heat, I remove my jacket before curling it over her mostly bare legs. My chivalry settles the expression she forced onto her face when Vasily tried to convince her to renege on our deal, but it does nothing to the wetness pooling in her eyes.

I’m fucking desperate to work out what’s going on with her, but Polina isn’t a woman you can crack open with a handful of words. You need a jackhammer and a heap of time to peel back her layers.

Time I now have since she’s bunking with me for a week.

As I check for traffic at the end of the lot, I ask, “Do you want to grab something to eat before cruising by your place to pack a bag? There’s a kitchen hidden under the empty takeout boxes, but I doubt you’ll find anything worthwhile to cook in the pantry or fridge.”

Polina waits for me to make a break for it between a semi and a family van, before replying, “I’m not actually spending the week at your place, am I? That whole spectacle was just for show... *right?*” The longer I stay quiet, the more her throat strains through multiple swallows. “Yev... I can’t stay at your apartment. You don’t understand what you’re asking me to do.” Most women panic when they’re in a relationship that would lead straight to their fiancé. Polina doesn’t even consider him. “What if Alek finds out?”

“I’m sure he’d rather you at my place than with a douche who can’t keep his hands to himself.” She almost chokes on her swallow this time around but maintains a silent stance. “Did Vasily cause that mark on your cheek?” Before she can fire off one of the denials in her eyes, I remind her of my mind-reading capabilities. “Let me rephrase my question. *When* did he inflict that mark on your cheek?”

With a sigh, she breathes out, “It was an accident.”

While tightening my grip on the steering wheel, I huff. “Accident. Right. Kinda like his broken wrist was an accident.” I signal to turn onto the highway. “Is Vasily left- or right-handed?”

She’s confused by my line of questioning, but answers nevertheless. “Right, why?”

“No reason.”

“Yev—”

“Takeaway or eat in?” When her brows crinkle, I nudge my head to the fast-food signage coming up on our left.

Polina grimaces before dropping her eyes to her fitted skirt and shimmery blouse. She’s dressed like she’s closer to her late thirties than twenties but is still hot as fuck. “Takeaway. It would look a little stupid turning up for burgers and fries in a three-thousand-dollar skirt.”

“Three *thousand* dollars.” I choke on my middle word. Nothing against Polina’s skirt, but even when my bank accounts were stuffed with funds, there was no fucking way in hell I’d ever pay three thousand dollars for an article of clothing.

When she giggles and nods, I steer my ride to the drive-thru while replying, “I might need to up my game again. I don’t think correct pinkie placement is going to cut it.”

She’s lost, but since the fluro-lit menu board is bringing her back to her youth, she keeps her confusion as closely guarded as the many secrets her eyes are dying to reveal.

POLINA

When it comes to people I care about, lying isn't my forte, so I'll admit I was peeved as hell when Yev tossed me into his negotiations earlier tonight. But once I settled my frustrations and realized most of them should have been directed at Vasily instead of Yev, I saw things in an entirely different light.

I haven't eaten carbs in God knows how long, and although I had to pop a button on my skirt when I gorged like a pig, the guilt was nowhere near as bad when I wasn't the only female in Yev's vicinity bulging at the seams.

Several little girls at the homeless camp we delivered food to were also on the verge of a food coma. They stared up at Yev like he was a sports star, and it reminded me of the times I delivered food to the home Alek lived in for a few years after he was discharged from the hospital's care.

He's never told me why our father attacked him with a steel pipe he kept hidden under his bed, but I have a feeling it is why he was placed in a boys' home instead of the foster care system.

I begged for my father to take Alek in as well when I found my feet in my new environment, but by then, Alek was thirteen and causing a heap of trouble. He refused to follow

any rule he didn't make up himself, and my new foster father had a book full of them.

We stayed in contact, but most of my youth was spent away from Kronstadt's known criminal activities.

Alek's revolved around it.

Although we weren't overly wealthy, staff at the franchise across the country received a fifty percent discount on any orders across the country, so I went a little crazy with my first paycheck when I could finally work. The bags of food I arrived with at Alek and Ghost's new haunt were meant to last them a week, but when I saw the glee on the faces of the younger boys they shared with, I strived to work out a way that I could do more than a two-hour shift after classes.

Yev was one of the boys my deliveries fed. He was scrawny and dirty, and the pain in his eyes cut through me like a knife, but my god, he was as cocky as a rooster. No one in our hometown was game to touch me after I informed Alek I was moving back to Kronstadt after graduation, but Yev didn't care about his no-touch order.

He teased Alek relentlessly that they would one day be brothers-in-law.

You can imagine how well that went down with Alek.

He is overprotective. I guess most big brothers would be if they walked in on their father telling their baby sister, "Don't tell your mother about this, or I will kill her."

That's when it dawned on me that our exchange was more than a father ensuring his daughter didn't get sunburned.

I'm drawn from my somber thoughts by Yev. "You good?"

As he pulls into the front of my apartment, I plaster a fake smile onto my face before nodding. I hate that I have to act around him, but the past couple of weeks have been such a clusterfuck, I'm having a hard time remembering who my enemies and friends are. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

When he looks like he's about to respond with a number of reasons, I curl out of his stinky ride, then head for the stairs at the side of my boutique.

I recall one of the discussions I had with Yev many months ago when he rakes his eyes over my pride and joy while saying, "I still think you should consider becoming a designer."

"This is close enough." I shrug like it isn't a big deal I let my dreams go for a more stable career. "I get to dress the people of Kronstadt in the finest threads."

"Yeah... but they're not *your* designs, Polly." He pushes off his car and heads my way. His eyes are still moody and temperamental but clear of any type of unnatural sedative.

Visiting the homeless camp healed his heart more effectively than the kiss we shared weeks ago. I would be devastated if I weren't so relieved. He wants to live. He just needs to merge out of the shadows of his grief to do so.

As he follows me up the stairs, he asks, "How come you haven't merged your two loves into one? Designing *and* dressing Barbie dolls."

I whack him in the gut before my head can warn me it is a bad idea. His stomach is rock hard, and it stings my knuckles. "I've never played with Barbie dolls."

"Oh, believe me. I fucking know. You much prefer controlling every damn aspect of Ken's life than his pretty

little sidekick.” When I can’t deny his claims, he mutters, “That’s why I’m lost as to why you’re putting up with Vasily’s shit.”

“Please, don’t. I…” While shoving my key into the lock of my front door, I speak from the heart for the first time in months. “There’s so much you don’t know.”

“Like you were aware he had my phone, but instead of telling me that, you swapped them back without saying a word?”

“What was I supposed to say, Yev?”

He twists his lips before freeing them to release a heap of taunting words. “How about ‘Hey, Yev, my douchebag of a boyfriend placed a three-thousand-dollar charge on your credit card for a prostitute who looks a fuckton like me’?”

“He what?” His anger confuses me, and I lash out when I’m confused. “Are you angry because he purchased a lap dance or because I asked you to wait in the bathroom?”

He laughs. It isn’t his true laugh. “No one pays three thousand dollars for a lap dance.” He unearths the real cause of his fake chuckles by adding, “And I’m not angry you *hid* me in the bathroom.” He licks his dry lips as he clenches and unclenches his hands. “I’m fucking pissed I let you.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, that’s right. Because I have no say in anything that occurs in my life—”

“Not with him you don’t!” he interrupts, thrusting his arm at the door like Vasily is on the other side. “He’s using you, Polly.”

He has it all wrong, but before I can announce that, my apartment plunges into darkness and my greatest fear presents itself.

I'm alone in a cold and dark basement, hearing nothing but my mother's gargling gasps as she fights for air, and the constant dribble of the blood oozing from Alek's head wound.

As panic rains down on me, I commence hyperventilating.

I can't get enough air.

I can't get any until a controlled voice breaks through the screams bombarding me.

"It's just a brownout. The generator will kick in at any moment." I notice how badly I'm shaking when Yev gently grips the top of my arms to keep me upright. "Let's move to the window and open the drapes. The streetlights are still on."

He won't forcefully move me since that's another one of my triggers. Being dragged from the hidey-hole keeping me hidden from the horrid murder-suicide scene that almost claimed more than my mother's life is as on par as my fear of blackouts.

"I-I-I can't."

Yev's words snap out of his mouth like a whip. "You can, Polly. Don't give me that shit. One step at a time."

"Don't leave me," I beg when his voice fades at the end of his reply.

"I'm not leaving you. I'm just moving toward the window. If you want to stay with me, you need to come with me."

I suck in a shaky breath when his voice tapers even more. "Yev, please." My short, snapped words are incapable of hiding the tremors racking through me.

I am petrified.

"I'm right here. Right by the window. Come to me."

“I-I—”

“Now, Polly! Get on your fucking knees and crawl to me. *Now.*”

I fall to my knees before I can comprehend how inane it is that I respond to dominance when I’m scared out of my mind. You would think it would have me recoiling, but it doesn’t because everyone who has ever protected me has always been super dominant. It was the sneaky, soft-spoken men who hurt me the most.

As Yev guides me toward him with barked yet nurturing commands, I slowly crawl across the wooden floor and the Persian rug softening its darkness with some color. When I reach Yev’s thigh, I cling to it before peering out at the streetlight on the far top corner of my street as if it is my only lifeline.

“Good girl,” Yev praises with his hand in my hair.

Before I can wet my throat with enough spit to thank him for not marching me to the light, the generator finally kicks on, and my panic subdues a smidge.

Not enough for me to secure an entire breath, but enough for me to know I will let Yev walk me to hell tonight if it means I don’t have to remove my nails from his thigh.

YEV

*A*fter ensuring the battery-operated night light in the entryway is on, I give Polina a tour of my apartment as if she's never been here. She has, multiple times, but she's so shaken up we're both acting out of sorts.

“Kitchen, living room, guest bathroom, Feo's room, and this is my room.” I switch on the light, enter, then toss Polina's bag I packed in a hurry onto the rumpled bedding I refused to change the past two weeks since they smell like her perfume. “There's a shower in the attached bathroom, but if you want to soak in a tub, you'll have to use the bathroom out there.” When she remains as quiet as she had during our ten-minute trip to my apartment, I spin to face her. “Any questions?”

I sound like the nun who barked out orders at me the night I sought shelter from the rain under the awning of the boys' home she ran.

My mother said I was breathing too loud for her pounding head and that I needed to walk home. Considering that it was thirty miles from where she forced me out of her car, I assumed she would return to collect me.

She never did.

I thought she had drunk one bottle too many until Feodor found me several long months later. Our mother had the

decency to give him details on how he could find his father, before shipping herself off to rehab.

It proved I don't breathe too loud.

I was dumped on the doorstep of a well-known respite home for out-of-control boys.

Does that mean I have abandonment issues? Fuck yes. But it also taught me to trust my intuition. It's been warning me for weeks to stop ignoring the obvious alarms flashing from Polina, so that is what I'm going to do—*after* she's rested.

She can't stop shaking, and it is driving me fucking nuts.

I hated seeing her like this when I was a kid, but it is worse now because I know the cause of her fear. No person should have had to go through what she went through that night, let alone a child.

Needing to weaken the tension, I mutter, "I'm not sure what time people nearing their thirties go to bed, but around here, it is usually sometime in the a.m." I slant my head to hide the grin dying to break free from her response to my jibe that she's old. "If you're down for that, we can watch a movie or play a card game—"

"I think I'll just sleep," she interrupts, the disappointment in her tone unmissable.

I was seconds from creating the first chip in her wall, and then a brownout went and ruined it.

Now I have to start from scratch.

"All right." I nudge my head to the bathroom door. "Fresh towels are in there if you want to shower before bed."

My shaky steps to the door halt when she whispers, "Will you stay with me?" I'm about to deny her request, to tell her I

don't trust myself being in the same vicinity as her, let alone the same bed, but the faintest plea has me choking on my reply. "Please, Yev."

Polina only begs when she's scared, and since this plea has nothing to do with feelings she's trying to keep buried, I can't say no to her.

"All right." Sparks of the man I once thought I'd grow up to be pops in for a visit. "But you get the wet patch this time."

Her smile barely lifts her lips half an inch. "That's fine."

The strained curl of her lips is as sluggish as her steps as she makes her way to the bathroom.

Mine are just as weighted when I head to a dresser on the far wall. My head is pounding, and I feel fucking sick to my stomach, but I'm so damn confused by the number of emotions hitting me, I don't give the two lines chopped up on the beaten wood a second thought before snorting them.

I cuss into the cool evening air when my habit is witnessed by the last person I want to see me as a drug-fucked idiot. "I would have thought Alek's downfall would have stopped you from reaching for the same crutch."

Polina sighs before entering the room. Her hair isn't wet, and she's wearing the same clothes she entered the bathroom with, but she acts as if she wasn't spying on me by moving toward the bed.

I call myself a dickhead for the second time when she gathers up her toiletries bag from her suitcase. She wasn't snooping. She was just ill-prepared for a shower since all my products are for men.

Incapable of holding back her disappointment for a second longer, Polina says, "He almost died, Yev. But I guess you

wouldn't know that since you rushed off on a coastal vacation with Ana."

The jealousy in her tone is shocking but not enough to stop my retaliation. "My brother *did* die, Polly. He's fucking dead." My voice is vicious and roaring. "And for what? A grave next to a cunt who knew about him but wanted nothing to do with him until he showed up at his door with only the clothes on his back."

Her shouted reply knocks me into the dresser. "You need to stop playing the same goddamn playlist on repeat. Feo is dead so you aren't. He died for you! So you can live. Love. Breathe the air you filtered for him day in and day out. How can you not know that? It is obvious to everyone else, but you seem blind to it."

She has it all confused.

Feo didn't die *for* me.

He's dead *because* of me.

When I say that to Polina, she frantically shakes her head. "He didn't position himself at known Bobrov haunts for no reason. He wanted to be close so if you needed him, he was there for you as you *always* were for him." When I mimic her head shake, she lowers her tone and says, "He told me himself, Yev, when he drove me to a stranger's house after untying me from your bed."

I'm too shocked to think rationally, so I ask the first stupid question that pops into my head. "Why didn't you tell me?" I'm lashing out at the wrong person, but that's how I operate lately. "Why didn't you fucking warn me that I was walking him toward a storm? He could still be here, Polina. He could still be alive if you had told me what he was planning to do!"

I hate everything about myself when I pick up a half-empty bottle of scotch and send it flying across the room. It smashes into the wall Polina is standing in front of, but doesn't get close to her. Although you wouldn't believe that with how red her face gets.

"You... I..." Steam billows out of her ears when she screams before she storms across the room to snatch up her bag and race for the door.

"Where the fuck are you going? We had a deal."

"A deal you can shove up your ass," she snaps back in an instant, her earlier fear of being alone forgotten. "I put up with Vasily's shit for a reason, but I refuse to accept it from you."

Clutching her bag for dear life, she freezes partway out the door when I say, "You walk out that door, and the first person I'll call is Alek."

Her eyes are on me, angry and blinking. "Alek has enough on his plate."

"And I have fucking nothing, so choose your team, Polly. Me or him."

My cock twitches more than my jaw when her lips form into a snarl. "I don't want either."

I love her sassy. Her attitude makes me so fucking glad I didn't die with Feo.

Won't ever tell her that, though.

"You don't have a choice. Pick."

She finds a button Vasily missed earlier when she mutters, "What if I want to pick my boyfriend?"

“I’ll put him in a grave,” I answer without pause for consideration. I’m done playing games. Vasily is bad news, and I refuse to act as if he isn’t.

I wonder just how much Vasily has on Polina when fear floods her eyes long before relief. “You can’t do that,” she breathes out through panicked breaths.

“Why?” I step to the right, blocking the bag of cocaine her eyes snapped to the instant I asked my question. “Why, Polina?”

I have a feeling she’s referencing someone other than Vasily when she mumbles after a hiccup, “Because I love him,” but I lose the chance to ask who when she dumps her bag back on my bed and storms into my bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

YEV

“Can you run his image through facial recognition software?”

Kliment exhales deeply before replying, “Doubtful. The image is grainy as fuck, but even if I could clean it up, do you see any Russian intelligence agency letting someone in from this part of the world?”

He has a point. Kliment is still in the US with Alek, Ghost, and the rest of the gang. I made out I’d return after bringing Feo home, but anyone who knows me knew my plan was full of holes.

My entire world altered the instant my eyes landed on Polina again, not to mention the lies I told myself for months.

I used drugs to cope because I knew it would push Polina away.

I got addicted because I couldn’t imagine a life worth living if she wasn’t a part of it.

It is a cruel fucking cycle that has no end in sight.

As I scrub at the back of my neck, suddenly filled with shame, I drag my eyes around my living room, unsure of what to do next. I’ve never felt so out of place in my own space

before, but I'd be deceitful if I said I've ever felt truly settled and comfortable.

My stomach is twisted up in knots and my body is achy, but not all my pains reside around Feo's untimely demise, and the fact Alek isn't pushing me for an answer as to why I decided to stay in Kronstadt longer than planned exposes he too is feeling on edge.

It could be because Ana is due to give birth in a couple of weeks, but once again, my intuition is warning me that it's more than that.

My eyes return to my laptop screen when Kliment mutters, "Want to talk about it?"

The tuft of dark hair I teased Feo about flops down my forehead when I shake my head. After he sat with me in the cold room with Feo for days, I now class Kliment as more of a friend than an associate, but I'm too fucking confused to conjure how to explain my bewilderment to someone else.

"Could you step me through the process of digitally identifying him?"

The man in question is from an image bounced off the security camera Vasily pointed out earlier this week. He was in the sedan, documenting Polina's every move.

"With the right equipment, probably." Kliment pauses for a beat before asking, "Why? Do you have a government laptop hidden somewhere in that mess?"

I grit my teeth when shame once again smacks into me. "No. But I could get access to one." As I let Kliment mull over my reply, I pick up the business card handed to me Friday night. I knew I had seen the elderly gent dining with Polina and Vasily before, but it wasn't from the ministry role

documented on his business card. He had a front-row seat to a dozen fights I participated in before I moved to Sicily. “I was invited to an event in his home Friday night.” With Kliment’s comment about my messy abode announcing he’s watching me, I twist Leon Cabanow’s card around to face the camera in my laptop. “I’m down with borrowing his computer. I am sure he’s got more than one.”

Kliment chuckles for barely a second. “They’ll lock us out the instant they realize it is missing.”

I sigh, disappointed.

It is a waste of energy I don’t have.

“But with the right software, I could remotely control his computer.” Papers ruffle before Kliment says, “I left an encrypted driver in the security office of your apartment building. If you plug that into any of his computers, within a couple of keystrokes, I’ll gain access to his files.”

“Then could you scan this guy’s face?”

He laughs. “And a fuckton more.” I realize he’s more perceptive than he lets on when he murmurs, “Possibly even a reason she’s dating that douche.”

I play it cool. “She?”

I startle like a soft cock when Kliment’s face fills the screen a second before he nudges his head to my right. Polina is standing in the doorway of my bedroom. Her shoulder is propped against the doorjamb. Although she looks ravishing in an oversized T-shirt, with bare legs and a nude face, I’m about to go on a rampage.

There’s no way Kliment can see her through the laptop webcam. That fucker must have rigged my apartment with cameras.

Or worse, Alek did.

“I’ll—”

“Close your curtains? Good idea.” The sound of him whacking his keyboard fills the silence for a couple of seconds. “Because I’m not the only one watching. I piggybacked off someone’s feed.”

Polina must hear him, as her brows furrow before she moves for the thick drapes covering a window that stretches from one side of the living room to the next.

“Can you follow any breadcrumbs?”

“Trying...” He punishes his keyboard before punishing his hair. “Fuck. They must have seen the footprints I left so I could get back out.” He continues typing. “Although they shouldn’t have been able to see them.”

“They’re gone?”

“They’re gone,” he verifies. “But I’d still suggest closing your curtains.” The creak of an office chair sounds down the line. “Equipment used was basic, but that doesn’t mean jack shit these days. We’re not all forced to go with the lowest quote.”

His reply hints that it could be law enforcement watching us, but he’s not confident enough to say it outright.

“Keep an eye on things. I doubt they’ll come back now that they know we’re watching.”

“But you’d rather be safe than sorry.”

I jerk up my chin. “Doesn’t mean I want you snooping in my apartment, though. Keep your beady fucking eyes out of here.”

His laugh rumbles out of the speakers of my laptop. “And miss the opportunity of watching Alek kick your ass when he finds out you didn’t pack her any underwear?”

As my eyes snap to the alluring curve plumping out the back of Polina’s T-shirt while she draws the drapes closed, I slam down my laptop screen, stuff it under my arm, then race into the kitchen.

Kliment’s laughter roars through the speakers until they’re gargled by the water of the quick wash setting on the dishwasher. Then it comes from the direction of my coffee table. “About time you stacked the dishwasher.”

As I glare at my cell phone, I growl out, “Kliment—”

“I’m going,” he interrupts, his voice husky with laughter. “I’ll send you a photo of the driver you need to get before Friday.”

I realize he can’t see me anymore when he waits for a response. I nodded—a foolish response for verbal communication. “Thanks.”

The rustle of a head bob sounds down the line before Kliment says, “Have fun, lovers. If Feo’s death taught us anything, it was that we shouldn’t waste a minute.”

Awkward silence amplifies the dead noise of a disconnected call. There’s no fading dial tone or clunk of a rotary phone. Just two people breathing in air neither of us is sure we deserve.

“I…” Polina and I say at the same time.

“You go,” I offer.

Strands of hair still wet from her earlier shower cling to her cheeks when she shakes her head. “No. You go. It’s your

house, so it's only fair you go first."

I almost argue until I realize that's what I'm trying to apologize about.

"I fucked up. I shouldn't have yelled at you, and I shouldn't do that shit in front of you." I wave my hand to my bedroom door like she has X-ray vision so she can see the dust lines of the cocaine my snort missed. "My head has been a little messed up the past few months. It calms me." When she raises a manicured brow, I mutter, "I *thought* it calmed me." I hit her with straight-up honesty. "Until I saw you again." Once my honesty starts, it refuses to stop for anything. "Then I needed it to calm my anger."

She gives me a faint smile, thankful for my honesty, before asking, "Why?"

I try to think of a way I can reply without starting World War III, but when seconds merge into minutes, I give up. "Because I don't deserve to be happy while my little brother is under layers of dirt."

Remorse floods Polina's gorgeous face. "Yev..."

"I'm not looking for your sympathies, Polly. I'm just being honest."

"Then be honest," she snaps out, her tone surprisingly strong for how devastated her expression is. "Admit that Feo's death isn't your fault."

I shake my head. "I asked him to go."

"And he went *willingly*. That isn't forced, Yev. He volunteered just like you did when you went to Sicily with Ana."

Our conversation has veered in a direction I wasn't anticipating, but it is clear from the strain on her face that it is a conversation she's been wanting to have for a long time.

"I didn't volunteer to go with Ana." Her breaths barely move her chest as she waits for me to continue. "I went because Alek asked me to." Her silence advises she knows there's more to my decision than loyalty, so I snap out, "And you were with that fuckhead. What was his name again?"

I tap my temple as if I am thinking. I'm not. I've never forgotten the guy who ripped the rug out from beneath my feet so fucking well, I almost considered not popping into Polina's boutique when I returned to Russia.

It is lucky I manned up, or I would have never known what it was like to have everything I've ever wanted. My brother was alive, and I had the girl of my dreams willing to get on her knees and crawl to me.

Life was good.

Too fucking good.

"Pe... Petra... Pa—"

"Pavel?" Polina interrupts, her voice as high as her brow. It is buried in her wet hairline.

"Yeah, that's him. Pavel the Perve." I can't say his nickname without grinding my back molars together. I hate the fucking guy, and I would have killed him if Alek hadn't rearranged his face with his fists only days before he asked me to follow Ana to Europe.

"Pavel the Perve," Polina agrees, her tone lowering before asking, "Have you ever wondered how he got that name?" She doesn't give me the chance to think, much less respond.

“Probably had something to do with him spiking girls’ drinks before trying to SA them on his filthy sheets.”

“What?” She tries to end our conversation by storming back to my room, but I beat her to the door, blocking her entrance. “Are you fucking saying what I think you’re saying?” I swish my tongue around my mouth to loosen up my words, but they still come out as stiff as a whip’s crack when I ask, “Did that piece of shit rape you?”

Her silence kills me.

It literally rips me to shreds.

“Polly, did he—”

“No!” she shouts, her one word unable to hide the quiver of her lips. “But he would have if you hadn’t narked to Alek.” She stops, exhales, then starts again. “Well, I thought it was you, but after seeing how easy it is to mistake you and Feo, perhaps it was him. I wasn’t in the right head space to determine who was who.” Exhaling again, she moves to the sofa to cradle her head in her hands. “I thought you walked out because you were jealous, and I was so mad, so very, *very* mad that you had done that. Then Alek arrived, and I was more relieved than anything.” The smile that arrives with her huff is unexpected. “Then I went back to angry.” My expression must show something I didn’t mean to expose. “Not at you. At the men who can’t take no for an answer. My first foster father, the stupid clerk at my high school, then Pavel.” I’d heard stories about her first foster father, but this is the first time she’s mentioned anything about a clerk and Pavel. “No is just a metaphor for some men.”

“Am I included in that statement?”

I realize I am summarizing out loud when Polina's glistening eyes sling to me. She looks confused until I wave my hand around my apartment.

I made her come here.

I forced her here.

So there isn't any way in hell she can say she's here of her own free will.

Fuck!

"Get your bag."

When I race for my keys, Polina blurts out, "What?"

"Your bag. Get your bag." As she stares at me in bewilderment, I hunt the entryway drawer for my keys. I could have sworn I tossed them on top upon entry, but they're nowhere to be found.

"You're taking me home?" Polina finally clues in.

"Uh-huh." My reply comes out with a whistle when I find my keys in the entryway table next to my hidden gun safe I'm tempted like fuck to open. "Then I'm going to piss on the shallow grave I fuckin' hope Alek dumped Pavel in, drive to Lebasraw, then break into your high school so I can find out who the fucking clerk was there a hundred years ago when you attended." I'm joking so I don't blow my top. That's how fucking unhinged I am, but I can't resort to drugs this time around. I need to use my fists. "Then perhaps I might cruise by the foster care office that organized your first placement. What did she say again? You barely had boobs." I look her dead set in the eyes. "She won't either by the time I'm done with her."

"Yev..."

When Polina remains on the couch, I enter my room, snatch up her bag, then hotfoot it to the door. “You coming?”

“Yev.” She tries again, her tone more commanding this time around.

I give her my eyes. It is a fucking hard feat. Not because she isn’t the epitome of perfection, but because I was jealous that night. The reoccurring image of Alek yanking Pavel off her all those years ago is why I agreed to Alek’s suggestion to follow Ana to Europe with little thought.

Drugs weren’t mentioned.

Spiked drinks weren’t mentioned.

I thought she was with Pavel because he was six years older than me, and that Alek beat into him because he placed a no-touch order on his sister for anyone in his crew—myself included.

I don’t know whether to be relieved or pissed when Polina mutters, “The clerk is dead, as is my foster care placement officer.”

Her reply seems a little shady, so I can’t help but mutter, “Alek?”

I learn why my Spidey senses are tingling when she shakes her head. “My father... the very man I’m dating Vasily Cabanow for.”

POLINA

*A*lthough his agitation can't be misplaced, and he continually strays his eyes to his bedroom door, Yev listens without interruption as I explain the reason I've been dating Vas for the past three months. I tell him how my father was kicked out of the country with no real explanation, and that I believe part of his extradition is based around the confession I told him when I was dosed up on cold and flu medication not long after my seventeenth birthday.

I'd never told anyone about the clerk or what the foster care lady said to me, so when news of their disappearance started floating around Lebasraw, I confronted my father about them.

He didn't say anything incriminating, but he didn't deny that he was responsible for their disappearances, either.

That was the first time I questioned his profession.

The second was when I found a gun cabinet in the back of his walk-in closet.

He didn't have a single gun for protection. He had many of them.

"I thought I was playing the doting girlfriend role well until earlier tonight at your fight." When I realize how late it

is, I correct, “Last night.” Having no reason to interrupt, Yev continues to listen. “But Vas made it obvious he’s known all along why I’m seeing him. He went along with it because—”

My battered ego gets a small moment of reprieve when Yev mumbles, “Because you’re you and he’s him.”

Any good his reply offered is wiped from the face of the earth when I say, “Because he needs a wife.” He wants to interject—badly—it is written on his face, but he is too shocked to speak and fighting like hell not to blow his top. “His grandfather left him and his brothers a ton of money, but they can’t access it until they’re married.”

“Then he should schedule a trip stateside.”

He cusses when I say, “In a marriage *approved* by his father.” I sink back in my chair and nurse the glass of water Yev served me instead of the nip of vodka I requested. “From what Vasily explained before I left with you after the fight, his father has to believe there is a true connection or the money remains in a trust, and my father’s visa applications will continue to be rejected.”

“You don’t need to marry Vasily to get your father a visa. Falsified documents go for a couple of thousand. I could probably rustle you up a set before dawn.”

I love that he is instantly willing to go to bat for me. That is very much the type of man he was before his brother died, but it isn’t that simple. “You don’t think we already tried that?” I huff out some of the heaviness weighing painfully on my chest. “He gets as close as the border, then is turned around and marched straight back out. Hannah thinks he’s on some kind of watch list.” I’m a bitch for asking this, but I am desperate. “Do you know anyone willing to hack a government agency to check?”

I'm being snarky, but Yev doesn't see it that way. "Kliment will give it a shot."

"I can't ask him to do that."

"Then I will." When I glare at him, he balls his hands like the skin under his nose isn't darkened from a bloody nose. "I'm not letting a douche like Vasily Cabanow use you."

"How is he using me?" When his eyes drop to my bare legs, I fold my arms over my chest, inching the already immodest hemline of my shirt even higher. "I already told you I'm not sleeping with him."

"You don't have to fuck to get your rocks off."

My disgust is heard in my tone. "We're not doing *that* either. Vasily doesn't look at me like you do. He sees a prop."

"Then why does he carry your photo in his wallet?"

I swallow to sooth my burning throat. "What?"

Yev breathes out heavily before marching to the entryway table and pulling out a wallet-sized image.

When he hands it to me, my pulse thuds in my ears. "That's my father's photo. He's carried it in his wallet for years. Where did you find it?"

The bile scorching my throat burns deep when he says, "In Vasily's wallet." Yev notices my shock is too high for me to speak. "Have they met?"

"Who?"

He arches a dark brow. "Vasily and your father."

I shake my head. "If my dad was in Russia, I wouldn't be anywhere near Vasily." Needing something to take the edge

off, I ask, “Are you sure you don’t have any vodka? Can you really call yourself a Russian if you don’t?”

I take a mental note to pay more attention to Nat’s quirks when Yev says, “I’m half my father, so tequila is more my jam.” He waits for the slightest furl to nudge my lips higher. “But I might be able to rustle up some if you’ll answer one more question for me.”

A second after I dip my chin, he returns us to the conversation he attempted to initiate in the car. “Tell me how you got the scar on your cheek.”

When my hand shoots up to hide the mark that is clearly more obvious than I realized, he pushes out, “It’s hardly visible, but I’ve studied your face in depth many times the past eight-plus years, so I know every tiny blemish.” He doubles the tingles I’m striving to ignore from his closeness by muttering, “It wasn’t there when I tied you to my bed.”

My heart thumps loudly when he traces the tiny white dot on the side of my nostril. “This one was. I first thought it was a chicken pox scar, but since it’s only the size of a pinhead, I assumed you rebelled in your youth and got your nose pierced.”

He is correct. My father was horrified when I turned up from school when I was thirteen with a friend’s earring hanging off my nose. Not only did it look ridiculous, but we also didn’t use sterile equipment.

“Then there is this one.” He drags his thumb across the sliver of silver behind my ear. “That was when you fell off your bike, and the strap of your helmet scratched you.” I squirm, turned on by his closeness when he scoots across the sofa to cup the back of my knee. “And this one”—I can’t stay still when his fingertips brush my largest scar—“is from when

Alek pushed you into the vent under the basement stairs, and the steel foundation caught your skin.”

As my eyes bounce between his, my bewilderment grows. He can't know what happened to Alek because Alek hasn't told anyone. If I weren't a witness to the commencement of our father's assault that saw Alek spending weeks in the hospital, I doubt even I'd know. That is how tightly Alek guards his secrets.

When Yev's face gives nothing away, I ask, “How do you know about that?”

“It is amazing what you can find out when you sit and listen.” He tilts forward until his elbow balances on his knee, and the tuft of hair he usually gels down is close to brushing my forehead. “But I'd rather not run on theories and lies. I prefer being told the truth directly from the source.”

I assume he's referencing the injury Alek endured during our father's brutal tirade, but realize otherwise when his remorseful eyes once again drink in the scar Vasily's hand left when he backhanded me for the first time.

I could lie, but there is so much honesty being shared tonight, I'm confident he'd call me out as a liar within a second of it leaving my mouth. So instead, I tell the truth. “Vasily borrowed money from his boss to buy a new car. I thought his choice of vehicle was hideous. He didn't appreciate my candor, especially since his father agreed with me.”

Yev's voice brims with anger when he asks, “He hit you because you didn't like his new ride?”

“No. It wasn't a hit.” When he drinks in the scar again like he can't believe it was caused by a slap, I mutter, “He was

wearing a frat ring he got in college. It split my skin.”

He twists his lips, his expression mimicking one that reflected at me when I saw the welt for the first time in the mirror. I was so angry I wanted Vasily dead. Visiting my baby sister was the only thing that changed my mind.

“You can’t kill him.” When Yev shrugs like death would be too kind for a man like Vasily, I blurt out, “Or torture him. I need him to get to his father. Leon is a family man. He does *everything* for them.”

“Except raise them right,” Yev mutters under his breath. “I’m not comfortable with your ruse, Polly. You know as well as I do how fast one slap turns into a punch, one punch turns into ten hits, and then they bring in weapons more maiming than their fists.” My shoulders hang low until he adds with abated breath, “But I also trust your instincts. You’re smart as fuck, so if you truly believe this is the only way to help your father, I believe it too.”

I sling my arms around his neck and hug him tight. “Thank you.”

His trust means more to me than I could ever express.

He returns my embrace before telling me the temporary hold he’s placed on Vasily’s punishment comes with conditions. “I don’t want you alone with him. If whatever he’s planning can’t be in public, you need to come up with an excuse to make it a public affair.”

“Easy. We usually don’t associate unless his father is with us, and he’s not a fan of eating in.” I had no clue only days ago that Leon’s lack of contact was mainly Vasily’s doing. I thought I was clever and tactical.

Shows how much I know.

I swallow a lump in my throat when Yev breathes out slowly. “And...” Like the most suspenseful movie in the world, he keeps the plot twist a secret until the very last scene. “You have to tell Alek what happened once this is over.”

This demand isn’t as easy to approve as the first one. “All of it or just Vasily?” When his eyes expose he wants to remove the world from my shoulders, I shake my head. “I can’t. That isn’t an agreement I can make.”

“Do you really think his punishment will be worse than mine? I’m five seconds from ordering a pizza and praying like fuck the delivery boy delivers it cold so I can disperse some of my anger on anyone but you, and I don’t even like pizza.”

“You don’t like pizza?” This isn’t the right time for us to have this conversation, but my shock is too high to register that.

Who doesn’t like pizza?

Yev shakes his head. “It’s more from the triggers it surfaces than my taste buds’ dislike of being laden down with grease, but I don’t eat it all the same.”

His eyes snap to mine when I say, “Do you want to talk about it?”

I’m genuinely offering to help him. Only one percent of my offer resides with me wanting to get the focus off myself.

Okay, maybe it’s more of a fifty-fifty share.

When the tension switches from flirty to moody, I say, “I can’t tell Alek because he will blame himself. You see a man with a rock-hard, unbreakable shell. I see a boy who still carries the death of our mother heavily on his shoulders.” I’m confessing secrets I shouldn’t be sharing, but once they start spilling, I can’t hold them back. “Alek believes if he hadn’t

provoked our father that night, he wouldn't have killed our mother when she tried to stop him.”

“He doesn't know that.”

“I know. Just like you don't know how he will respond if I tell him the abuse didn't stop at my first foster home.” My chest deflates when I exhale. “When you're sheltered under Alek's umbrella, he takes the role very seriously. You should know that better than anyone. He's wanted to kill you a dozen times, yet he holds back because you have a spot under the same umbrella you shook the shit out of every time you tried to cozy up to me.”

Yev bites back a grin. “A dozen? More like a trillion.” My laugh simmers to a breathy giggle when he says, “Which has me curious as to why he's not responding the same way to Vasily. He reeks of trouble.”

I nod, agreeing with him. “He does, but Alek hasn't been the same since...” My words trail off. Anyone who knows Alek and Ana knows what caused their first downfall. I'm praying like hell we don't get hit with a second deluge. “With their baby due in a couple of weeks, I think adding stuff that should be left in the past will unnecessarily hurt him.” I've already got Yev partway over the fence, so I give him a gentle tug. “I told you because I trust that you can handle it. Alek isn't there yet. But when he is, I will tell him. I promise.”

My word should mean nothing to him, but he graciously accepts it. I don't know if it is the drugs strumming through his veins working in my favor, or the tension. Whatever it is, I am grateful. It's been hard going it alone for the past seven months.

“All right. It will remain between us for now.” I would have preferred he left the last two words off, but beggars can't

be choosers. “But if I even sniff out an inkling that Vasily’s hands are itching to reacquaint with any part of your body, I will cut them off.”

Such a violent response should be a turnoff.

It isn’t.

It is nice knowing you have someone at your six, ready to wage war to keep you safe.

Twenty-one years ago, it was my father.

Today is Yev—*if* he agrees to my final term.

“I’m fine with your terms, but I have one of my own I’d like heard.” When Yev gestures for me to go on, I blurt out, “You need to give up every crutch that isn’t me.”

His eyes fall to his hands, his breathing slow. “I-I don’t know if I can. My grief is—”

“Understandable and not something I expect you to ever get over.” I wait for his eyes to lift to mine before finalizing, “But I think there are better ways to go about it than with cocaine and alcohol.” My response to his unease is as bold as fuck, but you can’t feel the electricity firing in the air, so you don’t understand how much faith I have in my logic. “I know far better options.”

“Such as?” Yev asks, his tone displaying his disbelief.

After standing with knees that should be wobbly but are surprisingly stable, I whip my shirt over my head and dump it at his feet. As my breasts fall heavily on my chest, I say, “If you touch drugs, you don’t touch me. It is one or the other.” I mirror his earlier stance, bossy and domineering, before saying, “Pick.”

YEV

The first two days of sobriety were fucking rough, but today is by far the worst. I'm shaking so much I can barely stand. I woke up coated in sweat, and my mood is woeful, yet not once have I considered going back on the decision I made in the wee hours of Saturday morning.

A man would give up far more than an addiction for a woman like Polina, so despite a jackhammer pounding my temples and my stomach's constant churning, I'll suck it up and not look at the toilet in wonder.

Polina ensured not an ounce of powder missed the bowl.

My stash is gone, and I don't have the means to replace it.

I wouldn't even if I could. Not if it would steal from me the visual slowly pulling me out of the trenches two restless nights forced me in. Polina is standing outside the steam-coated shower door, shredding her clothes and leaving them where they fall.

Once she is as naked as the day she was born, she pulls open the shower door, then bobs under the arm keeping me upright.

"Good morning." She breathes heavily on my chest before pressing her lips to the edge of my jaw. "Sorry I wasn't in bed

when you woke. I had to make some calls.” When she realizes not all the wetness shimmering on my skin is from the water pumping out of the showerhead, her eyes snap up to mine. “Are you okay?”

Instantly, I regret the jerking movement of my chin.

It doubles the swirls of my stomach and has me on the verge of vomiting so notably even Polina prepares to dodge the deluge. She leans to the side before asking, “What do you need?” Her tone is sincere since she’s confident we avoided disaster with a handful of swallows. We weren’t so lucky only yesterday. “I am here for whatever you need.”

Stubborn and feeling like an idiot who can’t handle a bit of withdrawal symptoms, I mutter, “Nothing. I’m good.” I’ve said the same thing the past seventy-two hours because as much as I am grateful for her help, my fuckup isn’t her responsibility. I just need to get over this last hurdle, and I’ll be good.

I hope.

“You don’t look good, Yev.” When I give Polina a look as if to say *thanks for the praise*, she smiles. “What? It’s the truth. You look like shit.”

Her smile grows when she spots my lips twitching to break into a grin. I’m not as moody when drugs aren’t running through my veins. Don’t ask me if that is a good or bad thing. I won’t be able to answer correctly just yet.

“But I think I know a way I can make you feel better.” Some of the pounding in my head lowers several inches before intensifying when she circles my cock with her hand and strokes it until there’s no doubt my focus will never return to my old crutch. “We’re through the worst of it, so now we just

need to steal the focus off one pounding head by forcing it to another aching body part.”

“Fuck,” I hiss out with a sharp breath when she finds enough space between the shower wall and me to wedge her delectable body in the gap.

She’s on her knees.

My erect dick is an inch from her mouth.

Withdrawals are one hundred percent a thing of the past.

The only thing about to buckle is my knees when she swipes her tongue over the crest of my cock before she slowly inches her glossed-up-with-pre-cum lips down my twitching shaft.

My balls pull in close to my body when her gag from taking me to the back of her throat replicates the ones I did before she joined me in the shower.

She hates her gag reflex.

I fucking love it.

After dropping one of my still-shaky hands from the tiles, I weave it through her drenched locks before giving them a playful tug. She was all about hairpulling, booty spankings, and dick choking when she was giving head before our six-month split. I can’t spank her ass since the shower is compact and I doubt I have the strength, but I will fulfill her other two requirements even if it kills me.

“Come on, Polly. Take me deeper. I know you have it in you.”

The shivers trekking through me shift to pleasurable when I push in a little too far and her gag vibrates my knob.

“Fuck. That noise out of that mouth.”

She moans greedily when I thrust back into her mouth again, and then she drags her tongue along the vein feeding my cock.

“Suck me hard and fast. Remind me how stupid I was for thinking I needed anything more than this.”

As the pains that kept me awake all night merge into something more wicked, I fuck her mouth hard, fast, and recklessly. I lose control of the sensation I once believed I'd never enjoy again while taking what I need from the ravishing beauty on her knees in front of me.

I'll return the favor. Abandoning my obligations is not what I'm about, but fuck me, I'd be a hypocrite if I made out I didn't want to stay here for eternity. Polina knows how to give head. She could make me a minute man if I were willing to make a fool of myself more than my drug addiction already has.

Considering she stripped my bed twice the past three days due to excessive night sweats instead of naughty activities, I'll hold back.

After circling my shaft firmly in one hand, she jacks me off while her lips pay a heap of attention to my swollen crown. She swivels her tongue along the slit in the middle before twirling it around the taut and stretched skin covering the tip.

“Oh, fuck,” I mutter with a roar when she sucks down hard. She has only a couple of inches of my cock in her mouth, but combined with the sensation of her hand pumping me while the other fondles my balls, you've got the perfect amount of friction.

I'm on the verge of losing control, which sees me bringing back the gags I love.

I don't force her to swallow me deep. I merely use my grip on her hair to pull her off my cock, the sting of her roots pulling from her scalp enticing her eagerness to recapture my dick between her succulent lips.

My hips jerk wildly as my body tenses. I am seconds from detonation, so Polina doesn't hesitate to keep me in her mouth. With a hum of readiness, she silently begs for my release so she can devour every drop of my cum.

When I give it to her, a surge of warmth pumps out of my twitching cock and onto her tongue. As her moan bounces throughout the shower, she doesn't hesitate to swallow me down. She finishes me off until the shakes I was trying to soothe with warm water return, and I'm dying for another hit.

“My turn.”

When I pluck Polina off the floor and plant her backside on the tiled shower seat, I wonder how I ever thought cocaine was the perfect crutch. It shifted my grief and made me believe things weren't as bad as they seemed, but not like this. Not so broadly.

Polina's freshly waxed pussy is liberating, so much so, even knowing I don't deserve it won't stop me from claiming every inch of it.

You don't get handed perfection and turn it down.

Polina's thighs shudder when I mimic her earlier stance, but it isn't solely my kneeled position sending revitalizing zaps through her body. It is our eye contact—steady and strong despite the clouds of steam between us and other matters I want to keep hidden for eternity.

“I thought I was meant to touch you when I want to touch drugs.” Her thighs tremor harder when I run the back of my hand down her waxed lips before hitting her clit with a firm backhanded slap. “Wasn’t that the deal we negotiated?”

“Uh-huh,” she murmurs, her voice husky with arousal. “But it isn’t always about you, Yev. I have needs too.”

A multitude of expressions crosses her face when I slowly inch a finger inside her before quickly switching it to two. “And those needs involve my cock in your mouth?”

I’m hard again in an instant when she answers with a brisk nod.

She clenches and unclenches her walls around my fingers before fighting through the sensation to toss her head back and moan.

Her discipline almost snaps when I swipe my thumb over her clit. It is throbbing with need and calling me to it with the same desperate neediness her pussy displays when I furl my fingers at the end to milk her G-spot.

I wouldn’t hesitate to eat her like a starved man if it wouldn’t disrupt her line of sight. She needs to see the face of the person touching her, and as much as it angers me that her neurosis has more to do with fear than carnal desires, I won’t force her out of her comfort zone.

Not yet.

Neither of us is ready for that.

“I’m going to make you come here.” I finger fuck her with slow, controlled pumps, gauging her pleasure by how firmly her pussy hugs my fingers. “Then I think it’s about time I made you that breakfast I promised. Can’t expect to feast off you without feeding you first.”

An unexpected chuckle rumbles in my chest when Polina drags her index finger over her top lip while muttering, “I’ve already eaten.”

“Is that so?” When she nods, I tug her forward until her ass hangs off the seat. “Then I guess it’s only fair that I eat too.”

Panic flares across her face for only a second, lasting as long as it takes for me to lift her into my arms and exit the bathroom like the shower isn’t still running.

Her moan when I plonk her naked ass onto my dining room table before taking a seat at the king’s spot makes my blood potent, but it has nothing on the scent of her arousal when the mirrors an interior designer lined across one wall leaves no snippet of the table uncovered.

Even if Polina wants to throw her head back and join her shoulder blades, she will still be able to see whose head is between her legs.

The thought has me burying my head between her legs and eating her for breakfast long before I’m reminded I was never one for interior design.

That was Feo’s niche.

“Stay with me, Yev,” Polina murmurs as her fingernails rake my scalp and her hips gyrate upward. “That feels so damn good.”

Her stormy eyes bore into me when I drag my tongue through the folds of her pussy before swiveling it around her clit. One flick makes her legs quiver. A second has her hands more tugging at my hair than massaging my scalp. A third has her grinding against my mouth, taking what she needs from me as I did her only minutes ago.

A fourth is almost my undoing.

“Fuck, you taste good,” I mutter against her slick slit, giving in to the euphoria pumping into me instead of denying it as I have the past six and a half months.

As I eat her without reluctance, I stroke my cock, needing to calm the beast before he loses all sense of normality. It’s as desperate to reacquaint with her greedy pussy as it was her mouth. I just need to exercise a little patience so I can ensure this romp is as two-sided as it’s ever been.

I won’t use her like that dumb fuck has the past three months. Vasily tainted her shiny exterior and pushed back her confidence to her pre-teen days. She’s lost, but I’ll help her find her way back if it’s the last thing I do.

“Oh god,” Polina moans when she spots what I’m doing in one of the mirrors. “That’s hot.”

As my pumps produce droplets of pre-cum at the tip of my cock, I suck her clit into my mouth. The sensation her moan rips through me is shocking—both intense and zapping, and brutally terrifying. It also confirms this exchange couldn’t have been controlled for a second longer.

Our hookup started with a pledge, but it is now driven by pure, unaltered need. We stroke, touch, and moan as one until Polina eventually embraces the earth-shattering climax threatening to steal her eyes from me for half a second so they can roll into the back of her head.

With a soft cry, she arches her back and comes. The blinding orgasm ends the rhythmic roll of her hips and fills the dining room with her throaty cries.

As her eyes return to mine, her eye contact once again a necessity, she gapes her mouth to suck in needy, lung-filling gasps of air.

Fuck, she's beautiful when she comes.

The world fades, judgments don't exist, and nothing but pleasure is on her mind.

As she grows hotter and wetter against my hand, my nose tickles the inside of her thigh. I'm desperate to eat her some more, to consume the pussy I starved myself of for six months so I could keep my word to my brother, but her climax is so violent it is almost choking, so I must wait.

I only like hearing her gag when she's working my cock like she doesn't have a gag reflex.

"Again," I say when life returns to her eyes stronger and more powerful than before.

My lips rise against her sweat-dotted skin when she faintly nods.

I usually have to coerce another set of orgasms out of her.

This time, she comes willingly.

"But not like that. I want you inside me when I come." When she shimmies her curvy backside across the dining table, I shove back my chair, giving her plenty of room to land in my lap.

As a memory of us fucking on an old wooden chair at her boutique streams through my mind, a brilliant idea pops into my head. "Stand and spin around."

Polina hesitates for only a second before doing as asked. She's naturally submissive in the bedroom, but she also trusts me.

It puffs out my chest even more than the ravishing visual of her naked in the mirror that stretches from the ceiling to the floor. Her breasts are perky, and her nipples are strained and

begging to be touched. Her stomach is flat and without a single blemish, excluding the tiny mole on her left ribcage, and her pussy is bare and shining with evidence of her climax.

She is fucking dynamite, and I haven't even taken in her cock-aching face yet, but you wouldn't know that from the way Polina's nose screws up when her eyes land on her naked reflection.

I don't know what the fuck she is seeing, but it must be starkly different from what I'm witnessing. She looks horrified.

There are many beautiful women in the world, but stunning is too simple of a word for Polina. Perfection isn't even quite right. She is flawlessly exquisite—a masterpiece too becoming of any man, much less one with as little to his name as me.

Yet here she is, in the dining room of my apartment, looking fucking ravenous even with the wish to hide her body flaring through her eyes.

Although I said earlier that today isn't the day to push boundaries, the unease on her face leaves me no choice. This is about more than my grief and me.

This is about us.

“Knees.” My cock braces heavily against Polina's ass when I drag her hair to one side of her neck before filling the gap with my face so she can see me without hindrance in the mirror. “Now, Polly. I won't ask again.”

When she does as asked, her chest rapidly rising and falling, I push the dining table and several chairs out of the way like they don't weigh a thing, before adding to my command. “Now crawl to her.”

My demand both panics and confuses her, but I know she didn't hear me wrong.

Her thudding pulse announces that there is nothing wrong with her hearing.

There's only one person I want her to crawl to.

That person isn't me.

It is the beautifully stubborn woman reflected at her, the girl who'd go to the end of the world for anyone but herself.

"Slowly," I mutter, my breathing shallow when I realize how much of a struggle it is for her to see herself in the same light as those around her. "And when has eye contact not been your strong point? Look at her. Take in her beauty while wordlessly promising to answer her every whim."

Polina drifts her eyes from mine in the mirror to herself before she slowly makes her way across the room, her creep timid yet seductive.

"Good girl," I praise when she makes it halfway to the mirror without her eyes ever leaving herself. I can see the struggle on her face, smell it leaking out of her, but she follows my command to the T. "Look at how fucking beautiful you are. Lean, strong, and unintimidated." Once she reaches the mirror, I say, "Now up on your knees and spread them wide. See how wet your perfection has made you."

Tears gloss her eyes as she mumbles, "I-I—"

"Now, Polly."

As her chest heaves up and down, thrusting the generous curves of her tits, she balances her backside on the balls of her feet before she spreads her knees wide, exposing her wet pussy to both our ravenous eyes.

As she drinks in the splendor that will keep me entranced for decades on end, she appears confident and strong, but her eyes missile to mine like a bullet being fired from a gun when I say, "Now touch yourself."

POLINA

*M*y headshake is firm enough to swish the drenched locks hanging halfway down my back, but Yev acts ignorant. He drags over the chair he was seated on when he consumed my pussy with a heap of tongue lashes, groans, and grazes of his teeth, slots it directly behind me, then encourages me to lean back until my back braces on the seat and my hair splays across his bare and chunky thighs.

“I’ll never force you to do anything you don’t want to do, Polly. But I think this will be good for you.”

I have no clue why. Touching myself is another hard limit. It slots right in between the darkness and forcefully moving me. I’m just lost as to why it scares the shit out of me so much.

It’s a hidden memory, but if I buried it, it was for a good reason.

Resurfacing it won’t do anyone any justice.

“I-I can’t.”

“Yeah, you can.” Yev’s voice is smooth and cultured since it isn’t hindered by the shakes that kept us locked away in his apartment the past three days. “I have faith in you.” Just like two nights ago, his trust does wonders for my battered ego. So

much so, I contemplate his offer instead of straight up denying it when he asks, “Do you want me to guide you?”

My head is screaming no, but my body’s response is the opposite.

My chin scarcely dips when Yev plucks me off the floor like he did in the shower earlier, plants me on his lap, then curls his hands over mine.

“Where do you want to touch first?”

I shift my eyes from his lusty ones staring at me in the mirror to my body. I’ve never looked at myself like this before. It is both raw and emotional. I’ve been scared of my body for so long. Not because it is hideous but because the shame of sexual abuse isn’t always shunted onto the perpetrators.

The victims wear the shame of their assaults more than anyone.

“My-my breasts,” I eventually murmur, my voice barely a whisper.

“Good choice,” Yev replies before he glides my hands that feel like lead up the planes of my stomach before cupping my breasts.

I was so scared my abusers’ touches could be seen, I didn’t lose my virginity until late in life. I thought their abuse was trademarked on my skin and that it would attract me to men just like them.

Only now do I realize nothing I did caused their unwanted attention.

It was all on them... *wasn't it?*

I'm drawn from a memory fighting to resurface when Yev says, "Fuck, Polly. Your body is so responsive." When I lock eyes with his hooded gaze in the mirror, he smiles. "Why are you looking at me? I'm not the one stiffening your nipples to rigid peaks. That's all you, baby girl."

I hate his nickname, but that isn't the only reason unease floods my veins. It is drinking in the perkiness of my nipple when I roll it between my thumb and forefinger.

Yev is no longer guiding my movements. I'm fondling myself, and it is oddly arousing but concerning at the same time.

"You should slide one hand down to your clit. Give it the same attention you're giving your nipples," Yev suggests, his voice husky with lust.

"I—" The quickest twitch behind me swallows the rest of my denial. He is hard and heavy against my back, as turned on now as he was when he had his cock between my lips. "Like this?" I ask after lowering my hand to my pussy and thrumming my clit with my thumb.

Yev wets his lips before jerking up his chin. "Does it feel good?"

I nod before a single objection can fire through my head. It does feel good, so why am I also being filled with shame? This is my body, so shouldn't I be free to do whatever the hell I want to it?

"Please touch me," I beg when my anxiety creeps higher than my wish to come.

"Pol—"

"Please," I beg again, unashamed since it is Yev's reflection bouncing back at me.

The ice thaws away with him, the hurt nowhere near as obvious. It probably has more to do with the way he looks at me than the negative thoughts he steals from my head when bedding me, but noteworthy, nonetheless.

I'm aware I have him snagged when he harshly swallows before demanding, "Shift up."

A tremoring breath rumbles in my throat when my new position allows his thick cock to brace at the seam of my pussy. We've never attempted a position like this before. My need for eye contact usually keeps positions like this off the table.

The mirrors assure me it won't be an issue this time around.

"I want you to stroke your clit like I usually do," Yev instructs, his words as strained as the veins in his densely thick cock.

This position may kill me.

Not physically. The painful stretch of taking a man with impressive girth and length has been eased by multiple orgasms. The one that snuck up on me unaware is when Yev's cum landed on my tongue, and the blinding one that couldn't sneakily arrive since it was loud and body-shaking.

I mean mentally.

I can see *everything*. Yev's eyes, the bliss on his face as he slowly sinks inside me, and the way he rolls his teeth over his lower lip before he cusses about my tightness. I can even see the hand he drops to the lower half of my stomach to encourage my hips to roll in tempo to the upward thrusts of his droolworthy Apollo's belt.

I watch him fuck me as every negative thought in my head fades to nothing, and the visual is wondrous.

With one hand ensuring I can't misunderstand how deep he's taking me, Yev's other hand wanders all over me—on my neck, my breasts, my hips. He even drops it to the opening of my pussy so he can encourage the sluggish strokes of my clit from gentle to urgent.

Within a handful of joint rotations, it is swollen and needy, pulsating with the frantic beats of my heart. Every swivel makes me wetter and hotter, and within seconds, the urge to come overwhelms me.

“Look at her,” Yev commands, his voice clipped when the desire to close my eyes overwhelms me.

The visual of his fat cock ramming in and out of me is too much.

I'm losing control.

Steamrolling into oblivion.

Eye contact is too much for me right now.

“Look at her!” Yev demands again, his shouted words vibrating through us.

He pulls back strands of hair hugging my sweat-drenched cheeks before he tugs my head back, forcefully aligning my eyes with a pair I don't recognize in the mirror.

She doesn't look tormented and scared.

She is liberated and free.

The girl I never thought I would be.

“Look at her.” His voice is unlike anything I've ever heard. It is almost nurturing and full of pride. “So fucking humble

and sweet. The very epitome of perfection.” Wetness pricks my eyes when he says, “She is you, Polina. She. Is. You.”

I break just as the last word leaves his mouth.

Both physically and mentally.

YEV

*A*fter Kliment updates me on the movement of the man who killed my brother, I shift our focus onto matters closer to home. “How did you go with that other search I asked you about?”

He closes down the video footage of Kirill being moved from a maximum-security prison in Maryland to one not listed on the USA inventory of penitentiaries. He then opens a folder my newly purchased laptop didn't have when Micah dropped it off at my apartment. “It should be a fuckton easier to track someone in their home country, but this guy is a fucking ghost.” He brings up an image of Brecken that Polina gave me earlier. He was her second foster father. “I even ran him through the English abroad program every backpacker slash English teacher has to register on to be paid. I couldn't find him.”

“What about the foster care program? Surely someone there would have details about him. You don't just hand over the care of a child to a man you know nothing about.”

“I looked, Yev. *Deeply*. There's nothing. Brecken Fleming doesn't exist.”

As I drag a hand down my face, I slouch low on my uncomfy couch. “Could that be the reason his visa applications

are always denied?”

“He put in a visa application?”

Bewilderment floods my face. “Yes! Is any fucker listening to me?”

I realize I’m taking my anger out on the wrong person when my voice bellows around my apartment. I’m not mad at Kliment or the channels everyone in my industry uses to stay off government radars. I’m pissed at myself.

I shouldn’t have pushed Polina as hard as I did. I fucked up, and I’ve regretted it ever since.

“Polina said he’s gotten as far as the borders before he’s turned around and marched back out of Russia.”

Kliment is silent for a minute. “Can you get me dates?” Papers shuffle before he explains, “I might have better luck hacking the border cameras than the systems here.” By here, he means in the United States.

“I’ll ask Polly.”

I don’t know what the fuck I said that gave him an in to my mindset, but he homes in on it like a missile locked on a target. “Wanna talk about it?”

I shake my head. “It’s my fuckup, so I’ll own it before fixing it.”

“Like your coke addiction?” I stare at the webcam in my laptop in silence. “The Bobrovs still run that side of the trade. They only gave up trafficking women.” He laughs while saying, “You were one of their biggest clients,” but his comment still makes me feel like shit. “They’ve noticed a dip in sales.”

“I don’t think straight with that shit in my veins.” I don’t with it missing either, but that’s a story for a day when I didn’t carry Polina to bed so her tears could soak into my pillow.

Needing to disperse some of my anger before it burns me alive, I ask, “Any news on Pavel?”

I could say more, but I don’t need to. It appears as if everyone knew the real reason for Alek’s anger that day but me.

“From what I’ve heard, he’s a couple of clicks out of Kronstadt. Alek said he could give you coordinates, but first, you’d need to explain why you need them.”

“He said that?” Suspicion is rife in my tone.

Alek isn’t one to hide away his achievements.

Taking out a wannabe rapist is an accomplishment worthy of bragging.

“Yep,” Kliment replies, popping the P. “He said it after he asked me if I could hack into the security system of your apartment building.” I swallow a hard lump in my throat. “He was pissed when I reminded him those old girls store all their encrypted data on onsite servers.” His reply grants my lungs permission to breathe again. It is a short-lived reprieve. “He stormed off while muttering something under his breath about a belt being tied to a headboard and how he’s going to wrap it around your neck if it’s there for any reason his deviant head conjured up.”

What the fuck?

My eyes bulge when the truth smacks into me. “I thought you said my apartment was clear of bugs.”

“It is. There isn’t a single camera watching you, bar the one I’m spying on you with now. Your face is fucking white, man. As pasty as a ghost.”

“Because that’s what I’ll be when Alek learns I tied his sister to my bed with my belt.”

Kliment’s silence has me picturing him with his mouth hanging open and his eyes bulging.

“You tied Polina Kotova to your bed!” he squeals out like a cheerleader at a cheer championship almost a minute later. “I need all the fucking details. When? Where? Do you still have your nuts?”

Desperate to remove the evidence of my fuckup, I tell Kliment to give me a hundred-mile head start if Alek decides to return to Russia earlier than planned before closing my laptop and heading for my room.

My fast pace slows when I overhear voices the closer I get.

I recognize the people chatting.

One unknowingly used his hacker to threaten my life only seconds ago.

Alek Kotova is back in Russia, and I am so fucking dead.

May as well go down swinging, then.

With my balls tucked under my chin and my fists at the ready, I enter my room at the speed of a rocket.

Polina startles when she spots my balled hands and angry sneer, but she only gives me a curious look for the quickest second before her focus shifts back to her iPhone held out a couple of inches from her gorgeous and thankfully tear-free face. “I told you I’m fine.”

Alek's deep grumble sounds out of the speakers of her phone. "Uh-huh. Then why are your eyes wet? Looks like you've been crying."

She scoffs as if offended. "I was sleeping when you threatened to send the Yurys to check on me if I didn't answer your call." She hides her shock better than me. "Since when have you seen the Yurys as allies?"

Polina rolls her eyes when Alek replies, "That's a story for another day."

"Of course it is. When isn't it when it comes to *your* secrets?" Her chest rises and falls before she breathes out heavily. "I'm the only one constantly forced to confront her biggest fears head-on."

I feel like an absolute fucking cunt, but I'm not given a chance to apologize for how hard I pushed her this morning when Alek says, "Talking about fears, you better put that boy on the line."

"Boy?"

Polina's acting is brilliant, but it doesn't fool Alek. "Don't act like he's not there. I can hear him purring to get close to you. He's worse than the fucking stray cats he used to live with."

Polina shoots daggers at me when I mutter, "They weren't strays. They were my pets."

"I tried to save you." Polina's breath comes out with a sigh as she tosses me her phone. "Now the ball is in your court."

After a supportive squeeze of my arm I don't deserve, she mouths that she's going to order us something to eat and leaves my room.

I collect my nuts from the floor and put them back into my sack before raising Polina's phone until it sits a couple of inches out from my face.

Alek says nothing when he spots me on the screen.

Not a single fucking thing.

Not a fan of silence, I ask, "How's Ana? The team? Any news on when you'll be coming back?"

Instead of answering any of my questions, he asks, "How long?"

"Long?"

I know what he's asking.

I am merely trying to delay the inevitable.

When his ticking jaw sounds out of the speakers, I mutter, "A couple of weeks after I returned from Sicily with Ana."

"Date. I want the fucking date you started screwing my damn sister." He scrubs at his beard as if messing it up will lessen his angry expression. "Was it before or after you shafted on your other obligations? It better not have been during, or I'll..." He lets his expression finalize his reply.

He's about to tear me a new asshole.

"What?"

I'm completely fucking lost. Excluding the six months I lost myself to cocaine and grief, I worked my ass to the fucking bone for him. I only pursued Polina when he gave me the all-clear from being Ana's shadow because I knew I couldn't give both tasks my all. One wouldn't have been given the attention they deserved, and I didn't want that person to be Polina, so I held back.

“The first time we fucked was the night you made Polina close up shop early.”

Okay, I’ll admit I could have said that a little more respectfully, but who thinks rationally when they’re pissed. I gave up on Polina for years because he didn’t tell me he punished Pavel for attempting to rape his sister. If he had, I wouldn’t have gone anywhere. Ana is my best friend, but Polina is my girl. She will *always* pull rank.

“Since we’re having this conversation, why the fuck didn’t you tell me about Pavel?” He tries to interrupt me, but I keep talking. “I thought you beat him because he ignored your order. You never mentioned him spiking her fucking drink and trying to rape her.”

“He what?” Alek’s voice is a roar, angry and deafening.

When unbridled rage floods his face, I say, “I thought you knew. She... ah...” I cuss when I realize I just broke a promise I made to Polina. “You can’t tell her I told you.” I cuss again when it dawns on me that lying will end us faster than anything. Drugs. Hang-ups. Remorse. We can get past them, but deceit will bury us. “Give me a chance to tell her I dobed first. Please.”

My remorse shifts to anger when Alek mutters the last thing I expected to hear. “Pavel isn’t dead.”

“You better be speaking out your ass.”

“I didn’t know about the drugs, so I let him off with a warning and pushed him to the bottom of the shitkickers.” He drags his hand down his face in anger. “If I had known, I would have cut off his cock before stuffing it into the slit I would have given him from one ear to the next.”

As he stares into space, I realize he is staring at the only woman capable of subduing his anger.

Ana brings his fury down to a manageable level within a couple of seconds before she removes the phone from his hand and fills the screen with her adorable face.

Ana has cute-as-a-button features. Polina's are more fierce and edgy.

They're both gorgeous in their own right.

I bob my head in thanks when she says, "I'll have Kliment send you the coordinates by the end of the day." I stop breathing when she adds, "On one condition."

Again, I nod.

I'll agree to anything if it gives me a chance to protect my girl as I failed to do years ago.

"Make sure you're doing this for Polina and not yourself." It feels like a big-ass knife stabs me in the chest when she murmurs, "You didn't want revenge stealing everything you've ever wanted. That's why you went home, back to your girl."

I can't deny her claim that I returned to Russia for Polina, so I remain quiet.

It pleases Ana. Happiness flares through her eyes as she says, "Don't let remorse steal her from you again. She's worth more to you than *any* amount of revenge."

With nothing more left to say, she smiles while telling me she will be in touch soon before she disconnects our call.

Polina enters my bedroom only half a second later.

"You came back for me?"

POLINA

*Y*ev's silence speaks volumes, and it adds to the somersaults in my stomach.

They're not bad tumbles. Far from it.

Yev probably doubts that, though. He's been quiet since my mini meltdown, and I realize why when he mutters, "Bet you're wishing I didn't."

"Yev—"

"I shouldn't have pushed. I just wanted you to see how beautiful you are. To see what I see when I look at you."

His throat works through a hard swallow when I mutter, "I did. Why do you think I reacted the way I did?"

It takes him a few seconds to reply. "Because I hurt you."

I brush off his worry with a wave of my hand. "You didn't hurt me. You showed me what happened to me wasn't my fault and that my scars can only be seen by me."

He looks baffled. I understand why since I'm a little bewildered myself. I've always thought I was strong and independent, but in reality, I've never left the shadow of the little girl who was so frightened to move the night my father killed my mother, I drenched my nightie with more than tears.

I also always blamed myself, my body, and my family for what happened to me.

I should have blamed nobody but the perpetrators.

“I’ve never seen what I saw last night. Anytime I looked in the mirror, I saw...”

When my words trail off, Yev mutters, “A broken soul?”

I nod before I can stop myself.

With a look that exposes he understands me more than anyone, he pushes off his feet and moseys my way. His stalk is dangerous and edgy but oh so sexy. “Did you see something different last night?” A grin I’ve been dying to see for days tugs at his lips when I nod again. “And you liked what you saw?” Once again, I nod, which slackens the deep groove his brows haven’t been without for weeks. “Enough to do it again?”

He smiles his first true smile when I fold my arms in front of my chest and arch a brow. I’m not opposed to a second round, but I need to recover from round one first. I’m also too curious to discover how Alek found out about us to wait a second longer.

“Did you tell him?”

With his prey locked, Yev pays more attention to my hair than the worry bristling out of me when he stops in front of me. “Who?”

“Alek.” Now I’ve got his attention. “Did you tell him about us?”

He fixes his hair into place when he runs his fingers over his scalp before he shakes his head. “But...” I could kill him for the delay. “I may have accidentally mentioned Pavel

spiking your drink.” He doesn’t give me the chance to get over my shock, let alone speak a word. “He was accusing me of skipping out on my obligations, so I hit him back with the same accusation. I didn’t mean to break my promise. I didn’t realize—”

I silence him by pressing my finger to his plump lips. “I don’t care about Pavel.” He can rot in hell as far as I am concerned. “I’m more interested in what obligation Alek thinks you skipped out on. He only ever uses those words for men who leave their women the instant they find out they’re pregnant.”

Yev’s eyes bulge. “What the fuck? I’m not like that. I wouldn’t do that. I am not a complete fucking tool...” His words trail off as his bug-eyed expression worsens.

When his eyes drop to my stomach, I take a step back. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“You’re the only one I was tapping back then.” I’m almost insulted until he adds, “You never consume scraps when you have filet mignon at your disposal.” He brings his eyes back to meet mine. They’re gleaming with a playfulness I’ve not seen since his return but are very much him. “Not even for the six months you closed the restaurant.”

He’s not saying what I think he is, is he? His grief was deep—it still mars his face now—but there’s no way he went that long without some form of intimacy.

When the truth is projected in his eyes, I enter his room fully and flop on his bed. I rationalized with myself for weeks that he had moved on. That’s why I only felt the littlest bit of guilt when I accepted Vasily’s offer of a date. He was visiting my boutique with his father. Leon has always flashed around his credentials, so even if I hadn’t recognized him on the

website I'd been researching the week before, I would have eventually learned of his title.

“That’s why you were so upset when Vasily said I was his girl.”

The mattress springs bend under Yev’s weight when he sits on the edge of the bed. “I wasn’t upset.” When I peer at him under the arm flopped over my eyes, he says with a smirk, “I was fucking pissed. I thought he had stolen my girl.” He tugs down my arm so he can fully see my eyes. “I made a mistake”—his smile slips from his face—“*again*. Pavel—”

“Isn’t your responsibility.” My head can’t keep up with the many topics we’re discussing today, but one thing is certain—Yev isn’t to blame for what happened that night. It all falls on my shoulders. “I accepted his drink because I wanted to make you jealous.”

His dark brow gets lost in his hair, but he doesn’t speak a word, leaving the gate wide open for me.

After propping myself on my elbows, I admit, “You arrived at the party with Stace Lenkov. She was all over you.”

“Because she thought it would piss off Ana.”

“It did.” I breathe out slowly before admitting, “And it drove me insane too. I loathe Stace.” Loathe is too kind of a word for how much I despise that woman. She’s caused so much trouble for my brother the past five years, and it has taken until now for me to admit she impacted my life as well. “But I was more annoyed you didn’t tell her to ping off. I thought you hated her too.”

“I did. I just...” He breathes out a cuss word. “This is why Alek sent me away. He knew I would have fucked it up, but I swear to God or whoever the hell is up there partying with Feo

that I wised up a fucking ton before I pursued you again. I chased you and *only* you. I cross my heart and hope to fucking die.”

After watching him do exactly that, I ask, “Could Alek be referencing someone before you came back? Someone in Sicily?”

“No.” When suspicion crosses his face, he mutters, “Well... fuck. Don’t ask me to answer that, Polly. I don’t want to sound like a dick.”

“I’d rather you sound like one than be one. If you have a child or one on the way, you have a responsibility to take care of him or her.”

I’m shocked by how calm I sound. Jealousy is usually my go-to reaction when I conjured up scenarios like this during slow days at the boutique. My imagination is so vivid, I was half expecting Yev to return from abroad with a wife in tow. A baby was a close second.

“Although that could be a challenge if you stay in Russia. You’d most likely have to return to Sicily.” Now I sound more fretful than calm.

Yev knows firsthand how bad long-distance relationships are. It is why he doesn’t know his father. From the rumors we’ve heard, he moved back to his hometown before Yev was born and has not once come back.

Too upset considering the prospect of him leaving again, I leap off the bed and make a beeline for the door. “I need to go to work. I should have never left Nat unattended for so long.”

Yev beats me to the door. After blocking the exit with his body, he confirms he knows me better than I know myself.

“I’m not going anywhere. If I go, you go. If you go, I go. That’s now *our* promise.”

He doesn’t issue life-altering pledges with no intention of keeping them, but I can’t act as if that is an option for us. “I can’t keep you from your child, Yev. The world is too cruel to grow up in without your father at your side, supporting you. We both know that.”

He cups my jaw and drags his thumb over my cheek before repeating, “I’m not going anywhere without you. And the only kid I’m ever going to have is with you. Alek is confused, and I’ll prove it. I just need you not to run.” An ill-timed grin pulls at my lips when he whispers, “Don’t make me tie you to my bed, Polly. We’ve lost enough time, so I refuse to lose a second more.”

Since I agree with him, I lean into his embrace instead of pulling away.

The briefest of movements has the biggest impact on the regret clouding his dark eyes. “Give me a minute to get dressed, and I’ll drive you to work.”

Although he’s not technically asking a question, I jerk up my chin. I’ll need more than a minute to fix my ruffled appearance, but the way Yev looks at me would have you believing I don’t.

After winking at me in favor of my submissiveness, Yev presses his lips to the side of my mouth before making a beeline for the bathroom. I hope he doesn’t have any issues with people sharing toothbrushes. Since he forgot to pack mine, I’ve been using his for the past three days.

As I mentally jot down a reminder to pop into the store today for essentials, a knock rumbles through Yev’s front door.

Believing it is the food I ordered, I snatch my purse off the coffee table before heading for the door, rummaging through my purse for a tip on my way.

“I’m sorry, I am a little low on cash. If you’re ever in town, pop into my boutique and I’ll...” I stop talking when I swing open the door and am slammed with the harsh reality that Yev and I aren’t the only two people in the world.

“Um...” A pretty blonde with sprigs of curly hair checks the apartment number on the door before returning her eyes to me. As she rubs her extended stomach to rid her palms of sweat, she asks, “Does Yev still live here?”

Oh god. “Yeah... ah...”

I’m saved from making a fool of myself by the man in question. “Do you want to grab something to eat before we head in? I’ve done a shit job of feeding you the past couple days.” Cold sweats and vomiting for hours on end killed Yev’s appetite, but I managed with the nonperishable items he had in his pantry and refrigerator. “They opened a drive-thru café last week. We won’t even have to leave the car...”

His words clog in his throat as effectively as mine did when I opened his door. His eyes lift and lock with me. He’s stunned by my silence until I step to the right. I’m tall for a girl, and the woman standing behind me is as tiny as a fairy. It makes sense that he wouldn’t notice her right away.

My stomach swirls when recognition is immediate. “Annika, hey.” Yev brushes off his surprise with a quick headshake, but when his eyes drop to her stomach, it returns full force. “Holy... fucking... shit.”

When he stumbles back like he did more than switch out his shirt in the bathroom, I ask Annika if she would like to

come in. “Please excuse the mess, we...” When I fail to find a plausible excuse for the dining table to be squashed against the sofa and for a single chair to be in front of a floor-to-ceiling mirror, I offer to take her coat.

“It’s fine. Thank you. I won’t stay long.” She steps into the foyer before adding, “I just wanted to make sure you got my letter.” Her eyes land on the entryway table with perfect timing. “Oh. There it is.” When she gathers up the handwritten envelope I placed there over two weeks ago, a sigh falls from her lips. “You didn’t open it?”

Yev, the master deflector, does what he does best. He asks his own question instead of answering hers. “You’re the reason my gel kept going missing?” His laugh startles me. It is edgy and uneasy but also relieved. “I told him to stop using it for lube, but he wasn’t, was he?”

I feel left out of the loop when Annika shakes her head before smiling.

“Is that...?” Once again, Yev lowers his eyes to her stomach.

As her eyes gloss with tears, Annika answers Yev with a faint, “Yes.”

“Wow.” He looks torn between throwing his fist in the air and yahooping and folding in two.

Upon spotting my bewilderment, Yev tries to settle it. “Annika is owned by the Bobrovs.” I don’t know who balks more, Annika or me. “Not like that. She was raised by them since she was ten.”

“Nine,” Annika corrects before shifting her focus to me. “Which I’m sure you understand placed me in a similar predicament to you. I wasn’t to be touched.”

Her eyes sling to Yev when he asks, “So how did he get in?” He answers his own question two seconds later with a low, gravelly tone. “By pretending to be me.”

Although he isn’t technically asking a question, Annika answers him. “Yes.”

My head bounces back and forth like I’m watching a tennis match when they continue their conversation like they are speaking their own private language. “Did you know it wasn’t me?”

Sprigs of blonde hair bounce when Annika nods again. “Yes, but we didn’t disclose it to anyone else.”

Yev’s reply is breathy. “So they thought he was me?”

Annika’s nod this time around is brief and regretful. “They still do.”

As his hands shoot up to his hair, Yev mutters, “Fuck.”

When he looks desperate for something to take the edge off, I ask, “Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on? I’m feeling a lot out of the loop.”

Yev curses again before apologizing and tugging me to his side. “Annika, this is Polina, my girlfriend.” When Annika’s face washes with shock along with mine, he says, “Hence me getting my ass chewed out by Alek not even an hour ago.”

“Oh my god,” Annika murmurs. “I’m so sorry.” Her eyes are on me during her apology. “I didn’t know you two were a thing, or I wouldn’t have.”

“Wouldn’t have?” I ask, still confused.

I’m glad Yev has a hold of me when he answers, “Pretended she was pregnant with my child.” He locks his

wide-with-shock eyes with me. “That’s not my baby growing in her belly, Polly. It’s Feo’s.”

YEV

*A*s I exit Feodor's room, I scrub at the back of my neck while struggling to work out which way is up. Annika has given me no reason not to believe her, and I had an inkling Feo was sneaking around in the weeks leading to his death, but I was so caught up chasing Polina, I didn't give it a second thought.

Feo and I were close. We never kept secrets from each other, but I also understand our conversation might not have gone down well if he chose to pursue it. While I was in Sicily with Ana, Feo made numerous connections with Maksim Ivanov's crew. Although the Bobrovs and Ivanovs trade together in the Bratva, the Bobrovs are notorious for not letting anyone piss on their turf.

This is fucked to admit, especially in this day and age, but Annika is Bobrov turf. She couldn't be touched or traded without permission, and the order had to be given from someone high up the chain.

Feo wouldn't have gotten within sniffing distance of Annika if the guards at the Bobrov mansion had caught wind that he was associated with the Ivanovs.

He had no choice but to pretend he was me.

To start with, I was pissed. But as our day went on and I listened to the stories Annika shared with Polina while we ate the food Polina ordered, relief slowly settled on my face.

I'm glad Feo didn't spend his last weeks miserable and alone.

His relationship with Annika was fast but explosive.

Much like mine with Polina.

A squeak pops from Polina's kissable lips when I pluck her from the couch, plonk my ass in her spot, then pull her to sit on my lap. I won't lie. My eyes have strayed to my bedroom door a handful of times this afternoon, but Polina's nearness does wonders for my cravings.

I'd much rather feast on her body than get high on a synthetic drug, but it isn't just that. It is her support as well. Emotions I'm not used to handling are harder to rein in without drugs flowing through my blood, and today has been one clusterfuck after another, yet Polina is still here. She hasn't run.

How the fuck did I ever get so lucky?

The groove between Polina's blonde brows grows when I ask, "Are you sure you don't mind Annika staying here, Polly? I can book her a hotel room."

Glossy locks fall away from her face when she angles her head to glare at me. "She's carrying your nephew. It is understandable that you'd want to help her, and what better place to do that than here?"

After a big exhale, I expose the real reason for my worry. "People will think—"

“I don’t care what people think.” When I attempt to interrupt as she did me, she speaks faster. “And Alek will just have to get over himself. I couldn’t stay a virgin forever.” She balks a second after her last sentence leaves her mouth before she shifts the focus back to me. “I’m more worried about you.”

“I’m fine.”

I’m a shit liar.

When I spot the downward turn of Polina’s lips, I murmur, “It’s just hard to wrap my head around. I’m glad a part of Feo will live on in his son, but I also hate that he’s missing out on his life.” I scrub a hand down my tired face. I’m fucking exhausted. It is what I get for staying up all night, struggling not to puke. “Who will he look up to?”

“You,” Polina answers without pause for consideration as if it was the simplest question in the world. “Just like Feo did.” She moves my hand before spinning on my lap so she faces me, inconspicuously grinning when I moan about her ass rubbing against my crotch. “I know this isn’t the right time to bombard you with more information, but what I said days ago was true. Feodor positioned himself in an area he thought he could help. But now I’m wondering if that was solely for you.” As my heart thuds in my ears, she strays her eyes to Feo’s bedroom door. “Maybe part of it was for Annika as well. She found out the day before the raid that she was pregnant. She could have gotten word to Feo before all hell broke loose.”

I contemplate for a minute before muttering, “He would have told me if he had known.”

“When?” Polina’s laugh is fake, but it lowers the tension hanging densely in the air. “Between you tying me to your bed and ordering for me to be placed on lockdown?” Now is not the time for my dick to harden, but it has a mind of its own

when it comes to this woman. She truly makes me believe my life didn't end with Feo's. That I still have many empty pages left to fill with unbelievable stories and mind-blowing sex. "I'm still mad about that. Those men were pigs."

"Fucking filthy," I wholeheartedly agree with an unexpected laugh. I thought Alek's backup plan was nuts until I realized who helmed it. "But they're loyal as fuck." I feel her heart rate surging when I murmur, "Anyone who is friends with your father is."

"They knew my dad?" Shock highlights her tone.

I jerk up my chin. "Alek doesn't trust many people, but he trusted your dad to place your safety in his friends' hands." Her smile should be way too bright for the late hour. "Though I doubt he'd feel the same way if he dug a little deeper into his past."

"What do you mean? And why would he need to dig? My father is an open book."

"Hey, I'm an ally, remember?" After kissing the tip of her screwed-up nose, I place her onto the seat next to me with a groan, then snatch up my laptop. "I asked Kliment to look into possible reasons his applications were denied." Before she can voice her annoyance about me dragging Kliment into my mess, I stun her into silence. "He couldn't find a Brecken Fleming, much less a visa application."

"Huh?"

She didn't mean to express her confusion out loud, but her expression shows she's glad she couldn't hold back when I work to elevate her bewilderment.

Within a handful of clicks, I bring up a report of visa applications lodged for both work and tourists from now until

before Polina was born. A handful of Flemings visited on tourist visas over the years, but not a single Brecken.

“Did you try his address?” Polina asks. “He’s lived at the same residence since I came into his care.”

Nodding, I open a second file. “The house is now in Hannah’s name, but before that, it hadn’t been offered for sale in over eighty years.” With her confusion keeping her quiet, I continue filling the void with words. “Did he go by any aliases?”

“Not as far as I am aware. I could ask him?”

When I nod, Polina digs her cell phone out of her purse and calls a frequently dialed number.

Her worried expression grows the longer she waits for her call to connect.

After breathing out the sudden heaviness in her chest, she says, “Daddy, it’s me. Can you please call me back when you get this? I love you.”

She appears tempted to call him again. A hundred excuses as to why he didn’t answer are running through her head, but she holds back the urge when she spots my shocked expression.

“What?” she asks, unsure what has caused my gawk.

As I wet my lips, leveraging more room for a grin I should hold back but can’t, I stand while rubbing my hands together.

Polina pegs her purse at my head when I say, “Daddy? Fuck, Polly. I don’t think I’ve been harder.”

Her cheeks go the color of beets. “Don’t make it weird. He’s my dad!”

“How am I making it weird? You’re the one who called him daddy.”

I’m stirring. I know it, and so does Polina, but since it is a side of me no one has seen for a very long time, she plays along instead of nipping my shameful hankering for a bit of daddy kink in the bud. “Before you get any ideas, mister, perhaps I should remind you who the elder is of our duo.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Grandma, I’m aware.”

Polina fakes a dry retch. “You took it too far. *Way* too far.” She tosses her cell phone onto the entryway table before saying, “Now I need a shower to wash off the ick.”

Her march to my bedroom freezes partway when I ask, “Want me to wash your back?”

The weight on my shoulders seems nowhere near as heavy when Polina tosses her head back to look at me while raking her teeth over her lower lip. My grief will never leave me, and my head is thumping, but they could become manageable, even more so when Polina jerks up her chin to my suggestion.

I’m set to sprint into the bathroom, but Polina cools my turbines a smidge by saying, “After you’ve called my brother. You don’t have to tell him who the father of Annika’s baby is, but I’d rather he know it isn’t you.”

Since I agree with her, I nod before demanding she keep the sponge off her skin until I join her, and then I grab my phone.

As Polina enters my room, Kliment answers my call. “You work fast.”

I’m lost until he tells me to check my laptop. There’s no denying the image on the screen is the man I was planning to track down the instant Polina went to sleep.

“Who got to him?”

Kliment’s confusion can’t be hidden by his short reply.
“You?”

“This wasn’t me.” I would have caved Pavel’s face in with my fists, not left him hanging from an apparent suicide. The other reason I don’t believe the ruse is the boot prints under his lifeless body. Pavel’s feet are shoeless, and the boot tracks lead away from the tree he’s hanging from. “How did you get this image?”

“It was sent to us,” Kliment answers.

“Alek?” I query, narrowing the list. With the crew working off a dodgy satellite service, every connection in and out is done through Kliment. He monitors everything to ensure we don’t get permanently locked out.

I can’t see him, but I picture him jerking up his chin when a woosh sounds down the line. His reply lowers my suspicions that my phone has been hacked. Alek and Ghost know their every move is being monitored. You can’t anchor only miles from Henry Gottle’s turf and believe he isn’t listening. I’m just curious as to why the Gottles would move on a traitor of a rival gang.

My mouth gapes when a thought pops into my head. “He’s letting them in.”

I imagine Kliment’s shit-eating grin when he says with a chuckle, “We can’t trade, but there’s less chance of a bullet to the ass now if we step on land.”

“What changed Henry’s mind?”

A whistle sounds through my teeth when he answers, “Katie.”

“She knows Ghost is alive?”

Another whoosh before, “Nah. Not yet. But she might soon since Ghost has resorted back to being sneaky.”

Kliment laughs when I ask, “How many shampoo bottles has he knocked up this week?”

“I ain’t fucking asking. He’s a moody prick when he’s not getting any.”

“You’re preaching to the wrong person.” I stray my eyes to my bedroom door when the shower switches on. The reminder that Polina is waiting for me has me shutting down my laptop and saying, “Can you put me through to Alek?”

“I would if he had access to his phone.”

My silence keeps him talking.

“Ana confiscated it. Some shit about stress not being good for his head.” He waits a beat before asking, “Do you know what that’s about? I thought they fixed his head when they removed part of his skull.”

They did, but Alek’s condition that almost ended his life several years ago is lifelong.

He will never get rid of it.

But since that isn’t my story to tell, I say, “Then patch me through to Ana. I doubt Alek will be far from her. She’s about to pop any day now.”

Kliment laughs before doing as asked.

Ana answers breathlessly two seconds later. “If it were anyone else interrupting his breakfast, I would have banished them from my life for eternity.”

Breakfast?

Alek isn't a breakfast type of guy.

I realize my error two seconds later when Alek's deep rumble sounds down the line. "Tell him to hurry the fuck up, Ana, or he's going to hear you come, and then I'll have every right to kill him."

"You're... he's..." I screw up my face. "For fuck's sake, Ana. You could have just said you were busy."

"I'll never be too busy for you, Yev."

"Like fuckin' hell you won't," Alek grumbles out, his growl masculine-stripping.

I don't know what's pissing him off more. Me interrupting him eating his girl or the fact he realizes I'll most likely do the same to his baby sister sometime today.

Perhaps a bit of both.

Forever willing to push the boundaries when it comes to the snarly beast, I murmur out slowly, "It's about Annika..."

POLINA

The shower has almost run cold by the time Yev joins me. It's for the best. I'll need a cold shower after drinking in his tattooed pecs, the hard bumps in his midsection, and the wonderment that'll keep my head in a tizzy more diversely than the constant mess flung our way over the past couple of days.

I miss when my life was simpler, but I'd never go back since it was a time Yev wasn't in the picture. Seeing how he responded to Annika's stories about the time she spent with Feo resurfaced those feelings that rushed me hard and fast seven months ago.

I was falling for Yev back then, and I am again now. His exterior is just hardened with grief this time around instead of cockiness.

When he tugs his sweats down, I wipe away the steam from the glass door, not wanting even something as minute as a drop of water to hinder the view.

My god, this man's body is divine. It isn't as big and beastly like a lot of men in my brother's industry, but it is tanned, toned, and panty-wetting delicious. And don't get me started on his cock or I'll catch pneumonia.

“Hey.” Yev grins before slotting into the space between me and the tiled wall, my gawk not missed when his erection forces him to take the long route. “Holy fucking shit.” He squeals like a girl when the water hits his shoulder. “That’s damn freezing.”

“You took too long to get here,” I reply, my eyes unable to deviate from his gorgeous face. He has such a dark, moody look with almost black hair and eyes, but his personality is on the opposite end of the spectrum. Before Feo’s untimely death, Yev’s playfulness thawed through the iciness I used to protect myself in a shamefully quick couple of days. “Did you speak with Alek?”

“I did.” I peer at him curiously when he chuckles. “I interrupted his breakfast.”

My bewilderment grows. Not even as a kid did Alek eat breakfast.

I get whiplash from our conversation when he blurts out, “Pavel is dead.”

I assumed he was years ago but was too scared to ask Alek what happened to him, but Yev expressed the news as if it is new. “When?”

After drenching his head before the water turns ice-cold, he replies, “Sometime today. We’ll know more once the authorities find him. Kliment called it in just now.”

“Why would you want the police involved?”

I’m torn on how to respond when he says, “We can’t exactly leave him hanging there. It was in a public space.”

“He was hanged?” When Yev jerks up his chin, I stray my eyes to my feet.

That's how my father decided to go out after killing my mother and believing he had killed my brother.

It takes a minute for Yev to click on. "Fuck. Shit, Polly, I didn't think."

"It's okay. I'm not upset." I almost cuss before correcting. "I am upset. Just not for my father."

I shudder when I recall the scene I was forced to take in when I was yanked out of my hidey-hole. I had been in there for hours, close to sixteen, yet the scene was still horrifying. The only person who had been removed was Alek, and there was so much blood on the floor I didn't believe it was him who had informed the officers of my hiding spot.

"Come on. Let's get you out of here before you catch a cold."

With the suds-loaded sponge dumped on the floor, Yev switches off the shower, gathers me in his arms, then exits. I'm not surprised when he walks us straight out of the bathroom with not a snick of cloth covering us. He loves air drying.

I would too if he weren't so sick after each shower that he struggled to stand.

He isn't facing the same problems now. He has no issues walking me to his bed before fetching me a set of clothes out of his walk-in closet.

"How is your head? You could take some more Advil now if you want?"

His reply is as smooth as his strides. "My head's good."

Feeling as if he is not telling me something, I ask, "Your stomach?"

He freezes partway out of the closet before locking his eyes with mine. “It’s good too.” After angling his head to the side and raising his lips half an inch, he asks, “Are you babying me, Grandma?”

I gag. “Call me Grandma again and you’ll find my stiletto up your backside.”

Yev laughs. It is still such a foreign thing to hear, but I relish it as if it is a precious gem. “How do you know I wouldn’t like that?”

I shrug. “Guess there’s only one way to find out.”

When he drinks in the height of my pumps, he pulls a face. “We’d need lube, and I’m out of hair gel.” A smile tugs at my lips when he murmurs, “Fucking Feo,” under his breath while pulling a shirt over my drenched head. “Always ruining my fun.”

As quickly as his playfulness arrived, it leaves, and guilt takes its place.

“It’s okay to talk about him.” He finishes pulling on his boxer shorts before drifting his eyes to mine as I say, “He’s your brother. He will never fully leave you. He just lives inside you now.” When lines furrow across his forehead, I realize my wording wasn’t the best considering what we were discussing only seconds ago. “Not like that. God, I forgot how perverted you are.”

My reply awards me a smile.

It isn’t a full smile but better than none.

“Do you have a preference?”

“For?” I ask, confused by the changeup but also appreciative of it. His voice isn’t laden down with the

remorse hardening his features.

“What side do you prefer sleeping on?” My mind trickles with ideas far more devious than sleep when Yev adds, “Because I don’t want you sleeping on the wet patch, so you need to tell me which side I need to position you before I drench the sheets with more than my sweat.”

It dawns on me that more than water is dotting his top lip when our eyes lock and hold. He’s struggling, but instead of reaching for the crutch that stole six months of his life, he’s searching for the lifeline I promised him three days ago.

He’s searching for me.

“Left,” I murmur a second before tugging him forward by his boxers and crashing our mouths together.

After kissing him until I’m breathless, I lean up on my elbows to enjoy the view of Yev stripping out of the clothes he just put on. It isn’t the longest tease I’ve endured—he’s only wearing boxers—but it is the most riveting. It may even top the time he stripped in my dressing room so I could take his measurements for new outfits.

His cock bounces when the waistband of his boxers runs over it, and then it bobs when he steps closer to me. Eye contact is commonly demanded during occurrences like this, but I can’t tear my hooded gaze away from his cock. It is so rigid, long, and thick. He’s also cut, which I’ve heard is unusual for mistreated and abused kids. Their births are generally not recorded, and it is rare for them to attend a doctor’s office, let alone one that will remove their foreskin.

I’m interested to learn more about his heritage, especially with his comment about him liking tequila since he is half his

father, but I lose the ability to think straight when he fists his cock and gives it a long stroke.

“I don’t know what I want more, baby girl. Demanding you to strip for me or to feast on you while you’re wearing my shirt.”

Shock stretches across my face. I didn’t realize it was his shirt because it has an emblem on the front for a foreign university.

When he spots my bewilderment, Yev’s lips tug at one side. “I had to do something with my time in Sicily.”

“After the skills you showcased last week, I assumed you honed your boxing skills.”

“I did,” he agrees, his decision made up when he fists the hem of his shirt and pulls it over my head. “But that was only once or twice a week.”

It is hard to keep my focus on our conversation when he drops his head to suck my nipple into his mouth. After teasing it into a firm bud, he releases it with a pop before moving for its equally erect counterpart.

“I was bored out of my fucking mind the rest of the time,” he mutters under his breath before swiveling his tongue around my nipple. Words are above me when he says, “So I figured it wouldn’t hurt to learn some new skills. You never know how far a bit of smarts can take you.” He smiles against the curve of my breast. “Could even have you bedding the most beautiful and intelligent woman you’ve ever met.”

As his tongue runs up the gully between my breasts, his hand slips between my legs.

His groan tickles my chest when he feels how wet I am.

“Fucking soaked.”

While running his nose along my collarbone, he drags in a hearty waft of air like the only drug he’ll ever snort again is me. It sends goose bumps racing to the surface of my skin and has my thighs clamping around his hand.

“And impatient.”

As his prickles tickle my neck, his fingertips toy with my clit. He waits for the groan rumbling in my chest to be released by my mouth before he drops the focus of his hand to my opening and pushes two fingers inside me.

With one knee balancing next to my splayed thigh and his forehead an inch from mine, he crooks his fingers to rub the sensitive spot inside me he knows will set me off.

It is amazing having an uninterrupted view of his eyes, but my god, it is torturous as well. His fingers are wonderful, and within a couple of pumps, waves of pleasure form low in my stomach, and the wish to scream smacks into me hard and fast.

I moan his name instead. “Yev...”

It urges him to sink his fingers in deeper and toy with my clit with his thumb.

As he drives me to the brink with nothing but his eyes and one of his hands, my backside lifts off the mattress more and more. His fingers thrusting in tempo to the faint rock of his hips drive me wild. I’m hot all over and panting before I’m blinded by unmistakable pleasure.

“Please... oh god.” I thrash against his hand before the need to kiss him again overwhelms me.

It is a messy, sloppy embrace that steals the devotion of his eyes and prolongs my orgasm by several breathless seconds.

Yev's relentless pursuit to give me the pleasure of my life ramps up when he spreads my thighs to the width of his shoulders before he lowers his head to the apex of my pussy.

He makes me come again, on his mouth this time, before he proves he's more than a generous lover. He doesn't stop at three orgasms or four. He brings me to ecstasy over and over again with his mouth and fingers until I lose count and am so spent I am on the verge of collapse.

"That should have you drenched enough to lessen the burn," he murmurs as he moves to kneel between my floppy legs.

As he wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand, he adjusts me so he can enter me without hindrance. It is a position most people would consider boring, but nothing is boring with a man who possesses as much sexual prowess as Yev. Missionary isn't missionary with him. He's not squashing me into the mattress and hiding his sweaty face in the crook of my neck, as my girlfriends often complain about. His torso isn't on me at all. One of my legs is flat against his chest, and the other is wedged between his manly thighs and dangling off the end of the bed.

As he enters me with painstaking slowness, one of his hands fondles my breast while the other braces and caresses my shaky knee. My clit doesn't need any stimulation from his fingers. His amazing V muscle has that covered.

As he rocks into me, he rolls his hips, ensuring every one of my hot buttons remains active.

Our pace starts slow as he waits for me to acclimate to his girth, but within minutes, our tempo picks up right along with Yev's filthy mouth.

“I could watch your cunt swallow my cock for eternity. Do you have any fucking clue how beautiful you look spread eagle for me, wet and waiting?” He flexes his cock, causing my inner muscles to clench around him. “I should tie you to my bed. Never let you leave. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, baby girl? You want to be filled by me every chance you get?”

My failure to respond sees him thrusting into me harder. His hips jackknife in rhythm to the bounce of my breasts, and the temperature turns roasting.

“Say it.” He grunts between pumps. “Tell me you want this every fucking day of the week. Sometimes twice. That you’ll never give this up.” My heart squeezes as tightly as the walls of my vagina clench around him. “Prove this is why I’m here and he’s not.” His eye contact has been prominent the entire night, but it is tethering when he murmurs, “Because it may be the only way I can forgive myself when I admit I don’t want to take his place anymore.” A dark curl drops down his forehead when he weakly shakes his head. “I can’t give you up, Polly. Not again. Not even for my brother.”

“You won’t have to,” I say, my words as husky as the moans he forever coerces out of me. “I’m not going anywhere. And neither are you. If you go, I go. That’s *our* promise.”

I’m more stating a fact than asking a question, but an immense amount of relief fills me when Yev nods in agreement. His struggles will forever haunt him, but I’m so incredibly proud that he realizes he still has so much life left to live.

After a second nod and a quick adjustment of my hips, he fucks me until I sing his praises with a multitude of high notes and blissful satisfaction soothes the tortured expression his face is rarely without.

Then we collapse with nothing but an unvoiced promise to make every day count.

We're not awarded a set amount of time, so we can't waste a single moment.

We both know that better than anyone.

POLINA

“Good morning,” I groggily greet, exiting Yev’s bedroom.

“Good morning.” Yev spins to face me. He’s in the kitchen, cooking breakfast as he has the past three days. His first three days of narcotic withdrawals saw him lying flat out in bed, shaking, sleeping, and vomiting. He’s spent just as much time there the prior three, but his shakes had nothing to do with withdrawals and everything to do with his excess energy being drained by sexual activities.

My god, the sex is amazing, and part of that is compliments to the confidence Yev bolsters my personality with every time we fuck. He’s such an attentive lover but in the domineering, bossy way I crave. I can’t get enough, but regretfully, I can’t continue neglecting my responsibilities.

Not only is that not fair on Natalya, who’s been working twelve-plus-hour days running the boutique, but it also isn’t fair for my baby sister and stepmother.

Hannah hasn’t heard from my father in over a week, and it has me so worried I have no choice but to return to the real world.

“Wow, Polly.” Yev’s growl has me regretting every decision I’ve made that doesn’t involve him naked. “You look

good enough to eat.” He licks his lips while struggling to work out what to say next. When he can’t find anything, he blurts out, “Are you going somewhere?”

I sheepishly nod before entering the kitchen to steal a strip of bacon from the three plates lined on the counter. Although Annika has pleaded numerous times for Yev not to fuss over her as he does me, he hasn’t once listened.

Yev can deny it all he likes, but Feo wasn’t the only nurturer in his family.

“I really need to head in to work this morning. We had a new shipment come in overnight. I can’t leave that up to Nat.”

He knows there’s more to my return to the real world. The frowning of his brow announces this, much less his muttered comment, “That’s it? Just work?”

Incapable of lying with words, I nod.

Yev dumps the spatula into the frying pan, ruining the pancakes he’s making, before skirting past me. “All right. Give me a minute to get changed.”

I splay my hand across his chest, stopping him. “You should stay with Annika. This is still all very foreign to her.”

Whoever thought you could use foreign when referencing someone’s freedom?

Annika is so used to jumping on cue that something as simple as yawning sees her leaping into action to turn down Yev’s sheets. She often forgets she is Yev’s visitor, not his slave.

Yev ends my campaign with nine little words. “You go, I go. It’s as simple as that.”

After winking at the softening of my features that announces my defeat, he jots down a note for Annika on the envelope he didn't open until after the news was delivered in person three days ago, replaces his shirt with a freshly laundered one, then guides me to the elevator with his hand on the small of my back. "You better get used to having me around, Polly, because I'm never letting you out of my sight."

With my mood a little unhinged after an email I wanted to delete the instant I opened it, I get snappy, "And how will you do that while couriering drugs across the country for Maksim?"

I hate my tone. I am no better than him. I dressed trafficked women for sale, for crying out loud. I'm just being a hormonal cow who doesn't understand there is a heap of work Yev can do while both grieving and endeavoring to keep his promise to me.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't judge."

When the elevator dings, announcing its arrival, Yev guides me inside while muttering, "It's not judging when it's true." He continues talking before I can muster up a lie to excuse my bitchiness. "And that's why I denied his offer. I can't exactly whine about people being fucked in the head while supplying the drug causing their psychosis. That would be hypocritical."

I'm proud of him, but I am also worried for him. He can't hide his overdue bills in a drawer forever, and I don't have enough funds in my account to sneakily pay them. "Is there anything else up your sleeve you're considering?"

He only found out three days ago he's going to be an uncle. He won't want to stay unemployed for long.

“I’ve got a handful of options I’m pondering, but one is standing out above the rest.” Sparks of the Yev who forever taunted Alek shines through when he mutters under his breath, “I’ve heard there is a ton of money to be made in the fashion industry.”

I helm our walk through the foyer of his building while replying, “I’ve witnessed firsthand how you take measurements, and I’m way too possessive to encourage an advancement in that field.”

He throws his head back and laughs. It is still a wonderful surprise every time it happens. The past week has been a rollercoaster of emotions, but not all the ebbs and flows solely belong to Yev. Some are mine. “What if I promise to keep my measuring tape inside my pants?”

I roll my eyes, hiding the disappointment flaring through them before muttering that I’ll think about it.

When Yev mentally throws a fist in the air, I mutter, “That wasn’t a yes.”

He *pffts* me before reminding me that Nat is a female version of him. “I’ll think about it is a yes just as much as a maybe...”

“It’s the third door on the left.” Nat waits for Yev to acknowledge her directions before she pivots on her feet to face me. Even with us slugging it out the past couple of hours, her mouth is gaped wide, and her eyes are glistening with mischievousness.

“Don’t start.”

“I didn’t say anything,” she replies, following me around the boutique that is magically still in one piece.

“You don’t need to speak for me to hear your dirty thoughts.” I wiggle my hand around her face. “They’re all displayed here.”

“So that’s why men follow me around the club like lost puppies?” She laughs at my immature eye roll before saying with a sigh, “I just need to find one who’s super squishy on the inside but rough and rugged on the outside. Does Yev have a brother?” She regrets her question the instant it leaves her mouth. “I’m a complete idiot. Will you forgive me?”

How could I say no to that adorable face?

She doesn’t fake remorse. It is downright genuine.

“How could I not? You’ve practically run this place yourself the past week, and it’s not a pile of ash and rubble.”

“It was a close call the first day,” she admits, “but I’ve had help.”

“From whom?”

Before she can answer me, the bell above the door chimes. I swear I locked it in preparation for us to go to lunch, but with the trade slow, I excitedly welcome the person I’m praying has deep pockets. “Good afternoon. Is there anything I can help you...” The remainder of my greeting sticks in the back of my throat when my eyes lock onto the man entering my store. “Vasily... ah... what are you doing here?”

“Do you really need to ask?” He moseys in like he owns the place, his mood pompous and over the top. After taking in the new arrivals rack, he drags his eyes down Nat’s frozen form before slowly shifting on his feet to face me. “Not only is

your agreement with that imbecile finally over, but you've also not returned any of my calls."

"Because I've been busy," I snap out, frustrated he thinks he can talk down to Yev. Yev may be a decade younger than him, but he is far more a man than Vasily will ever be.

While fighting the snarl forming on his lips, he spits out, "Doing?"

The simplicity of his question shouldn't remind me that the tension bristling between us could be ten times more awkward if my newest recruit was to leave the storeroom before he finishes rearranging the stacks Nat toppled over yesterday, but it does.

I've only been "doing" one thing the past week.

It wasn't working.

When I silently plead for Nat to keep Yev occupied until I get Vasily out of the store, she folds her arms over her chest and shakes her head.

She's as anal as Yev about me being alone with Vasily.

She doesn't trust him as far as she can throw him.

After hitting Nat with a look that warns there will be a penalty for her denial, I shift my focus back to Vasily. "We had a large number of orders arrive at once. Inventory has been a nightmare."

I laugh when he asks, "Do you want me to help?"

"And get your hands dirty? We know that isn't how you operate."

He nips my attitude in the bud in an instant. "I guess that's true. I'm more an injury-by-paper-cut kind of guy." He wets his

lips before breaking them into an arrogant smirk. “Talking about paperwork, how’s yours going? Any news about your father?”

You’d swear he has access to my inbox from his haughty grin.

My father’s recent visa application was denied this morning.

It’s another reason today has been such a struggle.

Upon spotting my downcast face, Vasily tries to act like he could care about someone other than himself. He rubs my arm soothingly. “I tried, but you know what my father is like. He only helps the people he considers family.” He leans in so close his hot breaths batter my lips. “You’re not family... yet.” His almost black eyes bounce between mine as he says, “But you could be. You’ve just got to stop playing in the minors and step up to the big leagues, and then that branch will extend to everyone in your inner circle.” He already has me clutched by the throat, but he goes for the knockout. “Even your father.” I realize he knows far more than a standard internet search when he says, “I thought you wanted him to meet his little girl in person?”

“I do.”

“Then stop acting like a spoiled little brat and do what needs to be done.” He nudges his head to a black sedan parked outside. “If you come with me now, we could salvage this.”

“I can’t go with you.”

He’s pissed about the disgust on my face, but his tone hides that. “Why not?”

“Because I—”

“Became a whore who only cares about herself?”

My slap sounds like the crack of a whip, but it doesn't budge Vasily's fat head an inch.

He stares me down while cutting my ego to shreds. “Your father will be so disappointed of the woman you've become, especially when he finds out who kept this place open during the recession.” As he gleams about the wetness brimming in my eyes, he continues to punish me for my mistakes with snarled words. “Maybe it's best for him to stay where he is. I doubt he'd let you near your baby sister when he learns about the bad influences you class as friends. Drug runners, sex-trafficking pimps, and men stupid enough to participate in an illegal fight circuit even knowing their actions were being taped.” His laugh is mocking, and it rips through me. “Some were even dumb enough to fight twice. What did the district attorney call the charges he's considering having drawn up?” He taps his fat lips. “Aggravated assault on a vulnerable victim.” He peers at Nat, then back at me. “Supposedly IQ testing has more standing than university placements. It can verify if victims are of sound mind to make life-altering decisions for themselves.”

“You rigged that fight.” I breathe out slowly. “So if anyone should be prosecuted, it should be you.”

I could slap him again when he says, “Who said I rigged the fight? I wasn't even in attendance, and you won't find a second of footage that says otherwise, or a witness willing to come forward.” Aware he has me on a cliff's edge, he offers me a final lifeline. “But all this could go away in an instant. You just need to get in my car.”

“Polina...” Nat mutters when my silence somehow equals a yes in her crazy logic of answers. “Don't let him play these

games. We will get your dad back, but not like this.”

“It’s been months,” I mumble, my words barely audible. “I don’t know if I can wait any longer.”

Since Vasily is only standing inches in front of me, I can’t admit that I also don’t want to lose Yev for years again, either.

I finally felt like I was getting my family back. Now it’s close to imploding again.

“You won’t have to wait a month if you keep your side of our agreement. You might not even have to hold out for a week.”

“A week?” I ask in disbelief.

Vasily nods before propping out his elbow in offering.

Realizing there’s only one person capable of getting me to see sense through the madness, Nat sprints for the storeroom while screaming Yev’s name on repeat.

Vasily hammers the final nail in my coffin just as quickly.

YEV

*A*drenaline surges through my veins when I burst through the front door of Polina's boutique. It's a high I'd usually relish, but not like this. Not when it is delivered with a heap of panic. Polina's boutique is empty, and the black town car Nat mentioned during our sprint out of the storeroom is nowhere to be seen.

While scanning the street, seeking any sign of which direction Polina went, I yank my cell phone out of my pocket and dial Polina's number.

As the annoying shrill of a phone ringing sounds through my ear, a retro beat thumps from my left.

"Fuck," I cuss when I spot Polina's cell phone and purse in the gutter at the front of her store.

Mistaking my fear as anger, Nat says, "This isn't just about her dad anymore. He threatened to have charges drawn up against you for the fights Friday night."

"And she believed him?"

Okay, maybe some of the lines etched on my face are anger.

Polina and I had an agreement. She promised she wouldn't be alone with Vasily. That she wouldn't associate with him

unless I was with her.

If she goes, I go. That's our deal.

I guess if she doesn't need to keep her promises, neither do I.

Kliment answers my call half a second later. "Hey, news travels fast, even with it needing to trek across several continents." I'm even more lost when he asks, "What's your wager? Most are sitting on a ten-pounder. I think they're way off the mark. She'll be girlie and compact like her mother."

"What the fuck are you on about?" With my worry too high to discount, I demand, "Put me through to Alek."

The squeak of an office chair sounds down the line as Kliment asks, "Do you think that's wise?"

"Yes!"

Air whistles through his teeth as he succumbs to the demand of my short reply. "All right. It's your funeral."

After a brief stint of silence, Alek's rough tone breaks over the grunts of a woman in a heap of pain. "This better be fucking important."

"Having a late lunch?"

"I wish." He cups the phone's speaker, then mutters, "Breathe, precious. In through your nose, out through your mouth."

"I... am... fucking... breathing..." Ana bites back between groans.

When a tormented scream booms through my phone's speakers, and a male voice not belonging to Alek asks Ana if

she wants to reconsider her decision not to have an epidural, the obvious smacks into me.

Ana is in labor.

As memories of the last time she birthed their daughter flash through my head, I ask, “How long has she got left?”

“Doc said it could be anywhere from two hours to two days.” Alek’s voice drops to a whisper. “I really fucking hope it’s two hours.”

“So do I,” I murmur to myself before pushing my phone in close to my ear. “Keep me updated, and I’ll do the same.”

Alek doesn’t miss the meaning of my reply. We’ve hardly talked since I confessed that Annika’s baby is my brother’s, but this saying goes way back from that. It started with Ana, and now it is shifting to Polina. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I lie. “Just keep me updated, okay?”

“Yev—”

“Go hold her hand like you promised you would if you were ever given the opportunity to support her through this again.”

That gets his focus back on Ana. Not wholly, but mostly. “I’ll stay in touch.”

I issue my thanks with a head bob before promising to do the same.

“And Yev,” Alek mutters, forcing me to return my cell to my ear.

“Yeah?”

He waits a beat before muttering, “She could have done worse.”

His praise is unexpected and premature, but since I need his focus on Ana, I shake the shit out of his tree as I have for years. “Remind me of that when I force you to wear a monkey suit and walk her down the aisle.”

“It’s too fucking early to talk marriage.”

“Says you.”

I hang up before I spill that I’m not the person he should be worried about. Vasily isn’t helping Polina out of the kindness of his heart. He needs a wife, and around here, you can get married as quickly as a celebrant’s empty calendar date presents.

As I work my jaw side to side, I shift on my feet to face Nat. “Where does he live?”

“Nobody knows.” My growl barely reaches her ears when she spits out, “Nobody fucking knows. I’ve had my bodyguard searching for his home address for months. The closest he got was an event his father is hosting tonight down by the lake. His name isn’t on the deed, but Saka is reasonably sure Vasily and Leon will be there. I could probably get you a ticket.”

“No need,” I reply as the tension stops asphyxiating me. “I already have one.”

“If you want them to believe you’re a guest, you need to wear a bow tie.” Nat moves to the rack I’ve been avoiding as if it had the plague before she plucks a midnight-black bow tie from a stack of many. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you as a plus one? I doubt I could get through to

Polina as well as you can, but I've been known to occasionally steer her away from trouble."

"By standing by and watching her be schmoozed by a dick like Vasily Cabanow?" I'm deflecting my anger onto anyone but me, but cut me some slack. I'm pissed, hungry, and craving the hit of a drug more potent than any I've snorted. "I'm sorry. That was out of line."

Nat shrugs like she's not sure if she deserves an apology. "I could only guide her to water. I couldn't force her to drink it." When her reply crinkles my forehead with wrinkles, she mutters, "Oh... you still think that text was from Polina." She grimaces. "My bad."

"What?" The truth smacks into me before she speaks another word. "Polly didn't message me that night?"

Guilt only crosses her features for half a second before she shakes her head. "You must have broken every law to reach Novaya Avenue before us. I would have picked a different location if I'd known Vas was there." When I'm too stunned to speak, she continues talking. "I knew one look would have her remembering she didn't need a man to save her." My scoff fans her hair when she adds, "She just needed a kid."

"A kid with a size fifteen boot—"

"That I hope finds its way lodged up Vasily Cabanow's rear end at some stage this week," Nat interrupts, laughing. As quickly as her giggles arrive, they leave. "Should we be doing this?" I'm not sure why she's including herself in my plans. All she's done is help me pick a suit. "We're meant to trust her."

"We do trust her."

She threads the bow tie around my neck. “Then why are you charging in on a white horse? That doesn’t display trust to me.” Once she has the bow tie in place, she straightens it before locking her eyes with mine. “She will hate being treated like a damsel in distress.” She hits me where it hurts. “Especially by you. She fell for you so fast because you don’t look at her like everyone else does, like she’s some sort of broken toy to fix. You knew her secrets before you started chasing her, but you didn’t care. You liked her how she came.” An expected grin tugs at one side of my mouth when she says, “Icy and cold.”

“That isn’t who she is.”

Nat mimics my smile. “I know... because we’re one of the rare few she’s let in. I don’t want *anything* to lose us our spot.” She scans the barcode on the bow tie into the cash register while murmuring, “So that’s why I have to sit this one out.” Her eyes are remorseful. “Then she’ll have someone to run to if you stuff this up.” Her tone isn’t close to duplicating the sentiment in her eyes. “And who knows, maybe next time I’ll get her to drink the water as well.”

Before I can thank her for her support, she claps her hands together two times before doing a one-eighty on our conversation. “Will that be cash or credit?”

POLINA

“*M*r. Cabanow will meet you downstairs in five minutes.”

As I twist to face Yana, the stylist Vasily hired to work with me today, I wobble in my sky-high stilettos. My stumble could have been missed if my dress had a modest hemline. This one is so short I’ll be worried I’m flashing my panties any time I sit down.

Vasily isn’t about glamor. He wants to make everyone within five miles of him jealous.

A week ago, I would have happily dressed like a Barbie doll to help him achieve that.

Now I feel gross.

Part of the reason I responded so shockingly to Yev’s suggestion that I touch myself was because a memory I’d kept hidden for over two decades resurfaced faster than I could comprehend it.

Alek didn’t walk in on my father inappropriately touching me as I suspected the past twenty-three years.

He watched a video my father recorded of me touching myself.

From the scant bit of information Vasily told me during the ride from my boutique to his family estate, I was three when my father commenced coaching me on what to do in the numerous recordings. Six when Alek found out because one of his friends teased him about his sister, the whore.

My father didn't film me for personal use. He sold the footage to a known pedophile ring who uploaded it for the world to purchase before he offered a private peep show for the elite.

I think that's why a lack of eye contact is such a huge deal-breaker for me. Even with the only hands touching me being my own, I was violated over and over again by faceless men.

Only one has a name, and that's because he mentioned how hard he got watching the footage he threatened to share across the globe if I didn't leave with him to attend the party where he plans to propose.

It made me sick to my stomach that Vasily took pleasure from watching any child being exploited, much less me, but his threat to exploit my tainted past isn't the sole reason I left with him.

I'm here to protect Yev as much as myself.

"Do you need me for anything else, Mrs. Cabanow?" Yana asks, startling me from my thoughts.

Glossy blonde wisps fall to my shoulders when I shake my head. For the past four hours, I've been dolled up to the nines. My makeup is perfect, my dress is sexy, and almost every inch of my body is gleaming, but I feel wretched about the way I left Yev.

God, I hope none of the horrid thoughts Vasily drilled into my head the past several hours are true. I couldn't live with

myself if they switched from gossip to gospel. Yev is strong, but even immortals occasionally dabble with temptation.

When Yana arches a brow, wordlessly demanding a verbal answer, I say, “That will be all. Thank you.”

Yana is lovely, but she is far too loyal to discuss the reason I’m a quivering bag of nerves.

I also thought I’d have time to adjust to people referring to me as Vasily Cabanow’s soon-to-be wife.

I don’t even have an hour.

After breathing out some of the nerves fluttering in my stomach, I wipe the sweat on my hands onto my dress, then exit via the same door Yana used.

There’s no use delaying the inevitable. The script has been written, and it is time for me to play the role of devoted spouse well.

I’m halfway down the grand staircase of the Cabanow family estate when it dawns on me that my stupidity won’t be solely witnessed by strangers. Yev is here. He’s dressed similar to the guests mingling in the foyer and den, but an uneasy snarl hardens his features, and his hands are balled even with them being stuffed into the pockets of his suit.

As I silently plead for him to maintain his cool, I greet an elderly guest on the stoop of the stairs before subtly making my way across the room. Interacting with Yev won’t be the smartest decision I’ve made today, but I have to do something.

He could ruin everything before he realizes my ruse will benefit him as much as my father.

“Hello. Thank you for coming,” I say to another guest as my eyes float around the room.

I look as if I'm seeking the focus of any man but the one I can't take my eyes off. Yev's apprehension is obvious, but he's not jumping the gun as anticipated. He's on edge but mellow, which is mystifying.

Oh god. I hope he hasn't gone back to his original crutch.

As I stare at Yev, soundlessly seeking an answer to the many additional questions now swirling in my head, I say, "No, thank you," when Vasily's uncle offers to fetch me a drink. "Maybe later."

I've barely greeted a handful of the hundreds of people in attendance before my endeavor to calm Yev is squashed by Vasily. He possessively grabs me by the hip before he tugs me to his side. "Unless you want to send postcards abroad for the next hundred years, wave him a greeting like you have our other guests, then move on."

He dips his chin in greeting to the group he maneuvers us through to place distance between Yev and me before he snatches a champagne glass off the tray of a waiter and downs it in one hit.

He's about to grab another when the person he's waiting for arrives early. His father wasn't meant to be here until well after eight.

I cringe when Vasily mutters an earlier sentiment. "May as well get over the inevitable." With a replenished champagne glass in his hand, he taps on the flute with the end of a butter knife, drawing his guests' focus to him. "This was meant to signify the end of our festivities, but my nerves won't hold out for a second longer."

My eyes shoot to Yev when Vasily offloads his drink onto a waiter's tray before he bends to one knee in front of me.

There's no flurry of a pricy black suit as its owner sprints across the dance floor. No angry snarls or vicious mutterings. Nothing but prolonged eye contact I don't deserve while being proposed to by another man.

"Polina, there is no set time to find love. Some take years, others take months, ours took only days." The crowd coos in sync, wrongly believing Vasily's confession of love is genuine. "You challenge and complete me. Mock me and teach me. You're my better half, so will you do me the honor of becoming Mrs. Vasily Cabanow?"

A head bob shouldn't hurt, but this one does. It rockets pain through my heart before tethering itself to the guilt I haven't been able to budge for the past several days. It's been hanging heavily on my shoulders since Yev confessed he came back to Russia for me.

With the holler of a man far younger than his age, Vasily slips a diamond ring onto my finger, stands to his feet, then wraps me up in a bear hug. His excitement is understandable when you learn how much he has to gain from our nuptials. He will have more money than sense.

Once Vasily releases me from his clutch, over the next ten minutes, we accept the congratulations of our guests.

Even Yev gets in on the action.

"Congratulations," he mutters before thrusting his hand out in offering to Vasily.

Vas is skeptical about accepting his handshake. What man wouldn't when they still haven't regained the use of their hand?

"Thanks," Vasily eventually murmurs when he notices our exchange is being witnessed by more than the gossip mongers

of Kronstadt. His father is standing at Yev's left.

"It is about time the cat was freed from the bag," Leon voices loudly before swooping in for a peck kiss on my cheek. "I was beginning to think we'd have to draft another prenup with how long it was taking him to come to his senses." He whacks Vasily on the back before shifting on his feet to face Yev.

"Feo the Flatliner..." He announces Feo's fight name like a commentator at a big match. "I'm glad you made it. I wasn't sure you would. You didn't seem interested last week when I gifted you an invitation." Before Yev can come up with an excuse for his earlier rudeness, Leon adds, "Can't say I blame you. These events are nowhere near as interesting as the ones you usually attend." After congratulating Vasily with a second slap to his back, he curls his arm around Yev's shoulders and guides him toward the bar. "Talking about events, what are your plans..."

I miss the rest of what he says. It is gobbled up by the men and women who hover in close to Leon like he's a rock star at a concert, and the shock pulsating in my ears when Yev cranks his neck back to me and mouths, "*I trust you.*"

POLINA

“*I* don’t trust him.”

While sipping on champagne, I sling my eyes in the direction Vasily’s angry sneer is facing. Unlike the past several hours, he is no longer shooting daggers at Yev.

His stern gaze is rapt on his father.

“Did he say something?” I ask, curious to discover if our ruse has been unraveled before it has truly begun.

I need Leon on my side just as much as Vasily.

Dark locks fall in front of Vas’s glossed-over eyes when he shakes his head. “I just have a feeling.” After downing his umpteenth double shot of whiskey, he twists to face me. “Probably wouldn’t be so paranoid if he weren’t up in that kid’s business all the time.”

He doesn’t need to nudge his head to Yev for me to know who he’s referencing. He’s referred to him as “kid” multiple times tonight.

Yev is the youngest person here, but that isn’t the cause of Vasily’s nickname. He wants me to believe he’s too young and dumb for a woman of my supposed “class,” and that I’ll grow bored of him like his mother did the pool boy.

Some of his disdain for women made sense during his swipe of his mother's adulterous ways, but it doesn't excuse his rudeness when he dumps a handful of bills onto a female waiter's tray before asking her if she's ever had coke sniffed off her tits.

I excuse myself from the table before I'm mistakenly seen as one of the elite who treat even the middle class as if they're gum stuck under the bench.

"Fuck no. You need to stay." I realize Yev is watching Vasily as much as me when his jaw tics as I'm yanked back into my seat. The vibe of the party changed the instant dessert was served. The older, more sophisticated guests left, leaving the riffraff with too much money and no manners. "He'll be back. He can't help but snoop." He pulls a bag of white powder out of the breast pocket of his dress suit. "That's how he found out my last engagement was a sham. I wasn't fucking my fiancée on his desk. I was balls deep in his secretary, so if you want your father to attend our wedding, you need to keep me in line."

"You're disgusting." The words leave my mouth before I can stop them.

"And about to be stinking fucking rich." He scoops a generous serving of cocaine out of the baggie, cuts it up into a thick line, then snorts it without the need of a rolled-up bill. "Then this shit will be endless."

As he dabs up the leftover cocaine with his damp thumb from the table he ate a five-course meal at, his ex-frat buddy yells for him to share the goods.

"Don't act like you don't have your own stash, Mikey," Vasily shouts back, his voice far too loud for how close we're sitting. "You're never without snow." Confident I'll bark on

cue, he drops his eyes to mine, demands me to stay, then makes a beeline for Mikey and a handful of his old fraternity buddies. “It’s like the women in your life, *on constant rotation.*” His last three words are echoed by the men surrounding Mikey and his backpack full of narcotics.

In under a minute, the black-tie gala merges from quaint and respectful to being on the cusp of disastrous, and the waiters aren’t the only people Vasily tries to drag into the controversy.

Yev is there right along with them.

Vas offers him a line, which I’m proud to announce Yev turns down a second before he arrives at my table. His stance is more protective bodyguard than jealous boyfriend, but it leaves no doubt he is awarding me the trust he issued earlier, not just telling me any faceless promise to have me siding with him.

It makes me so glad I made the decision I did. It was reckless, but the benefits will be endless if the pendulum continues to swing in my favor.

“With festivities dying down, you should go.”

These are the first words Yev has spoken to me in hours, and although they’re brimming with unease, I can’t adhere to them. “I can’t. Vasily said his father will return at some stage tonight. I have to make sure he doesn’t screw this up for us.”

By us, I mean Yev and me, but Yev doesn’t know that.

His jaw spasms along with the vein in his neck.

Even more so when I say, “You can go. I can handle Vas
—”

He shakes his head before all my offer leaves my mouth. “You stay, I stay,” he murmurs before sliding in next to me. “That’s *our* promise.”

It should feel weird being bombarded with a mammoth amount of comfort from something as simple as Yev’s shoulder butting with mine, but it doesn’t. The trust he is awarding me is mammoth, and it has me falling for him even harder than I did seven months ago.

He could yell and cuss at me like Vasily did the majority of our drive to his family’s estate, but he isn’t. He’s supporting me and my right to make my own decisions.

And now I need to support him the same way.

“Are you sure you don’t want some?” Mikey asks, waving an untouched brick of cocaine under Yev’s nose like the scent alone will lure him in. “You won’t find purer shit than this.”

“I’m...” Yev’s reply skips a beat when I pull across his hand hidden by the tablecloth and place it between my legs. My panties are still damp from when I drank him in wearing a suit for the first time, and they didn’t have time to recover before his aftershave put my senses in havoc. “Good... real fucking good.”

Mikey arches a brow. “You are?”

As Yev’s thumb slides across the opening of my pussy, arousing both my clit and my libido, he jerks up his chin. “I’ve got something far better to sample.”

Mikey is as docile as he looks. “What you got, man? Are you gonna share?” He doesn’t give him a chance to answer. As he bites his fist and prances on the spot like a pimp, he says, “That’s where I’ve seen you before.” Yev stiffens but not enough for him to stop stroking my clit through my scant

panties. “You did house calls back in the day. That shit you delivered was fucking toxic. I was on my ass for days.” He dumps the brick of coke on the table before ruffling Yev’s slicked-back hair as well as Yev is rustling up my horniness. “Almost didn’t recognize you in a suit with your fancy-schmancy hair.” Once he has Yev’s smooth, sleek look replicating Feo’s style of haircut, he inches back. “I’m tempted, man... real fucking tempted.” He flicks his head to Vasily, who is snorting another line of cocaine. “But I promised I’d keep an eye on him this time. I can’t get *that* fucked up again.” He holds out his hand in offering to Yev. “Will you keep me in mind for next time?”

Since Yev would have to remove his hand from between my legs to fist bump him, he answers him with a head bob. “For sure.”

“Thanks, man.” Mikey gleams before he bounces back to the hub of the party minus the brick of cocaine he arrived with.

Yev stares at it for several long seconds, his focus only shifting when I squeeze my thighs around his chunky wrist. He watches me with the same heated stare he gave me in my apartment weeks ago as he pulls my panties to the side and slowly inserts a finger inside me.

The tablecloth is long, so no one can see what we’re doing, but the risk of being caught adds to the boldness of our exchange. This edgy recklessness was our undoing the first time around. We were out in the open, in broad daylight for the world to see, fucking against the wall of my boutique like we didn’t have a worry in the world.

It was so perfect, and Yev had no clue I was a virgin. The rain washed away the evidence I was once ashamed of before a long soak in the tub took care of the pain.

Yev's thumb brushes over my clit as he pumps his finger in and out of me. His movements are subtle but mind-hazing—gentle enough not to fluff up a feather but enticing enough for a moan to garble in my throat before silently demanding to be released.

My legs tremble when he adds another finger to the one making me a hot and sticky mess. They stretch me wide before they have me battling to keep my expression neutral.

It is the hardest fight I've ever endured.

Yev's fingers are magical. They have me on the brink of release with only a few pumps, and my teeth gnawing into my lip with the hope a bite of pain will stop me from moaning out loud.

I'm not the only one struggling. I can see the bulge in Yev's pants and imagine his cock's pain as it digs into his zipper, but his eyes remain front and center and his expression schooled as he drives me to the brink of hysteria.

When the rough skin covering Yev's thumb swipes over my clit, I almost vault out of my seat. I'm so sensitive and wound up, not even Leon's return to the party will stop a freight train from steamrolling through me.

Leon moseys between the guests, his eyes blind to the narcotics spread across a table large enough to seat fifty as Yev finger fucks me without an ounce of hesitation.

Then suddenly, Leon's eyes are on me.

His peculiar stare instantly quelches my wish to come, but Yev will never allow that to occur. He asks why I didn't add any condiments to my meal as he continues squashing his fat fingers in and out of my drenched pussy while his thumb toys with my clit.

His face is still neutral, devoid of a single sign of lust, and the continuous flicks of his wrist are barely notable. I'd be clueless about the naughty event he's undertaking if my eyes didn't stray to the condiments dish he mentioned only seconds ago.

The lusty gleam of the man beaming back at me in the reflective surface is my undoing.

I come with nothing but a breathless tremor erupting from my mouth and umpteen clenches of my pussy around Yev's now stationary fingers.

As he stares at me through a mirror bouncing his reflection onto the condiments dish, he guides me down from the hysteria my body would give anything to announce with gentle sweeps of his thumb over my clit before his heated breaths eventually hit my cheek. "You're so fucking beautiful when you come," he mutters out with a long, hot breath. "More tempting than any drug."

There's more than lust in his eyes when he finally locks them directly with mine.

Something just as sweltering but almost forbidden.

I'm cruelly snapped back to reality when a deep voice interrupts Yev's slow, lazy smile. "Better hide that before the old man sees it."

When Mikey hoists up the tablecloth to stuff his brick of cocaine onto the seat next to me, the elastic waistband of my panties only just snaps back into place as Yev's hand lands on his thigh with a thud.

YEV

*A*s a keyboard being hammered sounds out of my earpiece, I watch Polina schmooze a handful of her guests like her panties aren't clinging to her pussy. Natalya's comment about us trusting Polina must have sunk a little deeper than I realized at the boutique. Up until Polina floated down the stairs, I was set to carry her kicking and screaming out of the party over my shoulder.

My plans changed the instant our eyes locked. Hers were plagued with unease, but her worry did little to dampen the shrewdness everyone overlooks when they take in her beauty.

They don't believe you can be both smart and beautiful, so they underrate Polina's abilities before she even speaks.

I refuse to treat her like everyone else does. How could I when Nat admitted she fell for me because I did the opposite?

Polina Kotova in love. *Fuck*. What are the odds she'd fall in love at all, let alone with a man as underserving as me?

I don't know what I did to deserve her, but I'll do everything in my power to keep her. I'll even let her smile sweetly at her fiancé. It isn't a hard feat when the quickest scrub of my jaw reprimed my veins with the endorphins that surged through them when she slipped my hand between her legs while her fiancé was only steps away from us.

I'd never been so hard when one swipe of my thumb over the crest of her pussy had her panties dampening from my meekest touch. My boxers were drenched with pre-cum when I slipped my finger inside her, and I'm hard again now, recalling how quickly I made her unravel.

My focus shifts back to the voice that hasn't stopped jabbering in my ear the past four hours when he shouts, "I'm in, and fuck me, the crap on here is extensive."

"Anything useful?" The curiosity in my tone can't be missed.

Kliment clicks his tongue against his teeth. "I won't know for a couple of hours, but you've got a prime spot in his search history."

During a quick bathroom break before joining the festivities in the main hall, I plugged the device Kliment mentioned earlier this week into a computer in Leon's office. Since Kliment's service is shitty, it would take hours to download all the files, so he suggested I join the party before returning later to remove the device.

Now is later.

I nudge my head to Micah, my plus one, silently commanding that he watch Polina until I get back. When he gives me the all clear to leave, I head for the bathroom located across from Leon's office while querying Kliment's comment. "Me or Feo?"

Lord Duckface hasn't worked out that I'm not my brother yet, so you can picture my surprise when Kliment replies, "You." My brisk pace slows a smidge when he mutters, "I didn't know you were Mexican."

“I’m not. My father is.” After nodding a greeting to a man standing guard at the end of the hallway, I pretend to enter the bathroom before spinning back around and bolting for the partially cracked-open door. I make it inside with barely a second to spare. He doesn’t spin back around until the waft of my race hits his fat neck. “He fled back to Mexico when he discovered he had knocked up my mother. That’s the last time anyone saw him.”

“Ah...” Kliment mutters, his tone groggy. “That’s not what I’m seeing.”

When I reach the computer on a big, bulky desk, Kliment brings up a birth certificate. It matches the date and time I was born, but the country is muddled up. It states that I was born in Mexico.

“It wasn’t your father who fled, Yev. It was your mother.” I couldn’t deny his accusation even if I wanted to. The video footage he slots in front of the birth certificate in my name leaves no doubts to his claim. My mother barely aged between the day she smuggled me over a Russian border and the day she dumped me at a boys’ home.

“You were a cute kid,” Kliment mutters when he zooms in on me tucked under my mother’s winter jacket. I’d be only a couple weeks old, if that. “What happened?”

Although confused as fuck, I have far more pressing matters to deal with than my mother’s constant lies. “Have you found anything on Polina’s dad?”

“Still a fucking mystery,” Kliment answers as the files on the screen disappear for a government agency login box.

I’m impressed with how fast he hacks into their server, but that’s as far as my awe goes when not a single search locates a

Brecken Fleming.

“What about the dates Polina forwarded you earlier this week? Could you scan the footage and compare faces with the photograph she gave you?”

“The photo is dated, but it could work.” He punches his keyboard for a couple of minutes before bringing up the first lot of footage. It shows Polina, Hannah, and her newborn daughter in the visitors’ area of the local airport, waiting for Brecken.

“Hold up, go back,” I request when the footage glitches for a second. “Do you see that?”

“I thought it was my dish searching for a new satellite.” Kliment plays the reel over and over again until there’s no doubt in either of our minds that the glitch occurs at the same section of footage each time. “The timeline is different.”

A cuss word spills from my lips when he jumps between screens. Only a couple of seconds are missing, but it could be imperative to our case. “Can you get that footage back?”

“Do I like having my dick sucked like a lollipop?”

Kliment laughs when I reply with a gag, “Fucked if I know.”

After settling his laughter, he discloses, “I can get anything back, but it takes time. I’ll need a couple of hours at least.”

I’m disappointed but understanding at the same time. “Does the driver need to stay in?”

He waits a beat before replying, “Nah.”

“I need better than a nah, Klim.”

“And I need these fuckers to stop throwing up firewalls. Anyone would swear they know I’m in.”

I know they are when the creak of an ancient floorboard screeches into my ear.

“I know what I said, Max, but this deal is too good to give up.” While spinning around to face the man creeping up on me, I point to my earpiece, hopeful he’ll believe it is part of a wireless handset for my cell while also distracting him from my hand snatching Kliment’s driver out of the monitor’s USB hub.

When I spot Leon and a goon with biceps as big as my head, I say, “He’s here if you want to speak to him. But he’ll tell you the same thing I’ve been saying the past ten minutes. Your cut of the proceeds won’t be reduced if I fight under him.”

Leon didn’t invite me to his pompous event because he likes making street kids uncomfortable in penguin suits. He heard I was searching for a new owner and wanted to show he could take me to the big leagues with his showy mansion and numerous butlers.

“Keep stalling them,” Kliment begs in my ear. “I need to remove my footprints.”

After wetting my suddenly dry lips, I lock eyes with Mr. Cabanow. “Do you want to talk to him? He’s a little offput by your proposal.”

He waves off my offer with a shooing hand movement. “Paperwork will be forwarded to him in due course. Until then, how about we keep our discussions between the stayers of your career?”

The distrust in his voice puts me on edge, but I pretend my shocked response is from an imaginary Max screaming a tirade of abuse in my ear. “Whatever, Max. You’re not the one bruising his spleen every week for a measly couple of hundred. I need more, and I’m starting to think you’re not the fucker who can give it to me.” I tap on my ear like the soft cocks in Sicily before blowing out a hot breath. “I hope you don’t mind me taking my call somewhere private. Max can make me a bit of a hot head, and I didn’t want to scare your guests.”

“I need two more minutes,” Kliment requests at the same time Leon mutters, “Not at all. Although I’m not sure why you needed to use my office. A dozen rooms veer off this hallway alone.”

I smirk before stroking his ego. It brings all the old straight guys to my side of the fence. “I wanted to see what it was like to be in the one percent.” I gesture my hand around his office. “I could only dream of having an office like this. Earning money with my fists is fun, but eventually I’m going to have to find another way to keep a roof over my head.”

“One minute,” Kliment pushes out.

As Leon gestures for his goon to stand down, he makes his way to his desk. “You’re interested in business?”

I do everything I can to keep his eyes off his monitor still churning through hundreds of files. “If it gets me an office like this, fuck yes.” Once again, I wave my hand around his pompous space. “Do you have any openings?”

He laughs, but that’s the extent of his verbal reply. His focus is on the mouse I left awry. It was sitting straight and anal when I arrived at his office. Now it’s bumped to the right of his keyboard.

With his eyes locked on the now blank screen of his monitor, Leon swivels his mouse.

I suck in a big breath when his computer wakes on the login screen.

Kliment is out.

“That was fucking close,” Kliment murmurs, matching my sentiments to a T. “We... got... t...”

I can't exactly ask him to speak up, so while pretending the static in my ear is natural, I take a seat across from Leon when he nudges his head to the bulky chair.

“With the right investments and even better contacts, a couple wins could put you on track for this.” I wait, aware there is more. “But”—see—“you'll never achieve that with representation from Maxwell Sklakovia. You need the best.”

When he leans forward to balance his elbows on his desk, I call myself a moron. I pulled out the wrong driver. Kliment's logo is on the one still hanging out of Leon's computer.

Fuck it.

“Are you the best, Mr. Cabanow?”

Leon smirks before slouching back in his chair. “Of course. How do you think I got this?”

My naturally engrained dislike for rich schmucks Feo forever warned would get me in trouble pops in for a visit before I can stop it. “I thought it was family money.”

Leon laughs. It is as fake as my interest in fighting for him. “Family is not everything, Feo.” He spits out my brother's name like he no longer believes I'm him. “It's the ties that bind us.”

I'm not a biblical man so his saying is lost on me, but I play it cool. "And money. Everything comes down to money."

"True." He pulls out a sheet of paper from his drawer before pushing it to my side of his desk. "And I think this figure is very fair."

Assuming I'll be bowled over by the six-figure amount cited on the contract in front of me, he moves to a bar on his left and pours himself a generous serving of whiskey. I shake my head when he dips the decanter my way, offering me a drink.

He downs half his serving before he places the partially empty glass onto a coaster on his desk. It is right next to his pen holder and just to the side of the USB I'm desperate to reach.

"What do I need to do to accept this?" A whistle shrieks between my teeth as I drag my hand over my scalp. "I've never seen so many digits strung together."

I'm a fucking liar. Maksim offered me six figures a run only three days ago. I could have seven figures in my bank account by the end of the month if money is all I want out of life.

It isn't. I want to live the life Feo no longer can and teach his son that not all parents are pieces of shit. And I want to do that with Polina at my side, guiding me with one lazy smile at a time.

Leon is clueless to this, though. "All you need to do is sign the contract, and we will have the funds transferred immediately."

"Now?" When he nods, I act like a street kid who's never had two dimes to rub together. "Then sign me up, Scotty." I

dive for a pen, “accidentally” knocking over his drink in the process. “Oh, shit, man, I’m sorry. I messed up your desk.” When Leon snags a tissue box from behind him, I snatch Kliment’s driver out of the port, then dump Leon’s onto the desk.

I don’t have time to place it back where it belongs. It is careless, but I’ve taken men down bigger than Leon’s goon, so I barely panic.

“I’d offer to replace your desk, but I’m not even sure this will cover it.” I wiggle the un-drenched paper in the air to distract Leon’s focus from the driver before assisting him in cleaning up the mess.

Once we have the brown liquid mopped up, Leon says, “It’s fine. Nothing a little scribble across a piece of paper won’t fix.”

He makes it sound so easy, like Polina hasn’t been struggling for months to achieve the exact same thing, and the reminder has me switching things up. “Then you won’t have any objections lending me one of yours.”

His mask only drops for a second, but I see it—that quickest flare of panic.

“Brecken—”

The floorboards back me up for the second time tonight, but they also leave me defenseless. I’ve only just bent back the hand of the goon preparing to pluck me from my seat when Leon jabs something into my neck.

Then, not even a second later, I’m out cold.

POLINA

“*W*ho the fuck are you waiting for, Polina?” Vasily asks, his voice groggy and incapable of hiding his inebriated state. “Almost all the guests have left.”

“*Almost* all of them. Not *all* of them.”

I haven’t seen Yev since Vasily’s father commanded me to his side to introduce me to some constituents from his office. His demeanor was a little icy, but he wouldn’t have introduced me to important members of his inner circle if he had known what Yev and I were doing.

Not even Vasily is that unhinged.

“Come on, Polly. For fuck’s sake. I’m bored.”

When Vasily grabs the top of my arm and yanks me toward his ride, I freeze for a second before all hell breaks loose. I kick and scream like I did at the officer who pulled me from my hidey-hole over two decades ago, my fight so vicious I lose several nails.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Vasily drops his hands from my arms, instantly ending my fight, before he slings his eyes to Mikey. “Thought you said she didn’t touch any of it.”

“She didn’t,” Mikey replies. “But I told you that shit he sells is potent. I was spaced out for days.”

“Did you take something?” Vasily asks, his focus back on me.

His eyes are as glassy as mine, but his glassy appearance is from narcotics.

Mine is from fear.

Too scared to speak, I remain quiet.

It pisses Vasily off.

He’s a mean drunk.

“Fine. Stay here. See if I give a shit.”

He pushes me back as if I mean nothing to him before he slides into the back of the SUV overstuffed with his fraternity brothers. When they leave nothing but a cloud of dust in their wake, anyone would swear Vasily was behind the wheel. He probably instructed his father’s driver to floor the gas so my lungs would be clogged with as much dirt as his hands.

I’ve barely contemplated calling a taxi when a voice at the side says, “Do you need a ride?”

I’ve seen him somewhere, but I can’t quite pinpoint where until he unshadows his face. He’s the man who defended me at Yev’s apartment weeks ago. He pushed off the guy asking if I wanted to take a ride on his face before making sure I made it back to the elevator untouched. “Have you seen Yev?”

Dark locks fall into his eyes when he shakes his head. “Not since he asked me to keep an eye on you.”

“Do you have a cell?” I left mine in the room I was glammed up in hours ago.

The stranger nods before stepping closer. He’s dressed in a suit similar to Yev’s, but its fit exposes it wasn’t tailored by a

professional. It hangs too loosely around his waist and biceps.

“If you’re calling Yev, his cell has been ringing out for the past two hours.” I don’t accept the phone he’s handing out since the only person I was planning to call is Yev. “Maybe he’s taking a breather,” he suggests, his tone unsure. “That was even a bit much for me.”

I smile even with my insides twisted up in knots. “Maybe.”

After a beat, I remove his cell phone before searching for a local taxi service. As much as I’m not getting any bad vibes from the man standing across from me, I’m still a little too rattled to accept a ride from a stranger.

As I squash his phone to my ear, the man says, “Just so you don’t think I’m a weirdo stalker, I should probably let you know that I’m going to follow your taxi home.” He points to a car at the side of the dusty lot. “That’s me. The paintwork will alter depending on the angle. It’s one of those peacock peels. You can take down the license plate number now if you want. Save you the eyestrain later.”

He must hear my confusion when I ask, “Why are you telling me this?”

He scrubs at the prickles on his jaw, then smiles. “Because I’d rather you know it is me than come at my baby with a tire wrench on the freeway. Custom headlights aren’t cheap.”

It is the wrong time to smile, but I can’t help it.

“Ah, there’s the side Yev fell for.” He bobs down low so we meet eye to eye before saying, “You’re not so icy when you smile.”

I’d usually bite back with a scolding comment, but once again, my nerves have me off my game. Mostly. “And you’re

not so smart if you think I'll come at you with only a tire wrench."

He chuckles while following me to his ride, its vibrations only lost when I slip in the passenger seat and slam the door shut.

We don't talk while he takes me the most direct route to my boutique without asking for directions, but he tries Yev's cell phone a handful of times during the twenty-minute drive.

"Do you want me to stay?"

"With me?" I ask the man whose name is still evading me.

The streetlights bounce off his teeth when he throws back his head and laughs. "I don't want to die. Yev has a mean right hook and Alek talks more with his guns than his fists."

So that's how he knew where to drop me off. My boutique was a part of Alek's no-touch order. The Bobrov crew was only allowed to shop online. Yev only veered past protocol because Alek brought him here first.

"How come you're not in the US with the rest of the Bobrovs?"

His brows furrow for the quickest second before he explains. "I'm not with the Bobrovs." He adjusts himself, sitting a little straighter. "I've known Yev since he was a kid. We kinda grew up together."

That's a proud man's way of saying he grew up in a boys' home.

He breathes out a hot breath before admitting, "I was also the one who suggested Feo gel back his hair before trying to sneak into the Bobrov compound."

Oh god. I wouldn't suggest he tell Yev that.

With silence comes more confessions. “He was going in no matter what, so I thought it would help him.” His knuckles go red when he scrubs them. “I still don’t know if I played a part in his downfall.”

“What happened to Feo was no one’s fault but Kirill’s.” I’ve spoken these words a hundred times the past six months, but this stranger seems to be the only one who accepts them.

“He will get what’s coming to him.”

“He will,” I agree before offering him a rare smile. “Thank you for the ride.” I remove my belt before twisting my torso to face him. “If you hear from Yev, can you ask him to call me?” I haven’t had the chance to tell Yev tonight is only phase one of Vasily’s ruse. Our engagement only removes my father’s head from the visa facility’s chopping block. Yev’s name won’t be removed from the deportation register until after the wedding, which the papers will announce is only a week away tomorrow morning.

The stranger jerks up his chin. “Will you do the same?”

When I nod in agreement, he scribbles down his name and number onto a scrap of paper and hands it to me.

“Thank you, Micah,” I praise after taking in his name written in neat cursive handwriting.

He waits for me to enter my apartment and switch on every light before his custom ride cruises down the almost isolated street. Most of the apartments above the stores are occupied by the owners, so I recognize almost every car. Only one stands out. It was parked across from my boutique when I returned home after Vasily’s birthday dinner two weeks ago. It left before Vasily’s heated exchange with Yev and returned shortly after it.

My throat works through a hard swallow when the headlights on the sedan I'm peering at switch on, along with the ignition. It careens down the street at a crazy speed, narrowly missing a drunken man crossing at the designated spot.

As he mumbles incoherently under his breath, I close the drapes before heading to the drawer in my entryway table to hunt for the cell phone Alek gifted me months ago. It won't have an ounce of charge, but it will keep me connected to everyone of importance. There are only three numbers stored on the throwaway cell—Alek's, Yev's, and my father's.

Regretfully, every one of my calls rings out.

POLINA

I'm startled awake by a brutal bang on my apartment door. I don't know what time I fell asleep on the chair next to my entryway table, but it was long enough for my mouth to dry but not long enough to combat the headache I haven't been able to shake since last night.

I showered with the hope it would wash away some of the ick covering me, but it made it worse. It took away Yev's touch, and for some stupid reason, its removal has me panicked it will never be replaced.

"I'm coming," I shout when a second bang hits my door.

For the petite size of the woman behind the door, she shouldn't have so much power behind her bangs. Annika's pupils are massive, swamping the corneas as they frantically scan every inch of my home.

"Annika, are you okay?" I ask, panicked.

She is due in a couple of weeks, so she shouldn't be this stressed.

After guiding her into my apartment, I assist her onto the chair I slept on for an hour or two at most before gathering her a glass of water.

She's so puffed, anyone would swear she ran here from Yev's apartment.

The way she gulps down the glass has me convinced.

"Is it Yev?" I ask while mentally kicking myself that I didn't think to check on him at his apartment. That is his place of solace, so of course he'd run there if things became too much.

My heart constricts when sprigs of Annika's crazy curls bounce along with her headshake. "There... was... a man..." I encourage her to drink some more water and settle her breathing before starting again. "He broke into Yev's apartment."

My eyes widen. "Did he hurt you?"

Relief engulfs me when she shakes her head. "I hid." Her exhale rustles my hair. "I don't think he knew I was there." I don't need to ask her to explain further. She gets straight to the point. "He wasn't looking for me. His search was focused on electronic devices. He took Yev's laptop and his gun."

"Yev has a gun?" I didn't mean to vocalize that out loud, but my shock was too great for me to ignore.

Again, Annika nods. "I don't know if he found what he was after, but he left after making a call." She rummages through her purse she packed in a hurry. "I got the last five digits of the number. I couldn't see the rest."

When she hands me the paper she wrote the number on, my heart flips. The past twenty-four hours have been one revelation after another.

"I'll be right back," I announce to Annika before galloping down the stairs siding my boutique, then charging inside like we're having a ninety-percent-off sale.

Natalya's eyes pop when she spots me. She looks relieved before it is quickly replaced with panic. "I swear to the big guy that I did everything in my power to change his mind." She waves her hand at the cash register I'm marching toward. "And I charged him full price for the bow tie even with it being on special." As she catches her breath from the swiftness of her words, I yank open the drawer under the cash register and search through a bundle of business cards. "If you're looking for the local employment agency, don't bother. I visited them on my way to work this morning."

Stunned, I peer up at her. "You're leaving?"

My shock leaps onto her face. "No. Not unless you're firing me."

"Why would I fire you?"

"Because I..." Her words trail off as her nose screws up. "Did you see Yev last night?" When I nod, she murmurs, "And..." Her eyes pop again. "*Ohhh...* my bad. I thought this was your cranky face." With a hip swing, she slams the drawer shut, then points to the break room. "There are condoms in the back... third shelf on the right."

"I'm not after condoms."

When I yank the drawer back open, good luck rains down on me. The business card I'm searching for is at the top of the sloped stack.

I'm partway to the door when Nat's assumption smacks back into me. "Why would we need condoms at work?" Before she can answer me, a reflection in the side mirror of a dark sedan captures my attention. He has eyes I'd never forget, but instead of welcoming me with outstretched arms, he

cranks the ignition and whizzes down the street for the second time in under twelve hours.

What the?

“Who was that?” Natalya asks, scaring me half to death.

“I don’t know.” I’m not lying. Those eyes couldn’t have belonged to my father. There’s no way he would be only feet away from me and take off like a crazy man. He’d never hurt me like that.

Needing to finish one puzzle before cracking open another, I spin to face Natalya. “Why don’t you close up and head home? Trade is slow, and we’ll make enough online orders to keep the doors open next week.”

“It’s Saturday. We never close on a Saturday.”

“We do now.”

After squeezing her hand in silent pleading for her not to fight me on this, I tell her I’ll be in touch before returning to my apartment.

Annika is no longer seated by the door. She’s standing by the window, peering down at the street.

I have trouble deciphering which way is up when she whispers, “That was him. The man in Yev’s apartment was the same man in the sedan.” She spins to face me, her eyes full of silent apologies. “I swear to God, I made sure no one was following me. I took several different routes and changed my coat on the subway.”

“This isn’t about you,” I mutter, easing her turmoil. “It is about me.”

She joins me in the living room, her extended stomach swaying along with her gentle steps. “How can you be so

sure?”

I hand her the business card, stunning her into silence. The last five digits of the local number are identical to the ones she jotted down.

It is the direct line to Leon Cabanow’s office.

POLINA

“*I*f he’s hurt Yev, I’ll—”

“Brutality might be how things work in your family.” Vasily glares at me to make sure I can’t miss the disdain in his voice when referencing my family. “But my father isn’t like that. He’s respectful, kind—”

“And the last person to see Yev alive.”

He brushes off the accusation in my tone with a *pfft* before straying his eyes to the scenery whizzing by his window. I contacted Vasily the instant I linked a connection to Yev’s disappearance with his father. He told me I was being ridiculous until he spotted the numerous requests from his father for them to meet today.

The messages were marked urgent.

That’s why we’re sitting in a black car, driving to an unknown location.

Supposedly, Leon’s stipulations included me.

I almost told him to shove his demands. The only reason I didn’t is because not even the street kids Micah and Feo regularly took under their wing when Yev was abroad knew of Yev’s whereabouts.

It is as if he up and vanished.

“What were they discussing, anyway? If your father is such an upstanding member of society, why does he hang off Yev like he wants a replacement son?”

It dawns on me that things are harder on Vasily than I realized when he mutters under his breath, “He probably does.” He scratches the stubble he didn’t have time to shave since he spent most of his day hungover and sick. “The address on the GPS is for a fight circuit my father is trying to get off the ground.”

“So he’s taking us there because...?”

I leave my question open, hopeful Vasily can answer it better than I can.

I’m disappointed when all I get is a shrug.

Upon hearing my sigh, he shouts, “I told you, Polly, I don’t know what the fuck he’s up to.” He snaps his narrowed eyes to me before attempting to pile his angst onto my shoulders. “Are you sure that kid didn’t rat us out? He was pretty fucking pissed when I got down on one knee.”

“Yev isn’t a snitch.” *He isn’t a kid, either.* “And quit calling me Polly. You need to earn the right to give me a nickname.”

Vasily scoffs. “I’m your fucking fiancé.” He grabs my arm hard enough to leave a mark. “And you want to sure as fuck remember that when we go in there.” He nudges his head to a warehouse coming up. Mercifully, despite the late hour, it is lit up. “Or you won’t be just worrying about a missing kid. Your entire fucking existence will be on the chopping block.”

It already is, my head murmurs to myself when the car stops at the side of the warehouse.

The noise that pummels into me when I exit the cab of the sedan on the same side of Vasily is shocking but relieving. This can't be a hostage situation. Not even a man with half a brain would be stupid enough to conduct negotiations in a warehouse packed with people.

I school my features when Vasily pulls me into his side like he does anytime we're in public. The scene we walk in on is similar to the one a week ago. The who's who of Russia are mingling with scantily clad women and affiliates of several crime syndicates. The air is littered with cigar smoke and stale whiskey, but the atmosphere is electric.

As Vasily guides us toward his father seated two rows back from the action, I stray my eyes to the ring. The fighter Yev took down in the first round last week is once again fighting a man half his size. He is winning this time.

"Mr. Cabanow. Good evening." I lean in to press a kiss to his cheek, noticing how cold it is even with him wearing a winter coat. "Is there a reason you asked us out tonight? I'm still zonked from last night." I flatten my hand on Vasily's chest. "*We* are still zonked."

He doesn't smirk at my dainty laugh. He doesn't even grimace. He keeps his eyes front and center before signaling for his driver to throw in the towel for the current match.

The crowd is not impressed. They boo and hiss, certain they're not getting their money's worth. Their logic only changes when the next fighter is announced.

Feo the Flatliner.

My stomach is already in my throat, but it only becomes a choking hazard when I realize how fumbling Yev's steps are.

He can barely stand, and his eyes are glazed over and fully dilated.

“I guess you’re not the only one who went a little too hard on the drugs last night,” Leon mutters to his son, his tone scornful.

“He doesn’t use.” *Anymore.*

A week is barely a dent into the years he plans to mark his sobriety on, but I don’t for a minute believe Yev’s uneven footing and clueless nature is because of drugs. If the urge became too much, he would have come to me like he did last night. He would have sought solace with me.

My eyes snap from the ring Yev’s opponent is entering to Leon when he snatches up my wrist. He knew I was going to run before his son, except he doesn’t solely use threats to pull me into line. He jabs the muzzle of a gun under my ribcage, confident it will keep me at his heel better than a snarled warning that he’ll rip up my father’s visa application before the end of the day.

“Let’s see how this plays out first.” His words are only loud enough for me to hear. “There’s no better way to test loyalty than putting two snakes in a box and seeing which one bites first.”

He only drinks in a smidge of my anger before the hissing shock of the crowd draws his focus back to the ring. Yev is slow on his feet, which leaves him at a disadvantage to a man not drugged out of his mind. He remains standing for his opponent’s first three hits and gets in two of his own, but he’s on his back after a fourth whack to the head, and then his opponent contorts his arm back in a painful hold.

As Vasily mutters something under his breath about Yev getting a taste of his own medicine, I beg his father to have some compassion. “Stop this, please. He’s been nothing but respectful in your presence.”

With his eyes on Yev’s furious battle to escape from beneath the man battering his ribs with thundering punches, Leon mutters, “Respectful? *Ha!*” After watching pain stretch from one side of Yev’s face to the next, he angles his head to me. “If you want this to end, tell the truth.”

“The truth? What truth?” As the words leave my mouth, I seek Vasily’s assistance. If this is about our ruse, he should be a part of his father’s interrogation. He’s the one endeavoring to fleece him of millions of dollars. All I want is a measly signature. It won’t cost him a damn thing.

My eyes are forced back to the ring so fast, my muscles scream as loudly as the women in the front row when Yev breaks out of his opponent’s hold before he punishes his aggressor with a roundhouse kick to the head. It sends blood spraying out of his competitor’s mouth and over the woman who paid for a front-row seat.

I almost throw a fist in the air when Yev comes out swinging from the corner the referee forced him to so he could check if his competitor was still good to fight. He’s barely coherent, and blood is pouring out of his nose, but his anger is at a pinnacle, and he is refusing to go down without a fight.

Regretfully, Leon doesn’t let that be an option for long.

After reminding me that it is more than Yev’s life on the line by digging his gun in further, he jerks his chin up to his driver. One flick of the driver’s hand sees another two men enter the ring. They’re both double the size of Yev and a head taller than his original opponent.

Tears burn my eyes when Yev holds them back for several painstakingly long minutes. He's only overwhelmed when a man with a snake tattoo skating up his forearm jabs something in his neck. It pulls Yev's legs out from underneath him and has his eyes shooting around the ring like he can't see a foot in front of himself.

"Stop the fight!" I scream, my voice begging. "They injected something into his neck. This isn't legal. It's against the rules. He can't fight like this."

The crowd laughs at me before someone in the front row yells, "If you want legal, you've come to the wrong arena, girlie."

Realizing there's only one man who can save Yev, I lock my eyes with Leon and ask, "What do you want?"

With his face void of a single wrinkle and his lips quirked about his son's disinterest in our conversation, he murmurs, "The truth. I want the truth."

As confusion bewilders me, a sickening crunch silences the crowd. It can't be misconstrued as anything but a bone being snapped in half, and it has my lips moving before my brain can decipher what I'm trying to say. "He hasn't always been respectful, but that is more my fault than his. He would have never stepped over the boundaries if it weren't for me. He's always seen me as more than a friend. Once again, that isn't solely his fault. We've always had a spark. A connection. I've wanted him as long as he's wanted me. I just couldn't tell him that until now... until I'm terrified of losing him." My last sentence was meant to stay in my head, but when I am upset, I blabber.

After dragging my hand under my nose, clearing away the contents spilling there, and uncaring that his gun's muzzle is

bruising my rib, I ask, “Is that enough truth for you? Does that answer your questions?” I thrust my hand at the fight keeping the crowd enthralled. “I love him, okay? I’ve loved him for years.”

“More than my son?” Leon questions with a vicious sneer as the horrifying noise of a man being beaten to death fills my ears.

“Yes!” I blurt out before I can realize I could be making matters worse for Yev.

Shockingly, I don’t.

With his free hand in the air, stopping the fight, Leon asks more calmly, “So you’re using my son to get to me?”

As I nod, my panic too diverse to deny my earlier admissions, the horrid noises that will keep me awake for weeks on end, everyone’s focus diverts to me. “But that’s on me. *I* used Vasily, not Yev. He wasn’t even in the country when I started pursuing Vasily, so if you want to punish anyone, you should be punishing me.”

I don’t know why I’m shocked by Vasily acting surprised by my revelation. He’s never been, nor will he be, an upstanding member of society. I guess I had just hoped he had a withered heart somewhere in his chest.

“I had no idea.” After dropping his eyes to mine, Vasily says, “What did I ever do to you to deserve this? I thought we were in love?” He snatches up my hand and rips off my engagement ring. “This is my mother’s ring! How could you taint it with so much disrespect?” He’s acting as if he didn’t announce a wish to spit on her grave only yesterday. “Fuck.” Unbelievably, tears flood his eyes as he lifts them to his father.

“Thank God you found out who she truly is before it was too late.”

Leon looks pleased by his son’s praise. “I’ll always have your back, Vasily. It’s a father’s job.”

Uncaring that he has the eyes of notorious gangsters on him, Leon stores his gun into a holster at his waist before he slings his arm around his son’s shoulders and guides him out of the warehouse.

Even with shock making my legs feel the weight of concrete, I sprint for Yev just as fast.

He’s on the mat, covered with blood. His leg is contorted at a weird angle, and his eyes are closed. Nothing will stop me from reaching him.

Not even spotting my father slipping out the back entrance of the warehouse behind Vasily and Leon.

YEV

*I*f I ever complain about the shudders of withdrawals, remind me of today. My head is pounding, my throat feels like I swallowed razor blades, and there isn't a single part of my body that isn't aching.

What the fuck did I take to knock me on my ass so well? And where the hell was Polina when temptation proved too much?

I don't care how good they claim the smack is, I'd never pick it over her.

Not in a hundred years.

As faint memories creep into my head of Polina slipping my hand between her legs, I fight my eyes to open. They weigh as much as my left leg, which feels strangely suspended in the air.

I learn the cause of my leg's odd angle when my eyes finally answer the numerous pleas of my head. It's being held in the air by a stirrup I'm tempted to have permanently installed in my room and is covered with plaster.

My confusion deepens when the walls surrounding me register as familiar. I'm in my room. The familiar scent assures me of this, not to mention my belt dangling off the headboard.

A second after the vanity sink faucet switching off sounds through my ears, the bathroom door cracks open, and Polina walks in.

She looks tired.

Real fucking tired.

“Hey,” I murmur through the cotton mouth keeping my throat as dry as a desert.

Polina’s eyes snap to me so quickly, the strain they undertake adds to their glossy appearance. “Yev. Finally.” Instead of running for me, she bolts for my bedroom door. “He’s awake.”

My room floods with guests who steal Polina from my eyesight. She’s tall for a girl, but the men surrounding her are much taller. Micah is here, and the guy who delivered my cocaine twice a week before I kicked the habit. Annika and her bump. Even Kliment is here.

What the fuck?

“I knew something was up when you stopped responding,” Kliment says before propping his ass on the edge of my bedside table like he’s accustomed to the rough edges. “I can work anywhere, so Ghost sent me here.” I get the feels like a schmuck with a peanut for a cock when he mutters, “You are family. We don’t leave family in the lurch.”

Before I can respond, the doctor who drilled out part of Alek’s skull months ago grips my chin and slants my head to the side. I assume he is checking my vitals but am proven otherwise when he murmurs, “The injection sites have healed nicely overnight. The needles were most likely new, but I ran bloods just in case. They came back clear of any nasties.” He steps back like my screwed-up face has more to do with the

churns of my empty stomach than a worry I could have caught an STI from a dirty needle. “Your leg will be in a cast for a couple of weeks. The pins will hold it in place, but you shouldn’t put any pressure on it for two to three weeks.” He looks as exhausted as Polina when he scrubs the back of his hand across his eyes while saying through a yawn, “If that’s all, I might head out and catch up on some sleep.”

He’s not one of those old geezer doctors with a hairy gray chin. He’s only a couple years older than Alek. So his tiredness has nothing to do with age and everything to do with looking like he hasn’t slept in over twenty-four hours.

“How long was I out?”

Since most of the people surrounding me appear as if they arrived in dribs and drabs, only one person can answer correctly. “Thirty-seven hours.” Polina breaks through the crowd, her smile tiny in comparison to the relief in her eyes. “Thirty-four of them were because of the sedative Dustin gave you.” I’m assuming Dustin is the doctor when she squeezes his arm before offering to show him the way out.

“I know the way,” he replies before straying his eyes around the room. “As I’m sure most of you do as well.” I want to kiss him when he nudges his head to the door, giving everyone but Polina their marching orders. “He needs rest. Not a bunch of rubberneckers.”

We’re only alone for half a second when my impatience gets the better of me. I’ve been out cold for thirty-seven hours. Add that to the sixteen or so hours Leon’s goons kept me drugged and bound in the back of a seedy pedo van, it’s been over two days since I’ve touched her, smelled her, and felt her against me.

That is far too fucking long, especially since small trickles of a breathless confession are slowly clearing through the fog in my head.

I sound groggy as fuck while muttering, “I swear to God, Polly, if you don’t get your ass over here in an instant, I’m going to test the sturdiness of my cast.”

With a smile that finally overtakes the fear hardening her timeless features, she toes off her shoes before climbing onto my bed. Her crawl up the untouched side of my mattress is almost as good as the one she does when she wants to devour my cock. It is seductive as fuck and has me wanting to consume every inch of her, but my obligations won’t allow it.

I was out for two days.

That’s two days she’s been without my support.

After positioning her so her head is on my pec and her hand on my abs, I ask, “Are you all right?” I’m shirtless but wearing ugly-ass pants that look like they belong to a man in his nineties. “Did they hurt you?”

As my question leaves my mouth, more of the fog in my head lifts. It has me remembering why I came out fighting even with my head in the clouds. If I didn’t fight, they were going to kill Polina. They didn’t say if I had to win or lose, but the number of sedatives they dosed me with meant it wouldn’t be close to an even fight.

I went down fighting, but I still went down.

I lost, although you wouldn’t believe that with how at ease I feel right now.

My grief for Feo is still there, but a massive weight has been lifted from my chest.

There's no more lying.

No more ruses.

Polina is my girl, and I can't wait for the world to know that.

I've just got one last matter to attend to first.

"Polly..." I pull her hair away from her face so I can see her eyes before asking again, "Did they hurt you?"

She shakes her head before quickly changing it to a nod.

One bob and my heart is torn to shreds.

They hurt my girl. *My* fucking girl.

I'll kill them all.

I'm about to go on a rampage until Polina mutters, "Not physically." Her wet eyes lift and lock with mine, and it dawns on me in an instant. Her hurt is centered around me, not because of me. "No one would help me, and I didn't have my phone." She scrubs at her cheeks. "I thought you were going to die. You barely had a pulse."

I try to make light of the situation. It is what I do when snowed under. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

She whacks me in the stomach, then instantly regrets her decision when I cough up half a lung. "I'm sorry. I forgot about your bruises."

"I'm fine. It was barely a fairy tap."

I'm a damn liar. It feels like she flung a sledgehammer at my groin, but there is no fucking chance in hell I'm going to tell her that.

Especially if it lessens the chance of her following my next suggestion.

“Although you might need to kiss my boo-boo better.”

She almost whacks me again. The only reason she doesn't is because of the smattering of bruises stretched across my midsection. I'm beaten to a pulp but not feeling an ounce of pain.

Would you if you had a woman like Polina Kotova snuggled up to your side, tickling the fine hairs splayed above your groin?

“This is my fault,” Polina confesses, her words low. “Leon saw us. He had to. Otherwise how did he know I was using Vasily to get to him?”

“Because you're you, and his son is a dipshit.”

She wets her dry lips before continuing as if I never spoke. “I shouldn't have been so reckless at the party. You had a handle on your addiction.”

“Even if I did, he would have found out eventually.” I drag my index finger down her screwed-up nose. “You can't hide sparks like ours forever. They're too fucking hot to ignore.”

My comment eases some of the guilt in her eyes, but it doesn't wholly erase it. “Dating Vasily was a waste of time, anyway. My father has been here for months.”

“What?” I wiggle my ear, certain I heard her wrong.

I didn't.

“I saw him at the fight, and Kliment found the missing footage you noticed at the entry point of Kronstadt airport. He's been here the entire time.”

Nothing but bewilderment is heard in my tone when I ask, “Are you sure it was him?”

She nods before checking that her bob didn't spill any of the tears flooding her eyes. "I couldn't mistake him if I tried." Her sigh ruffles my twelve or so chest hairs. "Vasily said my father would cut me off the instant he discovered the company I keep. He stringently follows the law, and I've been walking the tightrope for years."

Polina sounds confident in her assumption, but I'm still on the fence. From the stories she shared of her father, he wouldn't just up and abandon her. He isn't my mother.

"I think you should keep digging. There has to be more to his lack of contact than disappointment." I'm almost awarded a laugh when I mutter, "Tell me one parent who hasn't been disappointed in their kid at some stage of their life? It's our job to drive them fucking bonkers. It is payback for the years of hell they gave their parents."

Since I'm leaning in to get a sniff of her shampoo, our heads almost collide when Polina suddenly jackknives into a half-seated position. "Talking about parents. Your mother—"

"Smuggled me into Russia when I was an infant," I interrupt, grateful some memories are returning but also frustrated. I would have preferred for the memory of Leon stabbing a gun under Polina's ribs not to return. Her expression killed me, but I'll get my revenge if it is the last thing I do.

Polina's expressions at the fight were as dire back then as they are now when she says, "They're threatening to kick you out of the country and never approve your visa."

"They can't do that," I say with a stubborn shake of my head. "I am Russian through and through."

She huffs. “I thought the same until Vasily showed me the deportation orders his father’s team drew up.”

“Were they the same ones they showed me? Were they in Yev’s name?”

She’s confused by my question but nods nonetheless.

Her bewilderment doubles when I twist the tuft of hair I usually wear gelled back until it resembles Feo’s Elvis curl. “Pity for them Yev is nowhere to be found.” Leon’s goons are so fucking stupid, they spent the first hour of the tournament scanning the crowd for me. They had no clue I’d been presenting as both Feo and myself for the past couple of weeks. “Feo was born in Kronstadt. Excluding that sixteen months with his father, he lived here his whole life, and there’s not a shred of evidence that could say any different.” I shrug like it’s no big deal. “So let them kick Yev out. See if I give a fuck.”

Although relief darts through her eyes, Polina couldn’t protect herself very well if she wasn’t occasionally hypocritical. “You can’t pretend to be your brother forever.”

“Why not?” I ask, generally curious. “If Feo can’t live, why not live his life for him?”

I’ve never wanted to be me more than when Polina replies, “Because I didn’t fall in love with Feodor. I’ve only ever loved Yevgenyi.”

After a PG-rated peck on the corner of my split lip, she attempts to slip out of bed. I say attempt because there’s no fucking way I can let her leave now. “Oh, fuck no, you can’t tell me you love me and not prove it.” I wrap my unbusted leg around her waist and yank her down until she lands on top of me. It sends pain skittering in all directions of my body, but I

keep my focus on the task at hand. “There are *many* ways you can back up your claims.”

Polina is mainly humored by my reply, but there’s a smidge of eagerness that keeps the flame in my gut lit. “Your leg is broken—”

“And?” I interrupt through twisted lips. “Does that make my cock broken too? I haven’t tasted your bodywash in days. I can’t wait a second longer.”

“Yev.” Her laugh would usually soften my dick, but that isn’t a possibility when a body as fine as hers is splayed up against me. “We can’t. We have guests.”

“Who will stay the fuck out of my room if they know what’s good for them.” I shout my words loud enough for Kliment and the gang to hear.

I’m reminded of my new roommate when Annika says, “I’m going to the store.”

Two seconds later, Micah adds, “And I’m going with her.”

Polina’s cheeks are as red as a beetroot when Kliment jumps into the conversation. “I can’t hear shit with my headphones on. They’re moan-canceling.”

When the click of the front door closing creeps into my room, I return my eyes to Polina. “See? Not an issue.”

“How is this not an issue?” She waves her hand down my bruised and battered body while breathing out slowly. “You’re hurt.”

“I am”—I pause long enough for her plump bottom lip to droop half an inch—“which is even more reason for you to kiss me better.”

That gets me half a smirk but regretfully another denial. “We can’t. We’ve only ever... *fucked*.” She almost chokes on her last word. “And your busted leg won’t allow you to achieve the pace needed for that.”

Her eyes snap to mine when I murmur, “Then we’ll make love.”

I almost have her. She is right there with one leg straddled over the fence. Then she slips off my bed, leaving me with a raging hard-on and muscles too sore to stroke one out.

“You better be gathering supplies for a sponge bath,” I mutter when she heads for the door.

She smiles and winks, then drinks in the bulge in my pants for half a second. It’s nowhere near long enough to convince her I’m not fighting the urge to crawl into a ball and die.

My injuries aren’t killing me.

Her rejection is.

“Where’s the gratitude?” I mumble into the pillow I’m using to suffocate my shame. Being denied in general sucks, but when it’s from a girl you’d die for, it is ten times worse. “I risk my life, then get left hanging because of some *minor* bruising. Damn copout.”

My dick springs back to life when Polina’s stern tone snaps through the pillow a minute later. “Are you going to quit whining, or do I need to gag you?”

Somehow between her short walk to the door and my sulk in my pillow, she switched out her clothing. Her dress has been slung off, leaving nothing but the lingerie I stole from her apartment and a belt she’s holding out as if it is a whip.

Hot. *Fucking*. Damn.

Broken leg or not, if she asks me to crawl to her, I'm getting on my fucking knees and crawling like a baby.

I nod like I have an undiagnosed tic when Polina says, "*My* pace."

"Whatever you want."

"*My* rules."

"As if it hasn't always been that way."

It dawns on me just how smart she is when she adds one final demand to our negotiations. "*My* choice on whether or not I continue searching for my father."

I don't get a second to think of a reply, much less announce it. Kliment races into my room with a laptop balancing on his hand and his ears covered with big, bulky headphones. "You need to see this." He stops, swallows, then takes on a bug-eyed expression when he spots Polina scampering for her dress. "Should I go?" He answers his own question. "Yes." But then he retracts it. "No. You need to see this."

"Klim!"

"I'm not looking, I swear to God." His hand shoots up to cover his eyes as he marches for my bed. A cuss word leaves his mouth in a hurry when he smacks into one of those rolling bed tray tables you usually find in hospitals. It is positioned at the end of my bed and proves he can't see shit since his eyes are both covered by his hand and clamped shut. He dumps his laptop on the rolling bed tray table, then instructs, "There's a video on the screen. Press the space bar to play it," he demands while spinning on his heels and exiting the room, slamming my door shut behind him.

I wait for Polina to cover up her delectable body before pressing play on the video I'm confident she'll want to watch since the headline screams:

Minister Leon Cabanow and second eldest son in fatal accident.

With Polina's breaths too shallow to register, we watch the news footage of a black sedan with the tags blurred being pulled out of a lake a couple of clicks west of the warehouse I fought in Saturday night. The cameraman keeps his angles perfect, allowing the audience to clearly see the cufflinks of the man pinned in the back seat. A portion of his scaly skin exposes he's been underwater for quite some hours.

"They're Cabanow cufflinks," Polina says, her words muffled by the hand she clamps over her mouth. "And that's the town car Vasily's father sent to collect us." It is clear she missed the headline when she adds, "Leon walked Vasily out. Do you think they left in the same car?" When I drag my finger along the headline at the bottom of the screen, she plonks onto the mattress before her legs give out on her. "Oh my god."

Her chest rises and falls as she struggles to breathe. Although I don't believe Vasily deserves a moment of her grief, it would be heartless of Polina not to respond in some way that resembles remorse.

She is only called heartless by the people who don't know her.

After taking a moment to settle her breathing, a reason for her bewilderment is unearthed. "My father followed them out. He literally walked out alongside them." As her tear-glossed eyes bounce between mine, she asks, "Do you think he...?" She either can't speak badly of her father or doesn't want to

believe he is capable of murder, because she leaves her question hanging open.

From the stories she's shared of her father over the years, he is a big, protective bear who'd never let anything bad happen to her. His little girl sees him as a nurturer. It doesn't take much for the switch to be flipped, though. The footage I found on the Bobrov server while hunting for the driver Kliment left there months ago almost had me reaching my breaking point. I was filled with rage at how cowardly Kirill gunned down Feo. I wanted to kill anyone who crossed my path, but since I yearned to protect Polina more, I reached for her instead of my usual crutches.

When Leon tilted slightly too far to his left, any crutch but murder was wiped from the table the instant I spotted his gun. I wanted to kill him, and I planned to do exactly that as I crawled out from beneath my opponent and kicked him up the side of the head.

It seems Polina's father plotted the same revenge as me.

Although the newsflash is broadcasting Leon and Vasily's death as an accident, my opinion is on the opposite end of the spectrum. They would have had to be doing double the signed speed to reach the part of the lake capable of swallowing a car quicker than its occupants can exit it, and excluding the boat ramp, which isn't anywhere close to the freeway in that part of Kronstadt, the lake is covered with dense shrub. You'd need a semi to break through the shrubbery, but there isn't a single stick on the sedan as the tow truck slowly drags it from the lake's floor.

Vasily and his father were killed, and I'd be a liar if I didn't say I'm disappointed their executioner wasn't me.

POLINA

“*O*h god. Don’t stop.”

You’d have no clue Yev’s leg is in a cast halfway up his thigh with how fluently he rocks his hips. With his hands fisting the sheets and his core suspending his ass an inch off the bedding, he plows in and out of me like I’m not meant to be riding him.

He takes control, which I don’t mind at all.

I love handing the power to him when we mess the sheets. He never uses it to his advantage or makes me feel uncomfortable, and since we’ve had more time to talk the past week than the past year, he knows all my limits.

I’d be annoyed if it didn’t return his eyes to mine a second after he locked them to the area our bodies are intimately joined. They’re fired with lust and burning with so much desire, you’d have no idea he woke me this morning with his head between my legs.

He’s meant to be on bed rest.

Yev says Dr. Dustin’s rules are for wimps.

As another climax presents hard and fast, I’m inclined to agree with him. I doubt I’ll feel the same way once he brings

me back from hysteria. I hate that he got hurt protecting me and feels a little inadequate now.

He'll never admit it—he's far too cocky for that—but I see his frustration when I assist him in and out of the bathroom, and don't get me started on when his crutch slipped out from beneath him when the pizza boy got a little lippy in front of one of his neighbors.

The teen thought he was a man when he told me he was my dessert. He looked like a frightened boy when Yev appeared in the doorway, ready and willing to put a boot up his ass.

His fear lasted as long as it took him to realize Yev's leg was in a cast. While heading for the elevator, minus a tip from Yev's neighbor, he let out a string of insults. His scorn switched to howls of laughter when Yev's attempt to retaliate saw his crutch slipping on a puddle someone left in front of the elevator doors.

Pissed, Yev threw his crutch at the rapidly closing elevator doors before refusing my numerous offers to help him from the ground. His short fuse broke his crutch and the pizza boy's nose, and his dinner had gone cold by the time he gave up trying to apply weight to his screwed-together leg.

He crawled inside instead.

It was as hot as you're imagining, but he was too frustrated to notice my squirms past his anger.

He went to bed sulking.

He's such a stubborn man, but some good eventually came from his anger. Since he can only hobble without a crutch as far as the master bathroom attached to his room, he's been enduring the bedrest Dr. Dustin instigated the past two days.

It's done wonders for the energy he expels every time he fucks me senseless.

He gets restless staying in one spot, but that neurosis is null and void when it comes to bedroom activities. His stamina is remarkable, and it has me racing for my third climax this morning.

I suck in a sharp breath, my eyes locked with Yev's. "Please... oh... god... please," I beg when the swivels of his thumb over my clit tighten the coil low in my womb.

Detonation is immediate.

I am seconds from release.

"Fuck yes, baby girl. Ride me." A thrilling zap darts down my spine when Yev tilts in close before his tongue darts out to lick up a droplet of sweat careening down my face, his eyes never once leaving mine. "Every part of you is delicious. You taste so fucking good."

It is the fight of my life not to thrust my head back and grunt when he places the perfect amount of pressure on my clit. I'm consumed by him. Filled by him. Being driven to the brink of hysteria by him. Yet, I still can't get enough.

"More. Please. More."

There's a glint in his eyes that warns of danger, but I act ignorant when he slides one of his hands up my sticky back and fists my hair at the nape. I pant through the sensation that rips through me when he yanks my head back hard enough for the roots to sting.

As he arches me back, his mouth drops from my cheek to my neck, then to my breasts. His eyes burn through to my soul when he sucks my nipple in his mouth while continuing the rhythm, making me a hot, sticky mess. It isn't the fast, wild

pace we usually undertake. More of a steady, unfrenzied rhythm that drives me as insane as the way he peers up at me while toying my nipples into stiff peaks.

I love how he forever positions me so he can both feast on my body and the lust beaming from my eyes. Not even doggy style is a challenge for me now. How could it be with all the mirrors Yev shifted from the dining room to his bedroom?

I thought Kliment was clueless about his request. I learned otherwise when Alek called. He wasn't just organizing a time for me to have unlimited squishy cuddles with my adorable niece. Alek spent thirty minutes of our hour chat reading Yev the riot act.

Kliment was in a fit of laughter while listening in on their conversation until Yev took a page out of Alek's book and tore Kliment a new asshole the instant he ended their call.

He's been spending more time in his new bat cave than on Yev's couch, and I doubt his move has anything to do with how uncomfortable Yev's couch is.

After giving me a measured smile, Yev clamps down on my nipple with his teeth, forcing my focus solely back to him before he adds a flick to the end of his rolls. The instant his knob graces the sweet spot inside me, I lose control.

I shiver and moan as an eruption of euphoria darts through me.

Using his grip of my hair as leverage, Yev bounces me on and off his cock while commanding, "Look at me."

I couldn't take my eyes off him even if I wanted to. His command. The control. The way his words roar out of his throat in a snapped command has me entranced. I can't get enough.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, his voice lower but still husky.

Once my orgasm subsides enough I can see through the haze in front of me, he lets go of my hair and drops his hand to my ass. With his cast halfway up his thigh and my backside taking up a majority of his thigh not in a cast, there’s barely any room for him to skate his hand around, but he manages—somehow.

“I’ve still got to claim you here,” he murmurs on a raw breath, his words lusty as he rims my back entrance with his thumb. “Are you going to let me claim you here, baby girl? Are you gonna let me fuck you in the ass?”

His crudeness should turn me off.

It doesn’t.

It sends a droplet of moisture rolling over his balls.

“Jesus. Fucking. H, Polly. You ain’t no fucking saint.”

Before I can ask where he gathered the wrong intel, he spreads his thighs wider, forcing me to open to him even more before he slings his good leg off the edge of the bed.

“Oh... sweet... Jesus,” I push out between moans.

He’s deeper now.

Balls deep.

And thrusting his hips like he’s possessed.

My mind scrambles, my fists clench the sheets, and my back bows as I’m fucked to within an inch of recognition. I don’t know my name, where I live, or what damn day it is by the time Yev’s jerks still and hot cum spills from his cock in rapid-fire hits.

I can’t even recognize the annoying blurt of my ringtone.

My belongings were returned to me a couple of days after Vasily's death. Since he and his father's deaths were ruled an accident, the authorities had no reason to keep the items they seized during a search of his residence two hours before their demise.

Supposedly, participating in an illegal fight circuit wasn't the only shady business Leon was undertaking.

Although the list of accusations against them were long, a judge ordered that Leon and Vasily's possessions be returned to their family before he closed any cases associated with them.

You can't prosecute ghosts.

The rumors circulating about their accident stopped swirling shortly after that. There is no evidence that they were killed, but evidence of an accident is just as lacking. You'd swear their car was picked up from the freeway and dumped into the lake by a crane. There were no tire tracks to the boat ramp they supposedly sailed off, no missing rails. Nothing.

Needing to distract my mind from the deaths of two men who don't deserve my remorse, I slip out of bed and head for the stack of drawers Yev cleaned out for me.

Since Yev is too exhausted to think straight, I reach my phone before he can order me not to answer it. "It is Sunday morning," he grumbles under his breath when I slide my finger across my phone's screen and squash it to my ear.

"Hello..."

"Mrs."—a gruff voice rustles through sheets of paper—"Cabanow. We have an order we're meant to be collecting for a client. Pick up was scheduled for nine. Driver is announcing no one is there."

“You’re collecting an order today?” You can hear the confusion in my voice. We usually drop off our orders to the shipment distributors. On the odd occasion we don’t because the order is too large, the company comes to us, but that is usually during office hours.

And let’s not mention the fact he called me Mrs. Cabanow. It is an easy mistake to make since the papers are reporting that I am Vasily’s grieving widow, but it still makes me cringe.

In hours, Vasily had our lives so well entangled it was hard to tell where his business finished and mine started.

“Uh-huh,” the man replies, drawing me from my thoughts. “Got a man out back. He says the shop looks locked up. No lights on, either.”

Now I’m even more intrigued. Trade is slow on Sundays, but excluding when I ordered Nat to close early, we haven’t missed a single day of trade in over six months.

“Can your driver wait? I can be there in ten minutes.”

While the dispatch clerk radios in to the man outside my boutique, I head into the walk-in closet to get dressed. If this order is big enough for the courier to come collect on a Sunday, it isn’t an order I can afford to lose. Business is so slow right now my overhead is higher than my earnings.

I’m pulling a cashmere sweater over my blouse when the clerk replies, “He’s happy to wait. He’ll be in the bakery next door. I’ll text you his number so you can buzz him when you arrive.”

“Thank you,” I reply before ending our call and entering Yev’s room.

He’s still semiconscious. That’s what he gets for keeping me up half the night before feasting on me in the wee hours of

the morning.

“I need to pop into the boutique. We have a big order waiting for collection.”

Yev drops the arm covering his face before arching a brow. “Where’s Nat?”

Ignoring the unease twisting through my stomach, I shrug. “Don’t know. I’ll text her on the way. The dispatch clerk said the store looks empty.”

He isn’t as schooled at hiding his emotions as I am. As his brow crinkles, he scoots across the bed, flops both his feet over the edge, then attempts to stand.

“What the hell are you doing?” I say when the groan he tries to stifle rips through his lips. “Get back in bed.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Like hell you are. You can barely walk.” I push his chest until he lands on the mattress with a thud. “Nat is probably just running late again.”

“If you go, I go, Polly. That’s *our* promise.”

He almost has me over the ledge until my intuition rings louder than his words. “By the time I get you to the car, I’ll be back already.”

He *pffts* me but doesn’t deny my claims with words.

He can’t when I’m being honest.

I’m tall for a girl, but he is a brute of a man.

Even quick trips to the bathroom take ten minutes.

“There are no more threats. My father dealt with them.” I hate myself for my last murmured comment, but it slipped out before I could stop it. I’m more honest than conniving. That’s

why I should have realized sooner that my ruse with Vasily would have never worked. “And Dustin said the more weight you put on your leg, the longer your recovery will be.”

“Dustin doesn’t know what the fuck he’s talking about. No one called Dustin does.”

When he looks set to force weight on his leg again, I get desperate. With determination fueling my strength and remorse that I left everything on Nat’s shoulders the past two weeks, I grab Yev’s hands, clamp his wrists together, then tether them to the bed before he understands my motive, much less how I plan to achieve it.

“What the...?” He swallows his cuss word, locks his eyes with mine, then murmurs, “Untie me.”

He’s angry, but there is a smidge of playfulness gleaming in his eyes that harnesses my worry. He’s often joked that we should flip up the dominance in the bedroom. He just never thought it would be a possibility because I’m far too submissive for that.

“I will...” I mutter, stepping back. “When I’ve returned from the boutique.”

“Polly...” I snatch up his car key from the drawer, then head for the door like there isn’t an ounce of anger in his tone.

“Polina...” he tries again, dropping the nickname.

When his angry snarl doesn’t have my stance budging, he says, “What if I need to take a piss? Do you want to clean up that mess?” As my nose screws up, he adds, “Exactly, so untie me.”

He almost has me backing away from the ledge. Then I spot his cell phone.

“I’m going to tie your ass to my bed for a week!” Yev shouts through his rapidly closing bedroom door when I toss him his cell phone before hotfooting it outside.

His threat has excitement thrumming through my veins more than worry as I take the quickest route to my boutique. I travel well over the speed limit, the approaching storm more concerning than a ticket.

Typhoons cause blackouts.

Blackouts bring on panic attacks I don’t know how to control.

I text the driver as I pull Yev’s rust box into the alley that sides my boutique, noticing that my messages to Nat have gone unread.

ME:

Are you running late again?

Everything okay?

Check in with me when you can.

As I breathe out my unease, I scan my boutique.

The dispatch clerk’s observation was right. The building is completely blacked out.

ME:

I’m here.

I startle when a man knocks on the driver’s side window thirty seconds later. “Sorry.” His smile is shy but gleaming. “I’m in a bit of a hurry.” As he peers at the clouds rolling over the horizon, he pulls at the collar of his shirt.

“Not a fan of storms?” I ask as I slip out of the driver’s seat and pad toward the back entrance door.

His smile slips as he shadows my walk. “Not exactly.”

The brick wall next to me is the wall Yev took my virginity at. It settles my nerves enough for me to slot the key into the lock and pull the door open after only one attempt.

“Thought you guys are usually open on Sundays?” When I peer at the driver in shock, he scrubs at the back of his neck while muttering, “I bought my girl a little number here last Valentine’s Day. She became my wife only a month later.”

His cheeky comment does wonders for my nerves. With only the slightest quiver, I step into the back foyer to test the light switch.

“Could be a blown fuse,” the driver mutters before he grabs a flashlight out of his truck, then wordlessly advises me to lead the way. “Maybe that’s why Nat’s not in?” Another confused glare equals another quick confession. “She helped me pick out my purchase. Said it would move my girl up to wifey status within a month.” His smile is brighter than his flashlight. “Turns out she was right.”

As I use my phone to back up the dull illumination of his flashlight, and ignoring Yev’s multiple messages and one from Kliment asking if Yev is dressed this time around before he saves him, I ask, “Who placed the order?”

“I’m not sure,” the driver replies. “I have the paperwork in my truck if you want me to check.”

“No,” I shout a little too loudly, not wanting to be left alone in the dark. “That’s okay. I’m sure Nat took record of it.”

I stop feeling the urge to bend in two when we reach the storage room, and the driver rolls up the roller door at the

back. It streams light into the tiny room.

“I’d say that’s what we’re after,” he summarizes, nudging his head to a stack of boxes that weren’t there last week.

It has to be an order of at least five figures.

No wonder the courier company was so eager.

“We usually supply garment bags with orders this big. Let me grab you some.”

As I move deeper into the storage room, my heart beats in my throat. There is a packet of cigarettes on the third shelf. They’re open and missing several cigarettes.

“Don’t be too hard on her. Bad habits are hard to give up,” the driver says, scaring the living daylights out of me. “Sorry.” He hooks his thumb to the garment bags.

“Take two stacks.” *It may be the only way I’ll be able to look you in the eye again.*

I’m acting like a chicken, and it is even more frustrating since I have no reason to be scared. My father is home. My sex life is crazy, and I’m an aunt to a precious little girl my brother will ensure never faces any of the issues I did in my childhood.

I still haven’t told Yev about the tapes my father recorded. It won’t be an easy conversation, so I’ve been leaving it for a better time.

“That’s it. If you could just sign here.”

I scribble my name across the driver’s consignment sheet as a clap of thunder sounds above our heads.

It has him as eager as me to leave.

“See you soon,” he farewells before he slips into the cab of his truck backed up to the storage room.

Since I can't exactly ask him to walk me out of my store, I farewell him with a wave while lowering the roller door the best I can without putting down my phone.

I need it for the light.

When my cell tumbles out of my hand, it mercifully lands with its light up. It keeps me filtered in light and exposes why the electricity is out. The circuit breaker box is open, and several of the switches are off.

As I flick the switches back on, moving from left to right, the first set of lights to turn on is the basement lights. I never go down there. For one, I'm too scared, and two, I'm fairly sure it is infested with rats.

The reason the safety switch activated is announced when I turn on the main lights for the boutique. It switches off every light in an instant before announcing that I'm not alone. A groan comes from the basement. It is similar to the moans that seep from Yev's lips when he attempts to stand on his mangled leg.

It belongs to a human. I am one hundred percent certain of that. But they sound in a heap of pain.

"Hello..." I call out, as confident I'm not going to enter the basement as I am that Yev will never let me live this down when fear strangles me too perversely not to dial his number.

"You are in so much trouble," he grinds out down the line, not bothering to issue a greeting.

He seems set to say more, but I stop him by whispering, "Someone is here."

Sheets ruffle in the blow of his balk before he asks, "What?"

“Someone is here.” I step closer to the partially cracked-open basement door. “In the basement. Someone is in the basement.”

His demand doubles my panic. “Get the fuck out of there, Polly. I’ll send someone to check.”

“What if it’s Nat?”

“It’s not fucking Nat. Get out, Polly. Get out now!”

His shouts get my legs moving, but it’s too late.

Someone is entering the storeroom from the other side.

He is carrying a gun.

YEV

“*P*olina, I’m not playing. Get the fuck out of there!”

I stop thrashing against the headboard, endeavoring to free my hands by breaking my wrist when Polina’s frightened tremble sounds out of my phone’s speaker. Thank fuck for flexibility because I wouldn’t have taken her call if I couldn’t reach the connect button with my big toe. “I can’t. Someone is coming in from the other end.”

My brain is scrambled, but when it comes to this woman’s safety, it is quick. “What about the roller door?”

I thrash, crash, and bang until the headboard splinters away from the wall and I can pull my hands through the opening and scoot to my phone.

I’ve only just gathered it in my welted hand when Polina replies, “They’re out there too. I can see shadows.”

“How many?” A groan unlike anything I’ve ever heard before rips from my lips when I forget about my busted leg. I practically run off my bed, which buckles my legs out from underneath me.

My phone skids under the mattress, so I miss Polina’s reply.

It doesn't matter either way. Her answer won't alter my reply.

"I need you to hide."

The rustles of a head frantically shaking is the only response I get.

"I know it's scary, but I need you to do this. If they find you, they will hurt you. I can't let that happen, Polina. I can't live without you, so I need you to hide."

"I-I can't," she murmurs as my fingers fly over my screen to alert Alek of the potential threat invading his baby sister's boutique. "It-it's dark."

A second after my message is delivered, Alek's face pops up on my screen.

I deny his request to FaceTime before focusing my attention back to Polina. "You can do this. I know you can. Do it for me, baby girl. Show me how brave you are."

As the clangs of the chains that lift the roller door in the storeroom sound through my ear, I fight through the pain shredding through me to stand and head to the door.

It fucking kills me walking on my leg, but it has nothing on the terror that zaps through me when foreign accents sound over Polina's shallow breaths.

They sound Italian.

"Now, Polly," I demand as I move through my apartment so fast my cast cracks and falls apart with every stomp I take. "I need you to hide *now*."

"Okay." She breathes out noisily before all sounds muffle, and her breathing doubles.

“Are you hidden?” As I stab the elevator button with my thumb I circled around her anus only minutes ago, the faintest ruffle of a head bob trickles through my phone’s speakers. “Good girl. Is it a fully closed-in space?”

I should have known better when a swoosh sounds down the line. She can’t do fully enclosed spaces. The darker it is, the more terrifying it is for her.

“You did good hiding, baby, but I need you to do one more thing for me, okay?”

With the elevator taking too long to arrive at my floor, I throw open the emergency exit stairwell and stomp down seven flights.

My leg is in excruciating pain after only one level, but I keep moving, as determined as ever. Alek will get men to Polina’s store in no time, but she’ll need me more than them, especially since I forced her to hide.

“What do you want?” Polina’s voice is still weak, but I am so incredibly grateful it is without the stutter it’s had since the commencement of our call.

My breaths come out jagged from my stomps when I reply, “I need you to turn off any lights. To not touch the screen of your phone so it will go black. If they see light, they might find you.”

“Yev...”

“It’s okay, baby girl. It’s gonna be okay. I promise. I just need you to trust me.” I add on a demand for her to cup the speaker of her phone when my leap onto the second-level landing rockets pain from my ankle to my scalp.

I can barely see through the pain.

I can barely talk.

But I don't stop moving or trying to calm Polina down.

“Help is on the way. Alek sent men. And I'm coming too, Polly. I'm almost there.”

The grunts responsible for the furious shakes of my body almost block out Polina's hushed murmur of my name. “Yev...”

“Yeah?” I reply just as I reach the foyer.

I sprint out the stairwell so fast, the bottom of my cast completely removes, and my bruised and swollen foot takes the full brunt of my stomps.

As the words I've been dying to hear the past week in person rustle down the line, I freeze. “I love you.”

“I love you too, baby.” Even with her pulse thudding in her ears, she can't miss the sentiment in my tone, so it makes me nowhere near as guilty when I add, “But now is not the time for that, okay? You've got plenty of time to tell me that later. When you're here, with me, tied to my fucking bed.”

That almost gets a giggle out of her until someone finds her hidey-hole.

“Nooo!” she screams as the thrashes of a woman fighting for her life ring through the speakers of my phone.

“Polly,” I shout down the line with my heart in my throat.

“Polina!” I try again when I get no response.

With my pain threshold nonexistent and my body determined to die before it ever gives in, I race into the parking lot, cussing when I find my spot empty.

I'm about to smash the window of a neighbor's car when a dark sedan shrieks to a halt next to me.

I do a double take when the driver leans across to open the passenger door. "Get in."

It's Polina's father.

He's identical to the man Kliment spotted in the footage, sneaking into the country months ago.

Although a million questions are in my head, none of them are voiced during our frantic dash to Polina's boutique. We get airborne at the end of the street before the smell of burning rubber lingers in our nostrils.

I have a cast from the middle of my thigh to the bottom of my calf, but I throw open my door and enter the boutique as quickly as Polina's father.

The threat has been neutralized. The two dead men in the main area of Polina's boutique announce this, not to mention a small number of the street kids I grew up with filling the corridor between the main part of the boutique to the storage room, but my pace doesn't lessen in the slightest.

I need to see Polina.

I need to feel her.

I need to know she is safe before I can secure an entire breath.

When I enter the storage room, I spot a group of men huddled around an air vent. It is one of those big ducts that sucks in the hot air before distributing the cold.

My lungs commence accepting air again when I notice the man who carried Feo onto the dock in the body bag Kirill

stored him in for days has scratches covering his hands and arms.

He's been torn to shreds, and it fills me with an immense amount of relief.

"She won't let anyone touch her," Budimir mutters, his voice deep but uneasy. "She's a—"

"Scared," I interrupt before he says something that will force me to put him in a grave. "She's scared but so fucking brave," I say my last four words loud enough for everyone a mile over to hear.

I'm certain Polina hears them as well, but she's too frozen in fear to acknowledge my presence, much less blink. She stands as still as a statue. Not even her chest moves as she sucks in tiny breaths.

"Hey, baby girl," I murmur, my voice more nurturing than angst-filled. "It is okay to come out now. It's safe."

When she remains frozen in place, wedged between two thin sheets of aluminum, I realize the scene surrounding her isn't helping. It smells like death and deprivation—the two things she faced when dragged out of her hidey-hole the day after her father killed her mother.

"Clear the room." Budimir peers at me as if I lost my marbles, but I don't give him time to deny my request. "I said to fucking clear the room!" After nudging my head to the dead man at his feet, his face blown off by an automatic assault weapon, I add, "And take him with you."

Within seconds, only Polina, her father, and I remain.

It is quiet enough to hear a pin drop, so you can imagine how deafening the groans of a man in pain sound.

For once, the grunts aren't coming from me.

Don't get me wrong. I'm in a ton of pain, but since most of it is internal in response to Polina's manic state, I'm confident the noises aren't coming from me.

After snapping his eyes to the basement door, Brecken pulls a weapon out of the back of his pants before he quietly tiptoes down the rickety stairs.

I can't believe they didn't think to check the basement. Their mistake could have deadly consequences, and the acknowledgment of that sees me demanding Budimir to return to the storage room under strict orders not to go near Polina before I back up Brecken's campaign to properly clear the scene.

The creak of the bottom step under my weight shifts Brecken's focus to me. He points his gun at my chest, although I'm not one hundred percent sure it is his gun when he returns it to the back of his jeans before he continues removing the ties of the man bound to the boiler.

He looks a lot like the man assisting him—freckled nose and all.

What the fuck?

When Brecken—or a guy who looks identical to him—assists the injured man to his feet, I take a staggering step back.

My response is the same as every woman's in Kronstadt when Feo and I went out partying together. They thought their eyes were playing tricks on them and that they'd had too much to drink, but the instant they realized there were two of us, excitement overwhelmed them more than surprise.

They thought we were twins.

There are no doubts with these two men.

They're identical in every way.

With my mind too scrambled to offer assistance, Brecken helps the battered man up the stairs.

I realize I have them mixed up when the twin with a busted eye socket and a split lip mutters, "Polina," when he reaches the stoop of the stairs.

"Don't touch her," I demand when he shuffles her way like his ankle isn't contorted at an odd angle and being dragged behind him. "She's paralyzed with fear."

He nods like he understands before he shuffles closer. "The last time I saw her this bad was the night her mother was killed." He licks his cracked lip. "She was grubby, and her stomach wouldn't quit growling, so I didn't think about coercing her out of her hiding spot." He shifts his eyes to me, and they glisten as a memory filters through his mind. "I went in gung-ho and scared the shit out of her." His eyes drop to his shoeless feet. "She had nightmares about it for years. It'll kill me if I make the same mistake again."

"Then don't," I reply, my snapped words freezing his hand before it brushes Polina's shoulder. "I think I know a way I can get her out without touching her." Through bruised eyes and a massive gash trickling blood down his nose, Brecken stares at me like he wants to gut me where I stand when I say, "But I need you to leave." Ignoring his *pfft*, I hit him where it hurts. "If you have your daughter's best interests at heart, you'll trust me to do this... *alone*."

"I can't—"

"He's a good kid, Brecken." The uninjured twin shifts on his feet to face the battered one. "He won't hurt her." I realize

he's the man who's been watching Polina when he says, "He loves her enough to continually throw himself into the fire so she won't get burned. Although I would have punched the cheating prick in the face before stealing his wallet." Once he's standing upright again, he curls his arm around Brecken's shoulders. "We'll wait for you upstairs."

"Beckett—"

I can't help the grin that pops onto my face when Beckett interrupts. "Don't make me remind you who is the eldest of our duo. It might be by only twelve minutes, but I'm still your elder, Brecken, so you need to respect me."

I used to say the same thing to Feo. He loathed it as much as Brecken does.

Once the storeroom echoes with nothing but the torrential rain hitting the boutique's roof, I steady my stance before saying two words I know Polina will obey no matter how snowed under she is.

"Knees. *Now.*"

Polina barely flinches, but I know I'm getting through to her. For the first time in minutes, her throat bobs through a stern swallow.

"Don't make me ask again, baby girl. Get on your fucking knees. *Now!*"

Euphoria pumps through me when my command breaks through her fear and she lands on her knees with a thud.

The pounding of my heart is heard in my voice when I snap out, "Now crawl to me."

EPILOGUE

YEV

SIX MONTHS LATER...

“*K*nees. Now.”

As the woman I still masturbate to—in front of her now instead of by myself like a loser—lowers herself to her knees, I palm my cock, needing it to calm the fuck down before I make a fool of myself.

We’re on the Bobrov containership, only two doors down from the man who has threatened to cut out my nuts more than once during our visit to ensure our niece feels our love in person instead of via a phone screen, but a woman as ravishingly beautiful as Polina Kotova is still willing to get on her knees and suck my cock.

I am a lucky, *lucky* man.

And I only see things improving when she immediately complies to my next demand. “Now crawl to me.”

Even with grief still occasionally wreaking havoc on my mood, I can’t say things haven’t been great for the past six months. Brecken was reunited with his wife and daughters, Polina learned that even members of the CIA have hearts big enough to take in the child he wrongly believed he damaged beyond repair by forcing her out of the hidey-hole of a child pornography ring, and I discovered even men with squeaky clean personas can have skeletons in their closet.

Somehow Feo found out about the money I’d sent to him to finish school, and although to this day, I believe he paid his dues back tenfold long before he attended college, he didn’t see things the same way.

He wanted to pay back every dime I'd spent on his education, so he took up a trade I refused to dabble in six months ago.

His short stint in drug running had him stumbling onto more than crackheads seeking their next high. The drugs Maksim's organization imported were laced with dangerous shit. It was killing more street kids than creating the addicts' organized crime syndicates like the Bobrovs and Ivanovs crave.

When Maksim ordered the removal of the tainted drugs from sale, his supplier was pissed and gunning for blood, but instead of taking it out on the big dog, he went for the small fry. He set his sights on Vasily and his boss, Mr. Lenkov, the importers for that region of the country.

They were close to being taken out when Vasily made them a deal they couldn't refuse and promised that not even the CIA could interfere with the new operation he'd helm for them in Kronstadt.

Since they had no idea Vasily was stealing a massive chunk of their shipments before making up the numbers by mixing the leftovers with dangerous ingredients, they agreed to his offer—on one condition.

He would kill whoever was responsible for both tainting their drugs and calling in tips to a local CIA officer who couldn't be bribed.

Feo, Maksim's youngest runner and the man who delivered the cocaine for Vasily's last fake engagement party, was Vasily's implied scapegoat.

I couldn't help but smile when Brecken said Feo only had eyes for one girl in the months leading to his "disappearance."

Not even the promise of seven figures and an endless number of whores saw him agreeing to leave Annika's bed for what would have been his final run if Vasily's plan had gone off without a hitch.

Vasily shit bricks for almost a week when the Bobrovs turned on each other, and Feo was nowhere to be found, but eventually, he saw the distraction as a godsend. Instead of placing the blame for the tainted drugs on my brother's shoulders, he accused Brecken—the CIA agent Feo had been feeding intel to so well he was close to taking Vasily down.

With a handful of crocodile tears, Vasily convinced his father that Brecken had threatened to pin a false drug charge on him.

He spun the story when he met with the Sicilians again.

He told them when he'd witnessed firsthand what Brecken was doing, he shot him as asked. Like fools, both his father and the Sicilians believed him.

After watching Brecken be arrested and deported under the guise of espionage, trade continued without fault until Vasily proved it is rare for asshats like him to learn from their mistakes—especially when a shit ton of money is on the table.

He continued “watering down” the stock, putting more than his life at risk. When the Sicilians demanded answers, Vasily had limited scapegoats, so you can picture his excitement when his father mistook me as Feo.

He thought all his Christmases had come at once and that all his father had to do was schmooze me—*Feo*—back into his family's cooked books so it looked like I was a part of his trade, and he'd once again remove the target from his back by placing it on mine.

Vasily's plan caught a snag for the second time the night I finger fucked Polina at their "engagement" party.

Even someone with his head lodged up his kid's ass as far as Leon's couldn't miss the electricity brewing between Polina and me.

Leon knew something wasn't right, so he started digging.

His burrow unearthed a ton of shit Kliment gained access to the night I was drugged. But instead of looking at the information and determining that his son is a conniving piece of shit, Leon went into protective dad mode.

He set out to prove Polina was using Vasily, completely unaware that his ruse would place his son's life in more danger than a supposed money-hungry gold-digger seeking a not-so-tight prenup.

Brecken's alias of a schoolteacher was brilliant. With a pair of glasses settled on his wonky nose and his designer threads switched out for a plaid short-sleeved dress shirt, he screamed Dork 101. No one had any clue just how skilled of an officer he was.

His numerous operations on foreign turf netted some of the biggest child trafficking rings the CIA had seen, but one case stayed with him longer than the rest.

No one was looking for Polina in the vent Alek placed her in when their father was chasing them with a steel pipe. As far as Brecken's crew knew, the perp was hanging from the rafters with his wife dead at his side and his son on his deathbed. They had no clue one of the little girls in the videos Alek's dad distributed across the globe was his own daughter.

It was only when the faintest grumble of a hungry stomach escaped from the air vent did Brecken order the crime scene to

be shut down. It took him twenty minutes to discover Polina, and when he did, he responded quickly and without thought, which scared the shit out of the child who'd spent the last sixteen hours hiding.

Brecken said handing Polina over to a child services officer was one of the hardest things he'd ever done, but he believed she would be taken care of.

When that wasn't the case, he went against the advice of his handler and placed his name into the basket to take care of Polina. It meant he had to be moved from child trafficking to drug and weapon distribution, but since he believed the benefits would far exceed the negatives, he pushed forward with his application.

He's never once regretted his decision, not even when he stumbled onto a drug ring being run out of a shopfront next door to Polina's clothing boutique.

Since Polina never ventured into the basement of her store, too frightened by its dark, damp conditions, Vasily used her empty basement to store the stock he stole by "watering down" the real products with chemicals.

Polina had never met the tenant next door until a tear Leon caused to Vasily's suit when he caught him screwing his secretary on his desk saw them entering Polina's boutique that day over ten months ago to replace it.

Although at the start Vasily's interests in Polina were motivated purely by sex, he soon saw additional benefits of dating the blonde-haired beauty. He needed a bride to secure his inheritance, and what better person to use to do that than a woman he knew was desperate to reunite with her father?

Vasily thought the world had landed at his feet when he discovered the picture in the wallet he'd stolen from evidence matched the blonde his father was bedazzled by in under a second, but he vastly misunderstood the lengths real men go to protect the people they love.

The sirens the night I broke Vasily's hand weren't for me. In my anger, I forgot it takes Kronstadt PD almost thirty minutes to respond to a domestic disturbance. I learned that the hard way numerous times when I was a kid.

They were there for Brecken, but instead of taking him to Kronstadt PD to be charged for entering the country illegally, the corrupt officers handed him over to the Sicilians, whose lingering suspicions catapulted the instant they discovered the man Vasily claimed to have killed was alive and well.

They tortured Brecken for days on end for the location of the drugs Vasily had stolen.

He didn't crack—men like Brecken don't—but his disappearance forced an older and more deadly Fleming out of the covert operation he had been undertaking the prior few months.

Beckett pinched the title of “eldest” from Brecken by mere minutes, but he did what every big brother does when their sibling is in trouble.

He upended the world for Brecken, and it started long before he disappeared after his “arrest.”

The instant news circulated amongst his team that a CIA officer had been arrested for espionage, and he couldn't get ahold of his brother, Beckett landed in Russia under an alias.

He had no clue he was on the same flight as his brother until he unearthed the footage Kliment had stored on my

laptop when he broke into my apartment the night before the fight.

For months, Beckett worked behind the scenes to clear his brother's name, but unlike gangbusters like Kliment and me, he went straight to the source when he unearthed a connection between Brecken and the Cabanows.

He may have even taken down the people responsible for his family's pain.

From what the Feds discovered on a phone they raked off the bottom of the lake, Polina's public humiliation the night of my last fight wasn't the end of her punishment. Someone just took Leon out before he could place a bounty on her head as he had Vasily's last fake fiancée.

He's not a man to allow shame to rain down on his family, even when it is his son causing the shame, so he wanted Polina dead no matter the cost.

The Sicilians were suspicious of Vasily's shady deals long before Brecken's return. They tapped his phone, so when Vasily saw who he thought was Polina's father at the match, he sent word to his limited crew for the untainted drugs to be moved in case the rumors about Brecken having a recording of him tainting the drugs were true.

Local authorities believe the Sicilians finally taught Vasily the consequences of double-crossing the mafia. Only Polina and I have opposing opinions.

He will never admit it, but the boot prints left at both the scene of Pavel's death and in the marshland near the lake Leon's town car plunged into were the same size.

Fourteen and a half—the exact tread length of Beckett's army boots.

With the media's focus on Leon and Vasily's deaths, it took the Sicilians a few days to lure Vasily's top men out of hiding, but when they did, they were quick to torture the location of the drugs out of them.

They were in the process of organizing the shipment of the untainted drugs with a local runner when the courier company called Polina.

It is lucky Alek's men responded as fast as they did, or who knows how the Sicilians would have reacted when they learned the drugs had been moved again.

They were pissed by the interruption, and Alek lost two men, but the sole purpose of our raid was left untouched.

With my mood grateful, I don't fist Polina's hair and yank it back when she reaches me. I rake my fingers through her glossy locks before tilting her chin so her kneeled position doesn't diminish the eye contact she maintained while crawling to my side of our shared cabin.

I did the same when I coerced her out of the hiding spot in the storeroom of her boutique. She remained kneeling at my side for almost ten minutes, shaking and silent. Seconds never felt like hours until that morning, and I was beginning to wonder if her fear would ever leave, but eventually, she blinked before her nails released their firm clutch on my thigh.

Five minutes after that, she gingerly walked up the stairs to be reunited with her father.

I can't recall the exact words I whispered to her while waiting for her fear to subside, but they were similar to the ones I spoke while convincing her to hide. I reminded her that she was brave and that no one would ever hurt her again. That

she didn't need to leave the storeroom until she was ready and how I'd wait until the end of eternity for her.

It was only ten minutes, but my fucking god, those minutes were tethering. They tied me to her for eternity and secured my placement in her life for just as long.

My grief will never leave me, but the past six months have taught me that I had no reason to fear Feo ever being forgotten.

When you love someone to death, they never leave you.

Death cannot touch a love deeper than life itself.

Feo's son will learn that from his mother and me, but Polina's teachings lie solely on my shoulders—even if I must continually risk death doing so.

I love my girl more than life itself, so not even someone as dangerous as Alek Kotova will ever take her away from me.

If she goes, I go.

That is our promise I plan to keep until the day I die.

The end!

The next book in the series will be Natalya and Matvei. It will be called Deadly Intentions. This book is smoking hot and will release some time in August.

If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review.

Facebook: [facebook.com/authorshandi](https://www.facebook.com/authorshandi)

Instagram: [instagram.com/authorshandi](https://www.instagram.com/authorshandi)

Email: authorshandi@gmail.com

Reader's Group: bit.ly/ShandiBookBabes

Website: authorshandi.com

Newsletter: <http://eepurl.com/cyEzNv>

ALSO BY SHANDI BOYES

Perception Series

Saving Noah (Noah & Emily)

Fighting Jacob (Jacob & Lola)

Taming Nick (Nick & Jenni)

Redeeming Slater (Slater and Kylie)

Saving Emily (Noah & Emily - Novella)

Wrapped Up with Rise Up (Perception Novella - should be read after the Bound Series)

Enigma

Enigma (Isaac & Isabelle #1)

Unraveling an Enigma (Isaac & Isabelle #2)

Enigma The Mystery Unmasked (Isaac & Isabelle #3)

Enigma: The Final Chapter (Isaac & Isabelle #4)

Beneath The Secrets (Hugo & Ava #1)

Beneath The Sheets (Hugo & Ava #2)

Spy Thy Neighbor (Hunter & Paige)

The Opposite Effect (Brax & Clara)

I Married a Mob Boss (Rico & Blaire)

Second Shot (Hawke & Gemma)

The Way We Are (Ryan & Savannah #1)

The Way We Were (Ryan & Savannah #2)

Sugar and Spice (Cormack & Harlow)

Lady In Waiting (Regan & Alex #1)

Man in Queue (Regan & Alex #2)

Couple on Hold (Regan & Alex #3)

Enigma: The Wedding (Isaac and Isabelle)

Silent Vigilante (Brandon and Melody #1)

Hushed Guardian (Brandon & Melody #2)

Quiet Protector (Brandon & Melody #3)

Enigma: An Isaac Retelling

Twisted Lies (Jae & CJ)

Bound Series

[Chains](#) (Marcus & Cleo #1)

[Links](#)(Marcus & Cleo #2)

[Bound](#)(Marcus & Cleo #3)

[Restrain](#)(Marcus & Cleo #4)

[The Misfits](#)

Russian Mob Chronicles

[Nikolai: A Mafia Prince Romance](#) (Nikolai & Justine #1)

[Nikolai: Taking Back What's Mine](#) (Nikolai & Justine #2)

[Nikolai: What's Left of Me](#)(Nikolai & Justine #3)

[Nikolai: Mine to Protect](#)(Nikolai & Justine #4)

[Asher: My Russian Revenge](#) (Asher & Zariah)

[Nikolai: Through the Devil's Eyes](#)(Nikolai & Justine #5)

[Trey](#) (Trey & K)

The Italian Cartel

[Dimitri](#)

[Roxanne](#)

[Reign](#)

[Mafia Ties \(Novella\)](#)

[Maddox](#)

[Demi](#)

[Rocco](#)

[Clover](#)

[Smith](#)

RomCom Standalones

[Just Playin'](#) (Elvis & Willow)

[Ain't Happenin'](#) (Lorenzo & Skylar)

[The Drop Zone](#) (Colby & Jamie)

[Very Unlikely](#) (Brand New Couple)

Short Stories - Newsletter Downloads

[Christmas Trio](#) (Wesley, Andrew & Mallory — short story)

[Falling For A Stranger](#) (Short Story)

One Night Only Series

Hotshot Boss

Hotshot Neighbor

The Bobrov Bratva Series

Wicked Intentions (Katie & Ghost)

Sinful Intentions (April 25)

Devious Intentions (June 13)

Deadly Intentions (August)