



# HUNTER'S SCARS

FAYE PIERCE

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*My husband's prisoner has become my dirtiest little  
secret...*

**BRUTAL HUNTERS**

**BOOK 3**

**FAYE PIERCE**



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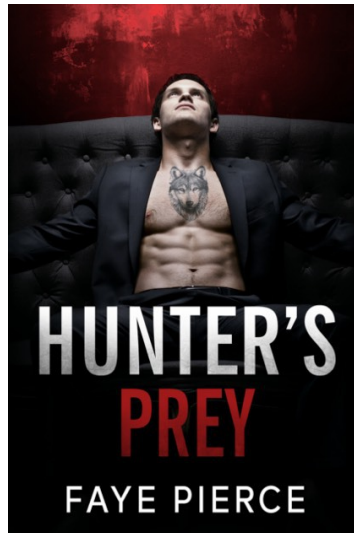
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## BRUTAL HUNTERS

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Book#2 - [Hunter's Kill](#)



Book#3 (this book) - Hunter's Scars

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## THANK YOU

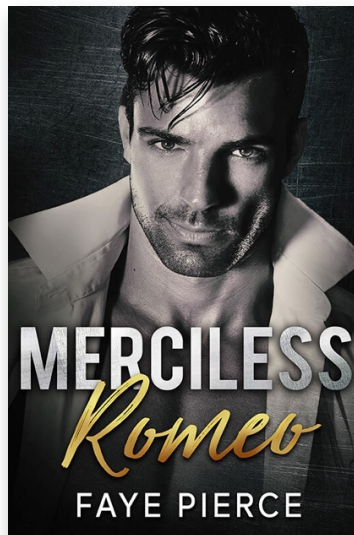
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I want to personally thank you for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me. It's a blessing to have the opportunity to share with you my passion for writing through my stories.

If you're a **true fan** of the **Dark Mafia Romance** genre, then you're going to love this story...

It is called "[Merciless Romeo](#)", and you can get it for FREE on Amazon.

**DON'T MISS IT**, as it will be available only for a few days!



Please click on the cover to download the book

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

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**Stockholm syndrome really did me one.**

**And now I have to deal with the aftermath of my poor decisions.**

Alek Ivankov is a ruthless murderous monster. That's what my husband says about the prisoner he has been torturing for a month now.

The Bratva and its violence are not new to me, but Nikolai's actions terrify me.

The prisoner's screams keep me up at night, and I don't mean in the sexy way. Although saying I never thought about him that way would be a lie...

I have to do something.

So, I begin sneaking into Alek's cell to heal his wounds. This act of defiance reignites something in me. And every time we

meet, I uncover more and more of my husband's lies.

It hurts to learn Nikolai is ruining our marriage only to get back at his definitely-*not*-dead ex-wife.

However, confronting him about his past has not gotten me anywhere, if not locked up in the basement with Alek.

In or out of a cell, I finally realize I have always been my husband's prisoner.

Running away is my only option now. And I'm taking Alek with me.

**Because the truth is lethal, and he is the only one who can save me.**

**If my husband doesn't kill me first.**



My husband's prisoner has become my dirtiest little secret...



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## PLAYLIST

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*If you need music for everything, like I do... Here's a playlist to listen to while reading my book.*

Muse - Stockholm Syndrome

Green Day - Jesus of Suburbia

My Chemical Romance - You Know What They Do to Guys  
Like Us in Prison

Muse - Time is Running Out

My Chemical Romance - Famous Last Words

My Chemical Romance - Bulletproof Heart

Green Day - Give Me Novacaine / She's a Rebel

Franz Ferdinand - Take Me Out

Muse - Feeling Good

Green Day - Church on Sunday

You can find the [complete playlist on Spotify](#).

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Dear reader, although I grant a HEA for the main characters in all of my novels, this is a **dark romance** and some of its content could be triggering.

*Hunter's Scar* contains explicit sex scenes (involving D/S dynamics); trauma; (on page) murder and torture; abusive partner; domestic violence (not by the MMC).

Please proceed with caution and be safe.

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## BEFORE WE BEGIN...

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Before we begin...

**If you would like to know what happened on Eva's 18th birthday...**

I think you may enjoy this **Bonus Chapter!**

This short scene is completely **optional** and not necessary to the story. However, for those who want a fuller experience and wish to indulge in every nuance of our characters' journey, it's a pathway I lovingly recommend!

Simply [tap here](#) and you can read it for **FREE**, or use this **link:**

<https://link.fayepierce.com/hmLfZN>

Or if you're reading this on a Kindle device, you can scan this QR code with your phone...



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## CHAPTER ONE

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### ALEK

“*A*re you ready now?”

Of course not. The man standing in front of me knows that I will never surrender. I won't break. No matter what he does to me. No matter how many days of torture he forces me to endure before my heart finally gives out and I die, I will not break.

I think that's what Nikolai Volkovich gets off on the most.

Even though it's a futile endeavor that he's undertaking, the bastard has always been a sadist. He likes hurting people just to see them scream. Something about him craves blood. Whether he's inflicting bruises on his opponents in the boxing ring or with full out torture, he loves it.

I swear the bastard is circling me with a predatory half chub in his black slacks.

Not that I can see much of a bulge there. Guess that he's not packing much inside of his pants. It would make sense that all his bravado and violence are a result of needing to compensate for a shrimpy, small dick.

I smirk. I can't help it.

The very action makes my eyes water with pain - the one that isn't swollen shut anymore.

Nikolai stops his circling appraisal of the carnage that he's inflicted on my suspended body. My hands chained up above my head have been numb for at least the last hour, maybe two. Every breath that I suck in feels like I'm inhaling shards of glass. But if thinking about the likelihood of him being lacking in the manhood department keeps me sane? Who cares?

"Something funny?" Nikolai asks as he grasps my chin in his beefy hand so hard I wince.

"No, of course not." I wheeze.

Nikolai snarls and releases me with so much force that I spin in a half circle where I dangle.

He's got to have at least seventy-five pounds of muscle on me and he's a good three inches taller than my six foot one. I have always been fast on my feet, but he's a brick shithouse. It really wouldn't even be match a fair match between us if I wasn't chained to the ceiling of his rank ass basement. Those stains on the floor? Not just my blood. It's rude, really, to bring me of all people into a room that he's already tortured somebody in before.

At least bleach the floors or something.

I, Alek Ivankov, deserve a little more flourish at the very least. A private torture room isn't too much to ask for. It's not like the rich bastard can't afford one with all his blood money.

Now my mind's eye switches to a delusional scenario where I'm being led down into Nikolai's basement and being shown various torture rooms like they are the finest hotel suites for me to take my pick before being shoved into one.

That thought makes me laugh out loud. The action might cause my bruised ribs to puncture my lungs. Only one of which is working right anyway. It's been what - two weeks that he's had me down here? With the lack of natural light everything blends together.

Nikolai *hates* when I laugh at him.

Sometimes, I think that my own defiance of him is going to break *him* first. What's that saying again? Topping from the bottom? Does that apply here? Torture from victim or something? It's just so *funny* that I can't seem to stop.

At least until Nikolai's brick fist collides with my kidneys and my laughter shifts to a spurt of blood from my mouth. That's not so funny anymore. I gasp and strain to breathe. My feet don't reach the floor so the very tips of my toes try to steady myself just enough to lift up to relieve pressure on my lungs as I swing in place. It doesn't help.

"Much better." Nikolai gloats before the chain holding me up is suddenly dropped and I collapse into the puddle of my own sweat, blood and drool on the ground. The chain from my wrist shackles is instantly shifted to the thick iron band around my neck that makes it almost impossible to hold my head at a normal angle - and I'm chained to the wall all over again.

Everything hurts.

No, this is something more than *hurt*. This is something that doesn't stop. There's no abating it. Nothing I do seems to make it better. I want to say something snarky to piss him off again, but I'm seeing double as it is. Vision swimming, consciousness only hanging on by a thread here. It's not looking great in my world.

"Have it your way." Nikolai speaks in a voice like razors. He swaggers toward me, full of false bravado and overwhelming ego. He squats down to talk to me, to relish in his little victory with a wry smile on his annoyingly chiseled face. "Tomorrow, you *will* tell me where that bitch is, or I'm going to start taking limbs."

I believe him.

It still won't be enough to make me tell him what he wants to know. I would rather endure his torture than tell him where my sister Helena is. My loyalty runs deep. If this is the very last thing that I can do for her, I'm happy to pay whatever price is asked of me.

My only acknowledgement that I've even heard a word that he said is a deep groan of pain as I struggle to roll onto my side so as not to choke to death on my own blood.

The sheer force of blood rushing back to my abused wrists and hands is painful enough that I almost don't register the kick in my ribs that Nikolai finishes today's session off with before he spits at the ground by my face. I don't even have the impulse to flinch before he turns his heels, muttering under his breath in heated Russian, and slams the door to my prison.

Leaving me in darkness once again.

I'm not delusional enough to think that I'm ever going to see sunlight again. I know that I'm going to die in here.

I think maybe it would have been a mercy for Daniel Colombo to have killed me. His visit last week was unexpected to say the least. Was it only a week ago? Perhaps it was longer. Time has been blurring together. Maybe this is all just a nightmare. Still, his mug was yet another face that I never thought that I would see again. He has more of a reason to want me dead than Nikolai does. After all, Daniel thinks that I killed his sister, Lilian. I forgot how much they look alike. Looked. Nikolai had offered me up to Daniel in exchange for making some sort of deal with him. I couldn't hear the terms of whatever it was that Nikolai wanted from him. But I do know that Daniel refused him and went on his way without taking my life. Talk about character growth. The Daniel I knew before, he swore he would kill me with his bare hands the last time we spoke.

The image of Lilian's face swims to the forefront of my mind's eye. And, for a moment, all the pain in my body disappears. Her lovely visage floats there, her smiling, laughing at something dumb that I said. And then it shifts to the portrait of rage that she was wearing the last time I saw her and the pain returns fast.

I'm almost thankful when oblivion pulls me under.

The black inky unconscious nothingness might be kinder still than the thought that maybe... just maybe... I deserve everything that I'm getting.

Time loses meaning so quickly.

There's no way to know how long I'm passed out for. Even with my eyes open it's dark enough in this little room that it's hard to tell where the floor meets the wall apart from when the occasional sliver of light appears under the door. It's not constant. They don't feed me on a schedule, so unless I want to start obsessively counting the seconds, I have to let the concept of time fade entirely.

It could be hours, or maybe it has been days before the door opens again.

At no point does my body *stop* hurting. The gnawing in my stomach is just as bad. Never mind the rest of the bodily functions that I'm pointedly ignoring.

I don't expect Nikolai to come back too soon - but when the door opens again I am ready with a sarcastic quip that doesn't leave my lips because the body standing in the doorway is far, far too small to be Nikolai.

Something dark and anxious flops in my stomach.

For all the death jokes that I've been making to myself during my lovely stay here, I certainly didn't think that I was *actually* going to die.

The silhouette of a woman that can only be described as heavenly comes quickly into the room. The little sashay of her hips is all I can make out of her features until she comes closer to me – the light behind her is so brilliantly bright that I can hardly even look at her for more than a second before my eyes burn.

The woman stops in front of me, and I can make out stunning olive skin and exotic features with a metal box in her hands.

She speaks, but in my delirious state I can't really understand what she's saying.

What game is this? Some new fresh hell, or have I died and this is it. An angel has come to patch up all the hurt.

“Am I dead?” I don't even really recognize my voice as I speak because it sounds so much rougher than I expected it to.



“Finally kicked the bucket?”

The angel smiles. A light all of its own.

Water - cool and crisp runs over my lips and I flap my mouth like a fish on land trying to guzzle every bit of it down. Moments later her cool, soothing touch is on my forehead before she replaces it with a damp cloth as she fishes around in her metal box of healing for something to help patch me up. I try my best to remain still. I don't want to scare her away. It doesn't matter to me if she's real or not - or if she's only helping patch me up with the express intention of hurting me all over again. If this face is the last one that I ever get to see, it will have been worth it.

“Stay with me.” She says in a sweet voice as she blots up blood and gingerly dabs salve on my bruises. Normally I detest physical touch but I'm far too weak to do anything but appreciate the soothing contact as she tends to me.

The angel asks me to stay with her, and I want to. I want to do anything she says. And anything is better than the state that I've been in until now. Except eternal sleep, which would certainly be the easier. But there is still a lot of work left for me to do on this mortal coil.

“I'm sorry if this hurts...” She mutters in a voice full of compassion as she tries to dip that same ointment from her kit between the ruined skin of my wrists and the thick metal of my cuffs. I watch as she eyes the thick band around my neck with what I can only assume is pity. She lifts her hand to touch it, and I flinch away. “...I'm sorry.” she mutters again.

I catch her hand, something my body protests violently, but I am shocked by how *real* she feels. I stare at the place where I'm holding her wrist in disbelief. My thumb passes over the inside of her wrist, seeking her pulse because I've almost forgotten what it feels like. I need to know if she's real or if she's an angel to carry me into the afterlife. I don't think I would fight her. It would be better passing than I could have imagined myself worthy of.

“You have to let me go if you want me to help you.” She teases with a hint of a smile on her voice.

My blue eyes finally lift to her and study the fine details of her lovely face. “Help me?” I ask in disbelief. “Angel, I’m beyond helping.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

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### ANYA

I've been hearing screams coming from the basement for weeks. *Weeks* of forcing myself to endure the fact that, despite this brand-new house in a brand-new state, Nikolai's already put in a torture dungeon.

*Not* the sexy kind that was in our last place in Vegas either.

I don't even know why I'm surprised.

Nikolai has always been the sort of man to get off on violence. He is the very best at what he does and most of the time he's a scary bastard. But he's *my* scary bastard. My protector.

But even still - there's only so much that a girl can take.

I'm not the kind of person that can just sit around and allow somebody to hurt when I have the power to do something about it. I don't have the stomach for it. Even if I had *never* taken the Hippocratic oath - I still couldn't have done it. I've been helping his personal doctor since we arrived here in Houston. It's not exactly going to get me my legal nurses' license but at least it allows me to practice. All the work that we do is strictly off the books and primarily pertains to the men that Nikolai brings in from this war that he's in with Daniel Colombo.

The same war that's been keeping him out of the house for several hours of the day - every day.

Nikolai will be furious with me when he finds out that I've stolen his key. I *hope* that he won't notice until I've had a chance to help as much as I can. He's expressly forbidden me from coming down here. Says that it's where he's working. Since we've moved here to Houston, he's made it expressly clear that I'm to be kept wholly separate from his work now.

More than just at arm's length.

I don't love that he's been pushing me away. We haven't been married for nearly long enough for him to use that as an excuse either. I tried asking Nikolai why he was keeping the man in the basement and he just said that he deserves it. I can't imagine what this man might have done to deserve enough pain to fill my nightmares for *weeks*. I can't sleep. More than that, I have to be able to live with myself.

I just have to hope that my meager training in first aid will be enough to help in some capacity. Even if I can't do much to help, I have to try. If I can just give it my best shot and know the extent of his injuries, then maybe I can finally get some sort of sleep tonight.

At least that's what I'm going to tell Nikolai if he happens to catch me.

The very walls of this giant house feel like they are conspiring against me as I sneak down the large winding halls and stairs. I still have a hard time coming to grips with the fact that this is something I have to do inside of my own home. But it doesn't really feel like that these days, does it? Whatever magical thing that makes a house into a home? This one doesn't have it.

I sneak down into the basement with the help of Nikolai's key and instantly wish that I had grabbed a sweater or something to fight off the intense cold lurking in the concrete halls. I hug my metal first aid kit to my chest as I wrap my arms around my body and slink down the long, winding hall. There's nothing and nobody down here. Which is for the best. I don't

want to run into one of Nikolai's men when I'm already breaking so many rules.

Most of the doors are unlocked and slightly ajar. But there's one that's locked and so I unlock it and brace myself for what I'm going to see inside of it. It's so dark that it takes a moment to spot the lump of a man in the back corner of the room. The smell coming from inside of the room isn't something I want to put into words.

"I'm a professional." I mutter to myself and summon what is left of my courage before heading inside. I've attended to gun shots and stab wounds aplenty in the clinic. Broken bones and contusions. I can do this. Nothing that I can see in here can look any worse than what I've seen at the clinic - and then I see him. It's worse. It's so much worse. I've seen Nikolai's men in just about every state and all manner of injuries from the war that he's in with the mafia - but this is something else.

For a moment I'm frozen in the doorway.

My husband did this. This brutality. My husband, my Nikolai, is the one that inflicted these wounds and put this body in this state. I know he's capable of violence. Some of it I like even, but this is on a whole other level. This man looks like he has one foot in the grave. There's a wheezing rattle coming from his chest each every time he inhales and exhales. I don't even know where to start. This is way beyond what I know how to handle - but I have to try.

It takes everything I have to keep my hands from shaking as I go closer.

This man is a stranger. Clearly, he's done something truly horrible to Nikolai for him to have done this. He's far too injured right now to be of much danger to me though, so it's a risk that I'm willing to take.

Only one of his eyes seems to be able to open and he looks up at me with a crystal-clear blue eye. Like ice in the dead of winter when the sunlight hits it just right. He doesn't move or flinch from me as I start to blot at some of the worse wounds. Everything looks like it's clotting at the very least. I offer him water - and that's the first real response that I get from him.

The bottle is gone in seconds. Who knows the last time that he was given anything. I don't even know if they have been feeding him. Not much. That's obvious. There are hints of the man that he once was when he looks up at me again. A little less crazed, a little less distant. I don't even know if he's capable of really seeing me or feeling what I'm doing for him but I hope it helps. Even if it's just a little.

Then he speaks. A rumble of words from somewhere deep in his chest. His voice sounds like he's close to death, knocking on the gates of hell. Maybe that's why he keeps calling me angel.

When he grabs my wrist, his touch impossibly soft and cold. He keeps a cage of fingers around my wrist without actually holding too tight, like somehow I'm the fragile one, while he claims that there's no saving him.

"That's impossible." I force a tight-lipped smile. "There's no such thing as being beyond helping."

"Why else would an angel be here to take me to the afterlife?" He asks. I can tell that he means it. I wipe a bit more of the grime off him and try again. I can't imagine the sort of pain he's suffering this very second if he's asking me questions like this. My stomach ties into knots and I bite back tears. No point in crying, I have to help him.

"I promise you I'm no angel." I force another smile. Maybe if we both relax a little, it won't feel so hard.

"Look like one." he grouses and slips back down to where he's lying on his side. The purple bruising on his torso bothers me the most. The pants that he has slung low on his hips are filthy. It can't be helping. He's seconds away from raging infections if he doesn't have any already.

"How can you tell? Having only one working eye and all." I tease, hoping to bring some levity to the situation.

The corner of his lip quirks upward and it transforms his whole face. Even as battered and swollen as it is, I can see more of the man underneath it all. I can't imagine how strong he must be to not have broken.

“Careful, he doesn’t like it when I laugh. Walls probably have eyes.”

A single fingers of his moves, attempting to gesture to the walls around us. His brow knits and he stares at his hand for a moment like he doesn’t understand why only *one* finger moved when he meant to move the whole limb.

I don’t want to think about what that might imply.

“Do you have a name to go with your sense of humor?” I ask, hoping to bring him back into himself.

“Maybe.”

“Very unique name. I’m sure you got a lot of crap for it in school, didn’t you? Teacher calls attendance and you’re just like, *maybe*.” I laugh at my own lame joke. More of a nervous gust of air than anything else.

“Stop, smiling hurts.” He wheezes and lets his good eye close. “It’s Alek.”

“Got a last name?”

“Ivankov.” he runs his tongue over dry lips. I move for the water bottle as the weight of his surname crashes around me. One that’s not *uncommon* but only one person with that name would have meant anything to Nikolai. The woman that he almost married. The one who caused enough damage that I had to repair him.

“Helena’s brother?!” I blurt with more affliction than I mean.

He rolls his good eye toward me. “Maybe.”

He is probably wary of me now, but I can’t stop. I can’t help myself. “I’m sorry...”

He doesn’t answer me at first.

“For your loss... I mean...” I mumble pathetically. How can I feel guilty or jealous over a deceased woman? What does that say about me?

“She’s not dead,” is his only answer.

My eyes widen in shock. Of course she's dead. Nikolai told me how he did it. He told me what happened that night. There's no way that somebody could survive a fall like that. I never thought to ask what he had done with the body, if anything at all.

"Don't put that on me, either. My sister is very much alive. And Nikolai is keeping me here until I tell him everything about her, but I won't. I have ruined a woman's life, that's true, but I will not ruin hers. I'm guilty enough without adding more to it."

"What are you talking about? Whose life did you—"

Whatever else I might learn from the conversation with this man is cut short by the door banging open wider behind us. Nikolai's hulking frame fills most of the open space and the rectangle of light that I was sitting in just moments ago is now in the shape of his large body.

I whip around to look my husband in the eye. I know he's going to be mad at me for doing this. I know that I'm going against his orders but until this very second the only punishment that I thought that I was going to get from it was a sound spanking. Which, I've never minded from him before. But the look on his face is something that I've never seen before.

Nikolai and I have been through a lot. He's done some not awesome things to me before the nature of our relationship changed. He wasn't always the man that I love - but I've never been afraid of him before right this very second.

"What the fuck do you think that you're doing?!" Nikolai snarls.

I scramble to close my first aid kit, but my hands are shaking. Why? I try to stuff everything back into the compartments as sloppily as I can, but it doesn't help - Nikolai closes the distance between us in the span of a heartbeat and then his hand is a vice grip around my bicep. He yanks me off the floor and drags me toward the door so fast that I can't get my feet up under me.



My hand goes to where he's holding me, attempting to pry his grip loose on instinct alone. "Stop! Nikolai, stop, you're *hurting me!*"

"Let her go!"

There's a clanging of chains and a rustle of metal against the concrete before the resounding clang of the man that I had just been helping clearly reached the end of his allowance. He must have hit that chain *hard* to make it make that sort of noise. I claw desperately at Nikolai's grip but chance a glance back at the man holding the chain attached to his collar in both hands - his swollen, battered face a mask of pure rage that twists something primal low in my belly.

"Got something to say, finally?" Nikolai snarls at the man.

"Let her go! It's me you have an issue with!" The man yells at Nikolai. There's such authority in his tone that I can *feel* it.

Nikolai drops me. Hard.

I fall to the ground, my first aid kit wholly forgotten.

Nikolai punches the man so hard in the stomach to shut him up that I recoil from the force of it. The man spits blood straight onto the concrete floor and Nikolai scoops me up before I can fully process what's even happening. He throws me over his shoulder and the last thing that I see before Nikolai slams the door to the man's cell shut is that striking blue eye trained directly on me. His mouth moves - and I focus on his lips to make sure I hear whatever is so important for him to say even if Nikolai has my blood ringing in my ears. There's a wild sort of desperation in his eyes. "Ask him... about... Lilian..."

The door slams shut and the lock automatically clicks into place.

"Put me down!" I demand.

Nikolai ignores me until we're upstairs. He deposits me heavily on one of our plush couches and holds his hand out expectantly. "Key."

I don't care for his tone.

I scowl at him and fish the key out of my bra where I had hidden it and slap it into his hand with as much indignation as I can muster. I refuse to cower. I don't break eye contact as he glares at me.

“What the hell were you thinking?!” He demands as he shoves the key back into his pocket. “I told you not to go down there. I *forbade* you from going down there!”

I sit up on the couch - but he's clearly not done yelling at me. “And that gives you an excuse to manhandle me like that?!” I scream right back.

“Do you have any idea what could have happened?! Do you have any idea what he could have done to you?! You were right up next to that bastard, Anya! He could have hurt you. For fuck's sake he could have *killed* you with his bare hands, Anya!”

I start to reply. I start to get indignant, but then I see the look on his face. The worry that knits his brow. The actual *fear* that something could have happened to me. Whatever I was going to say dies on my tongue as he sinks down onto his knees in front of me so that we're eye to eye.

“Whatever he said to you Anya, that man is one of the most ruthless, merciless, blood thirsty criminals that I have ever encountered in my life,” Nikolai says as he cups my face in his hands. His thumbs sweep out over my cheeks as he tilts me face up to his. Softly, I place my hands over the top of his.

“I'm all right. Nikolai, I can handle myself. He was chained to the wall. He couldn't—”

“He could. He would have. I promise you, he was just biding his time with you before acting. He doesn't deserve your pity or kindness and he sure as fuck doesn't deserve your cures.” Nikolai insists.

“I didn't mean to make you worry... I'm sorry...” I answer automatically.

“He didn't touch you?!” Nikolai asks with a far softer tone to his voice. “Are you sure that you are unharmed?”

I nod and smile softly. He loves me so much. “I promise. Nikolai, I’m fine.”

Nikolai kisses my forehead sweetly, his lips lingering for a long moment before he pulls me into his arms tightly in an embrace. “I’m sorry for reacting that way... I just... seeing you near him... I couldn’t...”

I wrap my arms tightly around him, holding him so that he knows I’m here. I’m solid. I’m okay.

“I’ll make it up to you. Dinner. Wherever you like. Anywhere at all - dress up nice and make a whole spectacle of it.” Nikolai offers as I pull back from him.

My heart soars. It’s been so long since we’ve been able to be alone with each other. It’s been even longer since we’ve been able to go out in public. My eyes lift to him, hope fluttering in my chest.

“As soon as this war is over, we will go out.” Nikolai continues.

That hope plummets like a rock in a lake. Of course he doesn’t want to go until business is over. Now that I know Helena is alive... that’s got to be why he uprooted everything. He was only moving on because he was coming to grips with killing the woman he loved... who betrayed him. He had moved on. To me.

At least I thought that he had.

How long has Nikolai known that Helena is alive? Is that why he moved us here? How do Daniel and his father’s mafia fit into all of this? There has to be more to this story. I’m supposed to be his person, the one he tells everything to and I have clearly been excluded from a lot more than he’s let on.

Is Nikolai lying to me?

I look up at him and his dangerously, painfully handsome face. The same eyes that I fell in love with. The man who I took vows for and tied my life to. I never had any reason to doubt him before right now, but the man in the basement had no reason to lie to me. I can’t help him, I can’t set him free. There’s nothing to gain from being anything other than honest.

If Helena is his sister... there's just too much that I don't know.

But more importantly... who the hell is Lilian?

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## CHAPTER THREE

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### ANYA

Lilian. Lilian. Lilian.

The name rattles around my head over and over like a mantra. Like a song that I just can't get out of my mind as I wrack my brain over and over again in an attempt to figure out if I have ever met a Lilian in my life. She's not somebody that Nikolai has ever mentioned to me. I thought that I knew everybody he worked with - his past, his history. I thought that he had opened up to me, that we were a team.

Was I wrong?

I don't want to think that he's capable of lying to me... no matter what he does for a living. Everything that he does is to protect me, to keep me safe and to build a life for us. A future. He's *always* saying that. Yet, this morning he refused to stop long enough to even have breakfast with me. He rushed through the dining room and ignored the plate that I had set out for him. He didn't even bother to ask what plans I might have made for us... today he was supposed to be home with me.

Instead, all I got was a rushed afterthought of an explanation that there had been a development in the war. He had grabbed

a pastry and winked at me as he breezed through and then he was gone.

I'm sick of war. I'm sick of everything that splits his focus and even more I hate that he won't include me. It's not like I wasn't raised in a similar environment. I could be useful to him. I do know a thing or two about what he's busy with. But no, of course not. Not something that a *girl* like me should worry about.

I think that was the comment that got to me the most.

I can't stop pacing. I would sit, but my ass is still raw from the punishment that I had received last night. He had spanked me until I screamed. Granted, I had cum just as hard as the pain stung but now I'm paying the price for it. At the time, I had been all for it. I had thought nothing of it because that was the nature of our relationship. But given how cold Nikolai has been to me all morning? Refusing to answer my calls or texts, location off? Now I'm starting to think that it's something more. Something worse. I feel like a crazy person. Does he *want* me to worry about him? To stay here in this prison disguised as a mansion? Is this some sort of punishment for not following his orders?

I am not one of his soldiers.

I am his *wife*.

And as such, I will do as I fucking please.

If Nikolai isn't willing to talk to me about Helena, I know somebody who will. Nikolai outright refused to tell me what Alek did to deserve such treatment. He refused to tell me what happened or how long he was planning on keeping him prisoner. In fact, he had started to seem rather pissed off that I was daring to ask such questions in the first place.

Then he had distracted me with his hands... and his mouth... and, dammit, I had caved.

In the light of morning my mind is clear. Clear enough anyway. There's no reason to keep Helena's brother alive if he doesn't need him for something. The rest of the Ivankov line is dead, so clearly, Nikolai is using him to locate his sister. My

only guess, if not hope, is that Nikolai wants to finish the job that he started.

It's easier to sneak down into the dungeons the second time because so many of Nikolai's men are out doing whatever it is that is so damned important that he can't have breakfast with me. At least, I think that it's going to be. It feels colder down here this morning than it did the last time. I'm overly aware of the thin fabric of my leggings as I go down there. The t-shirt that hangs off of one shoulder is comfortable, but maybe I should have grabbed something warmer like a sweater . I can feel my nipples hardening against the cold the further I walk. Even my thick, comfortable socks aren't enough to keep the cold from biting at the soles of my feet as I move silently toward Alek's cell.

No sooner have I started to fiddle with the annoyingly loud new keypad that Nikolai had installed last night than the front door alert chimes. Loud and insistent, I hear Nikolai swearing from the entrance. Adrenaline spikes battery acid into my veins as I run away from the basement stairs and up to see why he's yelling.

Nikolai is covered in blood.

Not an uncommon sight, but still shocking every time I see it.

My feet skid to a stop in front of him as my hands fly to my husband's chest in search of where he's injured. Nikolai ignores me until he disables the security system and re-arms it. He catches my wrist with a wry smile.

"It's not my blood." Nikolai says smoothly. "Do not worry."

His accent is always thicker when he's still high on his bloodlust.

I wonder absently how many people he must have killed today. How many families will be missing men because of my husband? Is it always justified?

"Productive day then?" I ask as I pull my hands away from him, the blood sticking to my palms. His only answer is a grin and then to wrap me up into his chest, kissing me firmly. I can feel the length of him digging into my stomach. Bastard. If it

weren't for the gore that he was covered in, I might be tempted to wrap my legs around his waist.

Hell, who am I kidding, I'm still tempted. Very tempted. But, given that we are technically fighting right now I'm not going to. I push away from him with a half-assed complaint about my now ruined outfit.

"You look good with a little blood on you, I'm not going to apologize for that." Nikolai breezes with an arrogant smirk before turning me loose.

The kiss left me a little weak in the knees, so I stagger a bit.

I didn't think that the conversation was over but he's already jogging up the main stairs toward his office.

"Wait, Nikolai..." I call after him, rubbing the blood from my hands off onto my shirt as I go. He doesn't stop until he reaches his office where Horus, his new right-hand man, is standing in wait. When had he even gotten here? The bastard moves impossibly silently. I like Horus, but I can certainly see why so many people find his nearness so unsettling.

"Report." Nikolai demands as he grabs an imported cigar and drops heavily into his leather desk chair.

Horus starts to give a report, and then pauses to look at me like neither one of them even realized that I am standing right here. Clearly, Nikolai doesn't want me overhearing.

"Do you need something, pet?" Nikolai asks.

The moniker is starting to feel like a leash instead of something sweet that he calls me in the bedroom. It's starting to make me feel more like property than I'm strictly comfortable with.

"Yes!" I say firmly. "I need to talk to you."

"I'm busy, maybe later? We can order in dinner from that Thai place that you like?" Nikolai offers.

Any other day it would be enough to shut me up. I would take the crumbs that I'm being offered, but not today. I'm not going to be pushed away as something that he only has to deal with



when he feels like it. I'm not going to be just another object in his house.

"I don't think that this can wait." I say firmly.

Something flashes across Nikolai's face. Something that I've never seen before.

"Who is Lilian?" I ask. Even just speaking the name that I've been obsessing over for the last day makes me feel nauseous.

Nikolai's lip curls upward like I've insulted him.

I just want to know if he's going to tell me the truth. I just want to make sure that this isn't all for nothing and that the man I love is still in there. I want to make sure the core of him, his heart, is still with me and that he hasn't already slid back into the version of him that I... the version he was before we had become what we are now.

"I was wondering when you were going to ask."

Now *that* pisses me off. If he knew, then why didn't he just tell me? Why wouldn't he choose to be up front with me so that there would be nothing to worry about in the first place? I'm tempted to say as much, but he speaks again.

"Don't you see that this is what he wants, pet? That man is a monster. I told you that. I thought this was settled. Do not listen to a damned thing a dying man says, Anya, he will say anything for his freedom. Do you really think that it doesn't benefit him to have you doubt me? To play with your mind like this?" Nikolai looks at me with clear disapproval. "You are better than this, Anya."

Guilt and anger swirl inside of me in equal measure.

"Then why would you not—"

"Is this what we are doing now?" Nikolai leans forward with his elbows on the desk. It's a little intimidating. Damn him and the fact that he's conditioned me to be so damned fucking horny the moment he gives me that look. "Have I ever given you any reason to doubt me?"

Well, *no*. Not *technically*. But the doubts still linger anyway.

“I know that you’re confused. I know that you want answers, Anya, but I do not have the luxury of time today. Do you understand that? You must be patient with me. As I would be with you. Can you do that for me?” Nikolai asks.

How can I deny him that?

I bite my bottom lip and nod reluctantly.

“Good. Then be my good girl and run along.” He says in the tone that always makes my toes curl. I know what that means. Be patient and then tonight I will be rewarded until I can no longer remember my own name. I do want that. Nikolai always knows how to make me cum so hard I see stars. Maybe I’m overreacting.

Nikolai gestures to Horus to remove me from the room. He crowds into my space until I have two options: leave willingly or be forcibly removed. I don’t tolerate anyone manhandling me but Nikolai.

I hesitate in the doorway. I glance over my shoulder at Nikolai, already focused on his work. “You promise that you will tell me later?”

Nikolai glances up with a smile that doesn’t meet his eyes. “Of course.”

Horus places a hand between my shoulders and pushes me gently out of the room so that the door falls shut heavily behind us - and that is that.

I don’t so much as look at the man trailing behind me as I stew in my irritation.

I know what I would see if I were to look into Horus’ dark features right about now. He’s not likely to tell me much more than Nikolai. He is loyal to a fault.

I can’t shake the feeling that Nikolai just lied to me. Right to my face. If he doesn’t explain himself tonight, what am I going to do?

“You should not speak to him like that.” Horus speaks softly to me in his mother tongue. It was just a fluke that we both happened to speak Arabic. A rusty language that I knew in my

childhood that I had dusted off quite often since Horus had moved up in the ranks. It was a bond, it had forged a friendship that I don't think Nikolai even knows about.

"I will not be just another woman who is afraid of making him angry. I can handle it." I say back with the same accented anger that I had used on Nikolai, albeit in another language.

"You should be."

"If you are so worried, then perhaps you ought to stop pretending that you don't know a hell of a lot more than you are letting on," I retort as I turn into my bedroom. I stand in the doorway to the massive room that Nikolai decorated without my input with my arms crossed over my chest. "Because I can tell that you know more than you're saying."

Horus is conflicted. He and I have forged a close friendship, there is no denying that. However, his loyalty is first and foremost to my husband. He would be betraying him if he answered my question. I understand, and I care... mostly.

After a long moment of tension, I can see the flicker of resignation in his eyes. "If he does not... then I shall."

I give him a look that clearly says "you better" and close the door in his face.

The moment I'm alone, sadness takes hold of me for reasons that I can't fully explain, cold, icy fingers wrapping around me and holding me tight. I pass the day in bed for lack of anything else to do. Does Nikolai truly not understand that, by moving us all the way across the country like this, he's effectively isolated me? He's all that I have here and if he removes that... what am I even doing here?

Nikolai doesn't come to dinner.

It's not until I'm changed for bed that I wander through the house in my satin pajama in search of my husband to come to bed with me that I finally find him.

He's in the gym, training. It's something that he prides himself on. He keeps his body in top shape and is ready for a fight at a moment's notice. He always has been. I know how disciplined he is but I thought that with the way things had been left

between us in the afternoon, he would have been ready to fix things. I feel like an second thought and I don't fucking like it. I stand in the door to the gym with my arms crossed over my chest. With his headphones on he doesn't even notice me.

Gone are the days where he worshipped the ground that I walked on, apparently.

Well, fine. If I'm going to stand directly in front of him without him even noticing me, I'm going to get my answers elsewhere.

It doesn't take me long to find Horus.

Sitting in the kitchen watching a rugby game on one of the many sports channels with a sandwich on a white plate in front of him. Messy, but a surprising favorite, I guess. He looks surprised to see me as I ease into the seat beside him and take half of his sandwich without asking.

"Talk." I say around a mouth full of food.

"He did not tell you?" Horus asks in Arabic as he cleans his hands.

"No, he does not even see me apparently."

"Fine... but you will not like the answer." Horus answers ominously.

"I'm a big girl. I can handle it."

Horus gives me a look that hints that no, I won't be able to handle it. But he speaks anyway.

"The man in the basement is Helena Ivankov's brother. We have it on very good authority that she is pregnant."

Just like ripping off a bandage, the news is laid bare in front of us so suddenly that I can't speak. I'm speechless. I don't even know where to begin with that bomb that he's just dropped on me. Pregnant? My first instinct is to question whether or not it's Nikolai's - but that's foolish. We have been married for long enough now that if Helena had been pregnant with a child of Nikolai's, she would have already had it by now. No, having his children will be my right and mine alone.

My brow furrows. “No, wait - what does that have to do with Lilian? That’s not what... there’s more to this...”

Horus is silent to a long moment, like he doesn’t want to tell me anything else that he knows. Fuck that. I’m not going to let him get away with keeping anything else to himself. No way.

“Listen, I need you to start talking right now or else I’m going to—”

Horus cuts me off with his steady words.

“The prisoner is wanted not only because of his sister, but also for the woman that he was once involved with. Lilian was the one who got away, to put it delicately.”

“From Alek?” I ask, confused.

“No, from Nikolai. Ms. Lilian was very important to Mr. Volkovich for many years. They had a very passionate relationship until Alek came around and stole her. It is my understanding that he feels that Alek not only stole his woman, but also planted his sister to move against him.” Horus speaks plainly, only offering up the bare facts and none of the gossip or details.

I don’t even know where to start.

Stole her? I don’t think anybody can *steal* anything from my husband. Now, that’s not to say that I don’t think that they wouldn’t try. I’m sure that they absolutely would. However, Nikolai isn’t exactly the sort of person that would let something like that go. He got to the position that he’s in now for a reason.

Which means that she left... or she had an affair maybe?

“Naturally, Mr. Ivankov doesn’t see things the same way. He claims that Lilian was the love of his life and she left Nikolai because she was pregnant with Alek’s child. Something about wishing to start a family together.” Horus finishes and takes what’s left of his sandwich back from me. I’m too stunned to eat anyway now.

“Did she cheat on Nikolai?” I ask, thinking that this is the most obvious question.

Horus wipes his face and shakes his head. “No, they were on and off. It seems that Ms. Lilian moved between the pair of them. At least that is my understanding.”

An ex.

All of this was about an ex? Because Alek slighted him? Nikolai was supposed to be finished with the Ivankov family. He was putting our own marriage at risk because of some petty vendetta from the past? Why should he care about Lilian when he has me now? There has to be more to this. There just has to be. Any other alternative just might break my heart.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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### ALEK

There is no telling what is a dream and what is reality.

It has all started to blend together. There is no longer any difference between being awake in these chains and drifting through my memories like they are really happening. Sometimes they feel more real than where I actually am. I only wish that more of my memories were happy so that I could disappear into them peacefully.

Guess this is just what I get for living the life that I have.

*The sun would be up in a moment. I had to get Lilian home but she was being stubborn again. She should have known better. She knew how cranky she tended to get whenever she didn't get enough sleep. In truth, if she hadn't told me that she was pregnant, I would have booked a doctor's appointment for her on account of her damned mood swings.*

*She had dropped the baby bomb on me like it was nothing.*

*And yet she still had insisted that we go out clubbing tonight.*

*Got even more mad at me when I stopped her from drinking. My child in her belly and she thought that she could just do whatever she wanted without consequences? That I would just stand by and let her put both herself and my child in danger?*

*The first fight of the evening had been about her thinking that I was suddenly trying to control her life.*

*I'd always controlled her life. She's never had a problem with it before.*

*She was hiding something. Telling me about the baby was nothing more than a smoke screen. There was more to it. Damn right she should have told me... but the only reason that she did was because she wanted to keep me distracted from whatever the real reason was that she was so upset. I was going to get it out of her one way or another.*

*"Alek... my feet hurt... slow down..." Lilian whined from behind me as she attempted to slip her dangerously high heels from her legs. It was too cold for her to be in a dress that short. Though, that was not a fight that I would ever win. Lilian had said a dozen, no, a hundred times how she only felt like herself with skin on display.*

*"Slow down?!" I shouted at her. I couldn't stop the fire in my chest.*

*Her gaze sharpened at my tone. Her arms wrapped around herself as she lifted a brow at me, ready for the second round of our fight.*

*"Because your feet hurt?" I continued. Normally, that was the part of the conversation where I laughed at her pain and scooped her up into my arms to carry her back to the car. She loved the princess treatment. Not that day. I couldn't do it. I could barely even look at her right then. My temper was being held up by such a fragile string that I didn't trust myself at all. "Lilian, I just asked you to leave with me... to run away from all of this with me and you turned me down... tell me why I should do anything for you right now?!"*

*My heart would not stop hammering in my chest.*

*I couldn't tell if I was more angry or heartbroken. I didn't want to investigate that too deeply for fear of the answer to that question.*

*"Just because I don't..." Lilian huffed and stomped her heel on the sidewalk out of frustration. I knew she was looking for*



*the word that she wanted. “Just because we aren’t... because I don’t... doesn’t mean that we can’t be friends... does it?”*

*I laughed humorlessly. “Are you kidding me right now?”*

*“Alek... I don’t... you don’t understand.”*

*I didn’t understand? Did she not know who she was talking to? Sometimes I thought that she didn’t really appreciate the depth of the things that I’d done for her - the sacrifice that I’d made. I’d changed my whole life for her, for us...and now this?*

*“This changes everything. Lilian. You looked me dead in the eye and told me that you don’t love me anymore. You told me that the child is your business and not mine... and apart from calling my fucking lawyer right this minute, I don’t know what the hell you’re expecting me to do!”*

*“Then maybe you should!” Lilian yelled right back.*

*“Then I will!” I matched her energy. Ah – it was heartbreaking. That was what that feeling was. “You can play this game all you fucking want. Lie to me, hurt me, push me away and it’s going to fucking work, Lilian! You are forgetting that out of all of the sorry bastards in this world, I’m the one who knows you. Really knows you.”*

*The timing of everything was just too perfect.*

*Dealing with Nikolai and then breaking up with me again? Dropping the baby bomb and telling me that she wouldn’t let us be a family? Pulling me close to her because she felt like she needed to be protected and then pushing me away when it wasn’t convenient for her? I’d never let a woman this close to me before her, and she was only reminding me of all of the reasons that I’d always held myself away from relationships. They were just distractions. Telling me that she didn’t know if she wanted to keep the baby when I knew how badly she wanted to be a mother? Whatever the truth was... she was drowning in it and she was trying to keep from pulling me under with her.*

*She knew I would do anything for her.*

*“This is for the best... Alek, I promise it is what’s best.”*

*“You don’t get to choose what’s best for me, Lilian. I don’t need you to protect me.” I was so close to begging. Pride had left the building. I pulled my jacket off and slipped it around her shoulders. “I’m not a man who scares easily. You fucking know that, Lilian. That’s my baby... our baby. Our family. I don’t give a fuck what anybody says.”*

*Lilian’s eyes swam with tears that slowly started to fall down her cheeks.*

*“I’m scared Alek... I’m so fucking scared.”*

*I pulled Lilian into my chest and wrapped my arms around her until the trembling stopped. “Whatever you want to do, Lilian, wherever you want to go... I’m right here with you.”*

Reality shifts.

The light of a thousand suns burns into my eyes so suddenly that I scramble back and away from the painful sensation with a groan of discomfort. This version of reality hurts more. Less emotional pain, but way more physical pain. Just moving to scramble away from the light is intense enough that it makes me want to puke.

“Fuck, I’m sorry... shhh... I’m so sorry...”

Not Nikolai then.

Nikolai would never apologize for anything.

A soft female voice whispers to me and for a moment, I can’t shake the image that Lilian has crawled out of my head and into this version of reality because they always blend together... and then I realize that I’m awake. Freezing, shaking, and awake.

How many days has it been since Nikolai was in here last? My tongue automatically starts to probe the space in my mouth where he knocked a damned tooth loose this last time. Maybe it’s only been hours... everything is so swollen that it’s basically impossible to tell. At least there have not been any new injuries. Nikolai is a very neglectful kidnapper, it would seem.

The woman in front of me is even more beautiful than my mind's eye remembered.

I groan as I push myself up into a seated position. Funny how the chains somehow feel *heavier* now that I'm starting to recover just a little bit. It's a mixed blessing. Feeling better when he comes back means that it's just going to hurt worse than the last time. At least when the pain is a constant, everyday thing, you can kind of get used to it a little bit.

"Nice dress," I comment as the woman squats down in front of me and then shifts her slight weight onto one knee. She smiles up at me softly and something in my chest loosens. Something hopeful and sad, a deeper part of me that's likely only that close to the surface because of how raw that dream I just had was. Memories tend to make everything just that much harder. Her hands are warm and soft as she checks me over. Looking for fever and wiping away some of the grime caked on my face. I try to pull away from her actions, it's a pointless endeavor anyway. She's wasting her time here. "Careful, you're going to see how handsome I am if you keep going."

"Charmer" She offers half a smile and then frowns. "I don't like the rattle in your chest."

I shrug. Not much I can do about that. "You're telling me. Feels about as good as it sounds."

I lean my head back against the cool concrete wall and let her go about her business. Part of me wants to tell her that there's just no point. It's not like I'm getting out of here alive, and all of her hard efforts are only prolonging the inevitable. I keep those sorts of grim thoughts to myself as she wipes and disinfects.

"Why do I get the feeling that you're used to this kind of thing?" She asks me finally, in a resigned voice.

I lift a brow. Perhaps it would be too obvious to tell her that this is *exactly* the sort of thing that I'm used to. I'm sure that she can see the sheer number of scars littering my body, only some of which are covered by tattoos. The majority aren't. Nikolai clearly didn't give me all of these. Though, he does tend to leave a physical mark on me every time that we meet.

I choose not to answer her question, but rather ask her one of my own.

“Aren’t you going to get in trouble for being down here?”

“How noble of you.” She chuckles. “Staring at death’s door and worried that my husband might be a little angry with me?” She shakes her head.

Husband? I had thought that she was a prisoner here like me. Or worse. Perhaps just the newest of the many women that Nikolai coaxed into his bed and then trapped there. Though, I suppose that being his wife does mean that she still technically fits that description.

“He’s not here.” She answers to my prolonged silence. “Not that he would care what I did anyway.”

The bitterness in her voice when she speaks surprises me, but I don’t think she’s going to give me any additional information even if I press the subject.

“Well, I’m better company anyway,” I grin with my bloodstained teeth.

She laughs and hits at my knee playfully, although the resulting hiss of pain makes her instantly apologize.

“Shit! I’m sorry... shit shit shit...” She starts checking me over for blood and only seems to calm back down when she’s certain that there’s nothing freshly torn from my sudden movements.

“Came down here to use me as a punching bag?” I laugh, teasing her sudden panic. It’s not like it hurt that bad. “I’ve heard that it’s very therapeutic. Might as well vent away too.”

“Like you want to hear about my drama.”

“I’m chained to a wall, gorgeous, I would listen to flies buzzing right now and be entertained. I’m certain that anything you have to say will be the most interesting thing that I’ve ever heard.” I flex and rattle the chains attached to the wall to emphasize my point.

“There is something that you might... want to know...”

I blink at her curiously. “Will the news guarantee that you will be in trouble? Because I think you’ve put yourself at enough risk here...”

It’s the truth. I have enough blood on my hands without adding this woman’s as well.

If she’s about to tell me something that would end up in Nikolai rage-killing another woman... I couldn’t live with that. I couldn’t.

She doesn’t hesitate before answering, like her fate isn’t something that she’s worried about in the slightest.

“Helena’s pregnant...”

Ice seeps into my veins. A lethal sort of frozen rage over the notion that my sister is pregnant... she’s going to have a baby and Nikolai is searching for her as we speak. I don’t even know whose child it could possibly be and it doesn’t matter. I shake my head, but the woman doesn’t move. It’s the truth then.

Fear and rage merge into a lethal sort of toxic acid in my body as I push away from Anya and pace the cell, limping deeply as I try to dispel some of the horrible energy in my body. Once wasn’t enough for Nikolai, was it? He couldn’t end one woman’s life and leave yet another orphaned child. Now he’s trying to land that cruel fate onto another? Killing them both?

“He’s doing it again...” I mutter, mostly to myself, before my fist cocks back and knocks into the concrete wall hard enough to crack bone.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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### ANYA

“*W*hat is that supposed to mean?” I whisper. I don’t want to sound so damned scared, but I can’t help it.

I flinch when Alek moves. He probably broke a bone in his hand with that little move. I make a loud noise of protest to try to stop him from doing it again. Punching things isn’t going to help anything in this situation. It’s certainly not going to stop the news from being true.

It’s not like I’m not familiar with men and their temper tantrums but I wasn’t expecting such a big reaction from the man in front of me. I guess I thought that it would give him hope to get through this, or something, knowing that he was going to have a little niece or nephew. I really had thought that it would be good for him to know... but now he’s acting like a whole other person.

“Alek?” I ask again as he presses his forehead into the cool concrete of the wall. “Alek you’re scaring me...”

That seems to cut through to him. I subtly scoot just far enough away from his range of motion. Just in case. Maybe Nikolai is right - maybe he is violent and unpredictable. Would he truly hurt me if I said something that he doesn’t like?

My gut says no.

But my gut's been wrong before.

"It *means* that he has marked a pattern twice." Alek says in a cold tone that sends shivers down my spine.

"Explain it to me maybe, because I have no idea what you're talking about."

Alek scoffs. There is no warmth or kindness left on his face as he slides back down the wall to where he was sitting a moment ago.

I miss the teasing smile more than I thought that I would.

I exhale slowly. I didn't know that I was holding my breath. Guess my gut is right this time. He's not going to hurt me. I'm being paranoid. Something that I never used to have a problem with. I wince at how torn up the skin of his back has to be from just that small movement alone.

"First Lilian... and now Helena..." Alek says as an answer. Not that it makes anything sound any clearer. I'm no closer to understanding his meaning than I was before.

"I don't see how it's a pattern if you mean because he tried to kill them..." I ask again.

Alek's eyes lift to mine, a horror deep in his gaze that unsettles me. What does he know that I don't? The pain on his face alone says that maybe... Nikolai is keeping even more from me than I suspected. How deep does this deception go? Can I trust Alek's word?

What choice do I have?

"...you don't know what happened to Lilian and her child... do you?" Alek whispers. The words shudder through the implications and worst-case scenarios run rampant. Did she actually have her child? My husband is a lot of things but he would never hurt a kid. Would he?

Dread turns into something terrifying in my gut as I realize that I'm not entirely certain I know the answer to that question anymore.

"I know that he tried to kill Helena... she killed his father." I stammer.

Alek's lip lifts into a cruel smirk. He almost looks proud of his sister for what she did.

Nikolai almost never speaks about his father. When he does, he makes it very clear that the man only ever taught Nikolai how to be cruel and to run the empire that was left for him. I don't think that the world is worse off for having been rid of him in the first place.

"You don't know what happened to her child." He says again to confirm that I know nothing.

I hate that I don't know. I don't need him rubbing my face in it. Clearly Nikolai doesn't tell me shit. He doesn't exactly seem like he's planning on being forthcoming either.

"So what if I don't?!" I snap and roll back onto my feet. Anxious energy builds inside of me and starts me pacing over the small cell because I can't do anything else. "And besides, don't you mean *your* baby?!"

Something darkens in Alek's expression as he lifts to his feet, and I refuse to cower as he crosses the cell to get as close to me as he can get. Even with the chains holding his wrists far behind him, the closest that he can get is about an inch from the tip of my nose. He's stuck, and I won't deny that it gives me a small power trip as he sneers at me.

"Watch your tongue." He sneers right back.

I won't deny the thrill that crashes through me, the way that my nerves light on fire. Something wicked inside of me begs me to push, to needle just a little bit more to see how far I can push him. The stubborn streak that I haven't felt since I first met Nikolai.

"And if I don't?!" I challenge, a smirk of my own playing on my face as I taunt him. "You want to hold it over my head that I don't know? Then *tell* me! I'm in here helping you and for what? For you to dangle half-truths? Where does that get either of us! I'm putting my ass on the line here!"

I'm snapping, something inside of me breaks. I can't be in this house with Nikolai if I can't trust him. I can't be the dutiful little housewife and just be here to look pretty. I'm so, so



much more than that. I'm supposed to be his partner - his *equal*. Not somebody who only gets to know bits and pieces of his life. He had let me see into the darkest parts of him before and he sure as hell had no reason to hide them from me now.

Not unless it was a darkness that he knew would break me. Something that would shake me to my core and make me see him differently.

I have to know. I deserve the truth.

Something snaps in Alek too. He moves so fast that I don't even see it happening. His foot moves and hooks to push me forward and off balance. I yelp in surprise as I stumble forward into the hard planes of his exposed chest. He manages to spin the pair of us, wrapping me half up in his chains as he pins my much smaller frame to the wall with his own body.

The fire inside of me roars to life - an inferno that wants to devour me alive.

I never did have the right bodily responses to fear. Why start now?

His knee pushes between mine as his body flattens mine to the wall. He's showing me that he's dangerous. He's proving exactly what he would do if I don't listen to him, how easy it would be for him to punish me.

Yet, my stupid body is so *painfully* turned on that all I can do is gape at him.

I never noticed that he has a little bit of yellow ringing the iris of his blue eyes. Even all bruised and dirty... there's no denying how handsome he is. His dark hair is unkempt and falls around his face in a way that is alluring. He shouldn't be - but he is.

I shouldn't be feeling like this. I shouldn't have these sorts of reactions to anyone other than my husband... but I can't stop them either.

My hands rest on the chain wrapped around me, holding. He's not putting any pressure on me, and I don't struggle against it.

“You have *no* idea what you’re talking about.” Alek sneers, voice full of derision. Clearly Lilian is a very sore spot, even all these years after her death.

For a moment. Just the span of a heartbeat, I’m jealous of a dead woman. That a man could love her so fiercely after so much time. Just the memory of her, to protect it so devoutly.

Then he turns me loose.

The absence of his body heat ignites a moan of protest that instantly humiliates me.

He turns his back to me, and I know that the conversation is over.

“Don’t come down here again, Volkovich.”

He says my surname with enough hate that I know that if I do, I might not leave.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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**ANYA**

Obviously, I didn't listen to him.

No man is going to tell me what to do outside of the bedroom, no matter how freakishly fast he moves or how vulnerable I happen to make myself from time to time.

More importantly, Alek apologized.

Part of me almost wanted to tell him that I didn't need him to apologize, that I wanted him to pin me to the wall like that again because lord knows that my husband hasn't been home long enough to touch me in a while. But of course, I don't. It doesn't matter that Nikolai is chasing after other women, he's still my husband. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

It's his own fault.

Nikolai left me here and it's not like the guards will let me out of the house. They won't let me explore Houston or any of the places that I might want to go. I have to stay here, where it's safe. The draw of a new big city to explore is practically singing in my veins and I'm not allowed to go anywhere near it. No tourist attractions or any of the good food it is so known for. What I wouldn't give to just go out and have some of its

famed Mexican food and drown myself in margaritas. Anything to let some of this steam loose.

But he would lose his mind if I went out because he might not be able to track me. He knows that I would never allow some huge security detail to trail after me. More importantly, Nikolai said that it would distract his focus and he has no choice but to be in Fort Worth, where the fighting is happening.

I don't do well alone. What does he expect me to do? Sit here and twiddle my thumbs for days on end? He doesn't want me poking around in his office - he doesn't want me touching his stuff or asking questions that I shouldn't. There's only so much TV that a girl can watch!

If only he had left Horus here with me, maybe then I could have followed his orders a little better. But I need somebody to talk to. I need to have something to do. Not to mention that Alek would die down there if it weren't for me feeding him. Nikolai either doesn't care or he wants him to rot down here in the darkness.

I can't do it. I can't let somebody suffer like that.

It took a few days for Alek to warm back up to me, and I to him, but this might be going a bit too far.

I look down at the plate in my hand. Yesterday he said that if he had to choose one food to eat for the rest of his life, it would be chocolate chip cookies. He said it would be his final meal. I said cookies were hardly a meal, but he had just shrugged. Said that he liked what he liked.

So now I stand here, ever the damned fool with a plate of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies.

It's going to change things if I go in there. I will no longer just be attending to his health and making sure that he's fed... this is something more. This is personal.

I shouldn't do it. I should go back upstairs and put on trash TV and eat them myself. That's the wiser course. I can't bring this man cookies. I can't.

My hand opens the door to his cell anyway.

Alek *groans* the moment the smell of warm chocolate hits his nose.

My face splits into a grin.

I try my best to shut out the intrusive thought that if *cookies* make him sound like that... what other sounds could he possibly make?

Alek's chains rustle and clink as he lifts his hands to wiggle his fingers for the plate in my hands. "I knew that you were an angel the first time I saw you." he smiles and damnit if it doesn't make my smile brighter. "Now I know that I was right."

"I still think that this is a very childish choice for a final meal." I pass him the plate and slowly sink into a crossed legged position directly in front of him.

"And I still don't care," he says as he inhales the aroma of the cookies so deeply that, even in the dim lighting from the still-open door, I can see his eyes roll back into his head.

I wonder why he hasn't tried to run away. He could overpower me and take the keys maybe. He could run out of here if he could break the chains. Maybe he can't break them. Maybe he's staying here just so that I don't get into trouble with Nikolai. The color is finally starting to return to his cheeks. The wounds have mostly all scabbed over and seem to be healing. I haven't been able to get my hands on proper antibiotics while locked upstairs so I still don't have a good feeling about the fever that seems to come and go from time to time. Still, progress is progress.

Alek pauses and gives me a side eye. "Unless you're about to kill me, that is."

I laugh and shake my head. "Eat your damned cookies."

We both know that if I wanted to injure him, he would be a far too easy target for me to take advantage of.

He holds the plate toward me, his eyes insisting silently that I eat with him. I roll my eyes again and take a single cookie.

That seems to be enough for him and he shoves at least three into his mouth at the same time. So much that he can't even properly close his mouth around them as he chews. He's lucky he's still injured or else I might have hit him in the chest just for being so gross. Crumbs fall down over him and the new sweatpants that I smuggled to him. And the flannel button down to keep him warm. It was a risk to bring him anything or to clean him up as best as I could, but I had to. I know that Nikolai's men can discover me at any given moment but at least I can sleep at night knowing he's not going to freeze to death.

At least he remembers his manners for the next cookie that he enjoys. I take a small bite of my own and shake my head. His answer is to grin at me with chocolate on his teeth.

"See? Childish!" I tease him.

He nods. "Guilty as charged."

Like this, Alek seems so much younger. Over the course of the past week, I've been getting to know him better. So long as we avoid the subject of my husband or the war that's presently being fought, he's great company. I know he wants to know what's happening out there or what Nikolai plans on doing with him... but I don't know either.

In the vulnerable moments when I allow myself to be truly honest with myself, I almost dread Nikolai's return. Strictly because I don't know what he's going to do to Alek or what the plans are. He clearly doesn't care if his prisoner lives or dies.

But I do.

I don't think I can lose him.

Being around Alek is *easy*. He has the sort of laugh that's contagious. Now that he's not actively internally bleeding and freezing to death, he's funny, and kind. Despite being in chains, it still feels like we're on some sort of date or something. I can't explain it.

I didn't think I would ever feel like this about anyone other than my husband.

Betrayal and guilt are an oily thing in my gut, threatening to rise upward. I try to staunch the feeling with another bite of cookie.

“You look distracted today,” Alek says around his mouthful of cookie.

When was the last time that Nikolai noticed that I felt any type of way at all?

I force a half smile and shrug a single finger. “He’s been gone a long time this time.”

“I’m the wrong person to look to for sympathy on that particular front.” Alek answers honestly and swipes his hands together to rid himself of the cookie crumbs. His gaze then drops to where my hands are wrapped around my bent knees, my cheek pressed into my knees as I watch him. “Is that why you’re not wearing your offensively huge ring?”

My what? My hand opens flat and I look up, startled at the realization that the familiar weight isn’t on my finger. When was the last time that I had it on? When did I take it off and where had I even put it?

Maybe my subconscious is trying to tell me something.

I don’t even know how to answer.

“Honestly, I’m not sure how you don’t hit yourself with that rock when you do wear it. I’m glad it’s not here to blind me.” Alek continues, changing the subject effortlessly as he notes the look of discomfort on my face.

“I must have taken it off when I was baking...” I say lamely. It doesn’t sound like a good excuse, even to my own ears.

Silence stretches awkwardly for a beat of time between us before he graciously picks up the conversation.

“Nobody has ever baked cookies for me before,” Alek offers with a wry smile. “When he does get back, I can die a happy man. So, thank you for that.”

The notion of the man beside me dying is something I cannot tolerate.

Fear spikes through me as I try to picture it. He's become my only friend... somebody who is mine in such a strange way.

"Don't talk like that," I whisper.

"It's going to happen eventually, babe." Alek smirks sadly. "This is borrowed time, no matter how good you make it. He's likely expecting me to be good and cold by the time he gets back as it is. Don't think that I haven't noticed the general lack of his thugs poking around."

I know he's just attempting to keep me grounded in reality... but I don't like it. I reject it entirely. I don't want reality if that's the only option. Why does the answer always have to be torture and killing? Why can't it ever be something else?

I just want to show Alek that he means something to me. That no matter how all this ends, I need him to know how much I care for him. I'm going to remember him, no matter what. Fate has to have pushed us together for a reason. I can't allow any other alternative. I just can't.

I don't know why I do it. Maybe I'm just lonely, maybe I'm sad. Maybe I have deeper feelings for this man who has been the only thing keeping me sane in this damned empty mansion for a week now that my own husband won't return my calls, but I lean in to kiss him.



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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### ALEK

*F*uck.

Shit.

I want to kiss her.

*Fuck* do I want to kiss her. I want to savor the chocolate on her lips. I want to see what she tastes like. I want to repay each and every kindness that she's shown me. This last week that she's been coming down here has shown me that kindness still exists in this world. Selflessness that I thought only existed in books and movies. I've never met anybody like her.

But she's Nikolai's wife.

She's Mrs. Volkovich.

I can't do it.

Anya leans in and I lean back, turning my head just enough that her perfect, lush lips brush against my cheek instead. The fresh growth on my cheek likely scratches her sensual mouth and she freezes. I can *feel* the moment that her eyes open in shock as her whole body stiffens. And makes me feel like shit. She's poised in a tense and uncomfortable position; she lingers beside me for a long minute that stretches on into forever as I

fumble and scramble for something to say to make light of the situation. I want to put her at ease, but this rejection is going to make me lose her.

I don't want her to leave me down here again. It's more than just the loneliness in the dark. She's the only thing keeping me tethered to sanity in here. I would have died days ago if it hadn't been for her attending to me. Left down here like Volkovich's refuse to rot. I can't kiss my torturer's wife. Maybe it would have been satisfying to me, once. But I actually respect the woman sitting beside me. I *like* her.

Not that she's going to know that my rejection of her kiss is actually a good thing. How can I explain something like that to her?

There was a time that I would have hurt Nikolai, lashed out at him in any way that I could, including fucking the brains out of his wife.

But that was before I knew her as a person.

Anya jumps back and away from me as if touching me has burned her lips.

"Sorry." I blurt lamely. I can see the deep red blush fanning from her cheeks all of the way down her slender neck. "Fuck, Anya, I'm so sorry."

My apology lands on deaf ears as she scrambles away from me, leaving the plate behind as she starts to make a bee line for the door. She's leaving. She's going to leave me down here. Fuck. I'm never going to see her again. Panic builds in my chest and right as she's about to leave and slam the door on me I speak again. I can't let her leave like this. She needs to understand *why*.

"It's not that I don't want you!"

Not what I mean to say, but I blurted the truth anyway.

Every night I all asleep replaying every word spoken between us in my head over and over again. She's infiltrated my dreams. I would have gone crazy down here without her keeping me grounded. I can't let her leave thinking that not kissing her had anything to do with her.

Anya pauses. I watch her hands open and close before balling into tight fists. She answers me without turning to look me in the eye. I've made her doubt herself, I've shaken her confidence. I can see it in the way that she's fighting her natural impulse to flee as fast as she can to get away from me. Her voice is soft, small, when she speaks again. "What is it, then?"

I sigh.

There's no way to explain myself without sounding crazy. But we haven't bothered sugar coating things between us yet, and I don't plan to start doing it now.

"I can't do that to you."

Anya turns. She shifts her weight onto one foot and looks at me with clear accusation in her eyes. "What is that supposed to mean?"

I have to tell her or lose her. I can feel it. She's giving me a chance here, and I need to use it as best as I can.

"I just... this is all like some sick déjà-vu, like a nightmare" I confess.

"I'm a nightmare?!?"

"No!" I answer. My shoulders slump forward in something like defeat. "Every woman that I get close to ends up dead. I can't let that happen to you. I can't have another woman that I care about die because she got too close to me. This game that we play, Nikolai and I, he's always ahead of me. He's one step forward and I have lost too much already. I won't take you down with me."

Anya says nothing, but I see the pity in her eyes as she looks at me.

"After what happened to Lilian..." I trail off. She's the one thing that I haven't allowed either of us to talk about. Even now it hurts too much.

"I am not Lilian." Anya answers gently. "If that's what you're worried about."

Anya's voice draws closer until she's kneeling right in front of me. The notion that there is any way in this world to compare Anya to Lilian is a joke. I laugh humorlessly. No, I've never met two women *less* like one another.

"No, that's not it."

"Then tell me what it is." Anya answers softly. Her hand lifts and cups my cheek in her palm. I can't stop the way that I flinch from the touch. I want to lean into it. I want to touch her. I want to feel close to her... It's been so long since I've allowed myself something like this. Even longer since my last physical contact from a woman.

I catch her wrist on reflex. There's a reason that I haven't made another move on her since my temper got the best of me a week ago. Anya moves to pull her wrist away but my hold remains. Her brown eyes lift to mine in silent question. I hold her gaze, something passing between us. I wish I could put into words what I mean... but I don't have the vocabulary.

It would be better to let her go. I should turn her loose and let her leave. Clearly, I'm a glutton for punishment. A masochistic sadist through and through. Anya stops struggling and I reach for her other wrist. She doesn't fight me as my hands encircle her thin wrists. I watch her carefully. I don't miss the way her breath hitches or how her focus shifts to my mouth. I see everything. The sort of desire that blows her pupils until the black nearly equals the honey brown. The sort of thing that can't be faked.

I lift until her arms are held over her head as I move us just enough to stand and rotate so that I can press her back up against the cool wall once more to give into all the same wicked intentions that had flooded my brain and headed straight to my dick the last time that I had her in this position.

So fucking beautiful.

Her body arches into mine for contact, silently asking for more as the pulse in her neck jumps wildly. Whatever comes of this won't be good. This is a dangerous line for both of us to walk. It can only end in disaster. There's absolutely no other alternative.

Kissing her would be worth dying for.

I lift her wrists higher until she has to lift onto her tiptoes or risk my cutting off circulation to her hand in silent command to move. She moves so easily, so fucking compliant to my movements. My touch softens as I smile in satisfaction that she did so well, a soft gasp from her lips like music.

I lower my lips to hers, just a feather soft brush of my sinner's mouth against something so fucking holy.

Like a moth to flame, I'm helpless to fight it. Her chin lifts, asking for more but not taking more than I give her, and I give her exactly what she wants.

When I kiss her again, it's consuming. It's the sort of kiss that burns hot and bright - a star always destined to crash. That's what we are. I won't drag her down into hell with me... but fuck if I don't love the small taste of heaven that she gives me.

*Absolutely* worth dying for.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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**ANYA**

*Two Days Later*

I have to stop looking at my reflection in every mirror that I pass. I know I don't look different. Logically. Yet I keep stopping to admire myself. My fingertips keep brushing against my lips as if it might somehow show on the outside how suddenly different I feel on the inside.

Nikolai came home yesterday. In the middle of the night. Woke me out of a dead sleep by his bulk sliding into bed beside me, then crawling on top of me. For a wild, delusional moment I thought that the extra bulk was somehow Alek.

He is not nearly as large as my husband but for a moment, I had *hoped* that the man joining me was the one chained by the neck and wrists in the basement. When my husband kissed me, I compared the two. Just for a moment. No longer than a heartbeat... but the guilt of it all was going to eat me alive.

I have no idea if he's been down to see Alek or not.

Nikolai mentioned nothing at breakfast this morning. He didn't comment on the fact that his prisoner was still alive and that *obviously* meant that I had defied his orders yet again by going down there and feeding him. There's no way that Nikolai hasn't put two and two together, just like there's no way that he's not pissed as hell about it too.

The waiting for him to punish me is going to drive me mad.

I've been sitting around this miserable mansion for *days* just slowly slipping into madness. If he's not going to let me out, then I'm just going to have to make him. One way or another. I can't even go down to see Alek while he's here. Better not poke the bear. But not seeing him is also grating on me more than I care to admit to myself.

Nikolai told me that he and Horus were going to be working all morning and to leave him alone.

Before he slipped out of bed this morning for coffee, he told me that tonight we would spend time together. He kissed me on the forehead and thanked me for being patient. Like a damned dog. He has to know that. He has to.

The distrust just keeps growing.

Maybe that's what prompts me to spy on my own husband. It's not like I can really be banned from doing what I please inside my own home, can I?

The door to Nikolai's office is closed this time when I approach.

My heart is beating like crazy. I press a hand to my chest as if that's somehow going to make it better. But of course it doesn't. I lean my back against the small strip of wall just beside the wooden door and strain my ears to listen to the conversation on the other side of the wall.

Nikolai speaks to Horus with a low tone of voice. I can just imagine him sitting with his fingers steepled in front of his face like he so often does, speaking authoritatively to his recently promoted right hand man. Horus' stoic face is the same neutral mask that it always is when he's in business mode. He's almost always in business mode.

The only exception is when he eats. The man is a closeted foodie.

"It's a trap," Horus says flatly to Nikolai.

"You think that I don't know that?" Nikolai snaps back at him.

Horus is one of the few who never seem bothered in the slightest by Nikolai's temper or its sudden and frequent flare ups.

"Are you considering going for the offer anyway?"

"Why not?" Nikolai answers. I can hear the creak of his chair. He's likely leaning back, turning to look out the window to gaze out over the pool and lawns. "I don't have anything to lose in the bargain."

"You cannot know what sort of men Mr. Colombo has amassed to guard Ms. Helena. Even though she claims that she will come alone, it is highly unlikely," Horus rationalizes.

"She's said that she is willing to trade herself for Alek. A stupid bargain made of love for a bastard who certainly doesn't deserve it." Nikolai's smiling, I can hear it in his voice. "She just wasn't smart enough to say that he still had to be *alive* when I trade him."

The silence that follows his words does nothing to quell the sudden roaring in my ears.

"Very good sir." Horus answers finally.

It's suddenly hard to breathe. I can't seem to fill my lungs properly. The room feels like it's tilting on its axis.

"It feels like a win-win for me, doesn't it?" Nikolai chuckles. "I'm not afraid of Colombo. He doesn't have nearly enough men in his employ to make a dent in our forces. If he's stupid enough to try to back Helena on her martyr mission, then I will have all the reason that I need to exterminate them entirely. More territory for us."

My feet are in motion before I can stop them. I run down the stairs and through the house. My slipper covered feet nearly slipping on the polished floors at least a dozen times as I hurtle myself to the basement. I don't have a plan. I know that I'm going to be caught but maybe it will be worth it. I have to try.

What Alek is supposed to do while chained in my basement I don't know.

Maybe he will have some ideas.



He will never let Helena offer herself up, no matter what the reason behind it might be or if she has some elaborate plan or not. He would rather die, I'm sure of it. And *that* is the outcome that I cannot live with. I can't let Nikolai do it.

I skitter into the basement and type in the code to his door with violently trembling hands.

Nikolai did come here last night before coming to bed.

The smell of the room - the sheer amount of blood alone is enough to make me almost lose my lunch on the spot.

"What are you doing here?" Alek groans. "Get the *fuck* out of here!"

I know he's warning me to keep me safe. He's trying his best to keep anything from happening to me. That's why I can't leave. That's why I can't let anything else happen to him.

For a moment, my worry consumes me.

His hands are lifted out to either side of his body, sagging in his chains, how he's likely been left all night long. No rest. No reprieve. His shoulders must be numb or on the verge of dislocation. I can't leave him like this. My hands hover just over his chest, his shoulders, the side of his face, never quite touching as if somehow I can magically undo all of the pain that Nikolai caused by force of will alone.

How could the hands that touched me so softly last night, the hands of the man that I thought I loved, who I thought loved me... how could they be capable of this? I feel sick knowing that Nikolai's hands had done this to Alek just moments before waking me up in bed. Those same hands had touched me... he had fucked me...kissed me...

I feel like I'm going to be sick.

Alek didn't deserve this.

He's never told me what Nikolai thinks that he's done, but I don't care anymore.

"I mean it, Anya, get the hell out of here right now," Alek yells at me as I fumble with the chains futilely.

“I can’t!” I breathe, panic edging into my voice. I don’t have a plan, but I just know that I have to do *something*. “I can’t leave you like this!”

“It’s not worth it, Anya, *I’m* not worth it.” Alek protests.

Just as a hulking shadow fills the open doorway.

“Finally, something that we can both agree on.” Nikolai says in a voice like thunder. Cold and dangerous, it sends a shudder of fear right up my spine.

Alek’s eyes widen in genuine fear as Nikolai comes up behind me. I don’t dare look away from him as Nikolai’s hand closes around my wrist and *yanks* me away from Alek.

Nothing like the firm, steady but comforting pressure that Alek used on me.

No, this is controlling. This is meant to bruise and hurt. This is a man forcing obedience from something that he no longer sees as human, a possession. His pretty little doll to be locked away in his pretty little house.

“Let her go!” Alek yells as I lose my footing. Nikolai hauls me out of the room with a smirk. “Nikolai!”

His scream for me is severed by the thick door to his cell being slammed shut.

“Let me go. Nikolai. Let go of me!” I claw at my husband’s hands as his grip on my wrist tightens so much that I fear he’s going to somehow bruise my very bones.

He drags me into the cell directly beside Alek’s and my heart drops into my ass. What is he doing? Is he going to keep me here?

“I warned you what would happen if you disobeyed me again,” is all Nikolai offers as explanation.

I thrash against him as my insides turn to jelly. The vice grip that he has on me doesn’t change, doesn’t falter, as he pulls a chain from the ceiling, and locks it around my wrist. I try to kick and scream at him, but it’s to no avail. Nikolai captures my other wrist and handcuffs it. I’m lifted until my toes barely

touch the ground and my weight is supported by my arms. It hurts. More than a little. The fear doesn't help anything.

"You wanted to be down here so badly..." Nikolai trails off as he pulls a knife from his pocket and flips it open. "Perhaps I should leave you down here."

Nikolai has always been good at blurring the line between pain and pleasure - terror and play.

I don't know if he is threatening me, or if this is just another one of his games.

The knife goes to my shirt and he pauses.

He pulls a small remote from his pocket and aims it at the single screen mounted above the only door in the room. A camera in the corner flicks on, the red light recording, and I can see the image of myself reflected in the screen above the door. Satisfied with the feed and recording, Nikolai sticks the remote back into his pocket.

"I suppose that I'm just going to have to teach you in a way that I'm sure you will remember this time, love." Nikolai circles me predatorily. He grips my hip in his large hand and sets me spinning so that he can watch me struggle to orient myself. I can feel his eyes on me like a caress, trying to figure out where he wants to start... what to do with me.

When he stops me, he grabs me by the chin and kisses me harshly.

"You remember our rules?"

I nod, relief flooding through me when I realize this must just be another one of our games. I've crossed a line. I will be punished. That's how this works. This is what I signed up for. Our dynamic might not make sense to everyone... but it does to us.

The tip of his knife drags down my chest without drawing blood, and then slices through my shirt, exposing my breasts to him. Another couple quick cuts of his knife and I'm naked as the day that I was born. My breasts lift high from my stretched arms. Nikolai slides his belt from his pants, holding the two ends in one hand as he watches me.

I know the familiar sting before it lands.

First a smack across the breasts to warm the skin. He will cover my thighs and ass in red welts before he takes me. That's normally how this goes. He warms my skin with welts until the pain is nearly too much, torturing my clit all the while before he takes me - fucking me so hard that I cry when I cum for him. Sex has always been an easy thing for us. I arch my ass out for him, ready to be punished, anything to get this over with... but he flips the script.

"Why would you run to him?" Nikolai asks in a low voice.

My eyes snap open, but before I can answer his belt lands across my thighs. Hard. I cry out in pain. Something evil flashes in his eyes.

Game, or not?

"Perhaps you're having a crisis of faith, *my love*." Nikolai continues.

Again, he hits me. *Hits* me. Not a smack. Nothing in my realm of pleasure. He's never *hurt* me before, not that way. Never left a mark that might hurt.

"You belong to *me*, and me alone." Nikolai seethes in my ear before stepping back and hitting me again. The strap lands across my ass and wraps around my hip... and I scream.

"Tell me who you belong to!" Nikolai demands, something wild in his voice.

So help me, I do. The blows come. Again, and again, and again.

My body blurs the lines of memory and what's happening. Confused, as pain has been trained into me to be something good. Something that I like... have come to *crave* and fuck if the fear of the man whipping me doesn't turn me on in its own sick, perverted way. I can feel it sliding down my thighs. The belt that hits my breasts, my hard nipples as I grab hold of my chains and hold on for everything that I'm worth.

"I'm yours! Nikolai! I belong to you! My body belongs to you!" I scream it until my throat burns and tears track hot

around my face and drip down onto the raised red welts on my chest.

Nikolai circles me, his eyes locked on that camera in the corner of the room, onto the red glowing light with determination. I see it in the monitor. The possessive, feral beast that is going to claim me, to mark me in every way that he needs to, to know that I am his and his alone.

“You will not see that man alive again.” Nikolai speaks in a low tone of warning as his hand dips between my thighs, feeling the wetness there. “Isn’t that right my love? Because you want me to spare him, don’t you? Your soft, healer’s heart wants to help everybody... even the monsters.”

My legs tremble and shake as he slides two fingers into me, giving me pleasure for all of the pain that I’ve endured, like the good girl that I am. I feel my mind sliding down into that safe, warm place inside of my mind - the peaceful place that Nikolai’s touch always coaxes me to. Nobody before him ever made that blissful place come.

He pinches my clit - *hard*.

“I asked you a question, bitch.” Nikolai repeats.

Bitch?

He’s never called me that before.

My lips part to protest, but he slaps my breast again, his fingers resuming their motions on my clit - blurring that line between pain and pleasure.

“Promise me. On his life. That you will never see him again.” Nikolai purrs in my ear.

“I promise.” Exhaustion is warring with the over stimulation running like lightning under my skin. I can’t tell him no. Even if I wanted to, there is no option but the one that Nikolai gives. If I want Alek to live, this is what I must give him. I can do it. That’s worth it.

“Tell me who you belong to.” Nikolai asks, his voice like velvet in my ear.

“You, I belong to you.” I breathe, the words soft on my lips as I barrel toward my orgasm - but I should have known better.

Close, too close, he removes his hand. The belt returns.

“Open your legs.” Nikolai demands.

I start to respond and realize what he means to do. I shake my head no. I don't want that.

“Excuse me?” Nikolai's head tilts to the side, the belt hanging loose in his hand as his eyes darken.

Fear grips me tight, and I open my legs, standing as far apart as I can manage. The first blow makes me see stars. The belt slick with my own fluids as it hits the inside of my thigh, then the other, and up higher until I'm sobbing, hanging in the chains, but even then, he doesn't stop. Each thwack of the belt to my sex brings me higher, my pussy abused and raw and somehow, he knows it, knows the limits that he's pushing and how close I am to cumming despite the pain.

I don't know how many lashes he gives me, they blur together.

I don't know when they stop, my skin screaming and angry.

I don't think my mind is even fully conscious when he moves forward and lifts my thighs in his hands. My head falls back as he fucks me, the pain and pleasure swirling together until I'm cumming. I can't stop, even as I scream, even as my body can take no more, can go no higher and hurt no more than it already does.

Nikolai uses me, fills me deep until he's spilling down my thighs.

Only as he tucks himself away into his slacks does he curl a soft, loving knuckle down the side of my face. I can't move. I can't stop shaking. “This hurts me more than it hurts you, my love... I do hope that you've learned your lesson this time.”

Nikolai kisses my forehead tenderly... and leaves me in the cell.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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### ALEK

*I* can't look away.

I don't want to see this. I know that the only reason that Nikolai is doing this in the first place is to hurt me. He wants to make me suffer for daring to touch something that he thinks belongs to him. You can't own a person. It doesn't matter what he makes her say. It doesn't matter what he does to her or the hollow words that he's forcing her to say. They mean nothing.

She doesn't have a choice.

Not really.

Stay in that cell and rot with me, or do what he says.

I'm glad that she chose the option that's going to hurt less. I can't imagine how Nikolai can stand to leave such welts and marks on such perfect skin in the first place. Anya is the sort of woman that needs to be put up on a very well-deserved pedestal and treated like the angel that she is. Nothing less.

This is the opposite of that. How she wound up with a monster like Nikolai in the first place blows my mind. I cannot fathom it in the slightest.

Make absent promises or get beaten. Everything about this perverse *performance* is to gloat - to rub it in my face that he can do anything he wants to anybody he wants. What the hell did Anya ever see in him?! The kindest, most gentle soul that I've ever met with that monster.

She shouldn't be with him. She should be with...

The thought dies in my mind as hot rage takes over. He's treating her like an object. No less of a prisoner than I am. That's why he's doing this. We both know that he's only doing this because he wants to show me what I will never have. Stuck in this room while he gets to bury himself inside a pussy that likely feels like damned nirvana. Unworthy bastard. That's what he is.

I scream at the screen above my door - hoping that somehow my voice will magically carry over to the room directly beside mine. That somehow, she will hear me telling her not to, that I don't want this... begging for him to stop, offering up wild promises as she's stripped bare and beaten. Debased and objectified right in front of my eyes.

I nearly rip both of my shoulders from their socket.

I scream at that screen until I have no voice. Pull and tug at my chains until my limbs are numb and blood runs down my arms.

Nothing makes a difference. Nothing helps her. Nothing saves her poor skin from his 'claiming'.

Nothing will spare her, as much as I try.

Just like nothing spared Lilian. Just like Helena was forced to plummet to what should have been her death out of terror of the man in the room beside me. The women closest to me all lived in terror. Helena was forced to run to another country in the vain hope that she could get away. She was shoved out of a fucking window and left to bleed out in the cold winter snows of Moscow. By fate, my sister was saved. Even then she knew that she could not stay in the country that she loved. She had to get away. Get *anywhere* that she thought that he could not reach. As if there was anywhere far enough from Nikolai that



she could run in this world to get away from him. Nothing gets away from Nikolai. Nothing will stop him coming after what he wants. Does Anya know that's why they relocated to Texas? So that he can finish the murder of my sister and everything that she loves and holds dear?

I grind my teeth so hard that I swear I feel something crack.

Guilt consumes me. This is what he does for thinking that his wife has so much as *spoken* to another man? Or was it just because it was me? I will never forgive myself for this, for inflicting this upon her.

I should have never spoken to her.

Never gotten to know her.

I should have made sure that she left and never had anything to do with me again. I should have frightened her into leaving just so that I could spare her this.

I certainly never should have kissed her. I should have never crossed that line.

If Nikolai ever finds out, I don't know what he will do. I fear to even think about it.

I've never felt this useless in my entire life. Stuck only feet away and I can't do anything but watch. I have no way to take this pain away from her. I don't have a way to ease her suffering or make it better other than to witness her debasement and hope that on some level, she knows that she's not alone, even if a thick concrete wall separates us.

I make a silent promise to myself, and to Anya.

Nikolai will pay for this. If it's the last thing that I ever do.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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### ANYA

The next three days, Nikolai pampers me.

Takes me to a spa that he's purchased so that I can have all my wounds rejuvenated and pampered until I'm beyond spoiled. But it doesn't erase the bruises. It doesn't ease the bone deep ache in my shoulders or the burning shred of my throat. Every move hurts. Does he know that? Does he care? There was a time that I had relished the love bites and bruises that he left in our moments of passion. But this? This is something else. I can't sit. I can hardly walk because of how my thighs brush together. All that I want to do is soak in my tub and cry until the ache inside of me eases.

But even that's not allowed.

It's almost performative. The way that he trots me out of the house and holds my hand on the way to each and every new location that he takes me to. I know he's trying to assuage his guilt. To trick me into thinking that nothing is wrong and that I deserved that level of punishment.

I didn't.

Did I?

Jewels. Dresses. Manicure. Pedicure. Salves and ointments all luxuriated upon me.

Nikolai bathes me. Buys me a whole new wardrobe and takes me to dinner. He must feel bad, or else he wouldn't bother, right? He loves me, he just got a little carried away. That's all that was, Nikolai would never want to actually hurt me. Right?

I think I would have bought it, this new leaf that he's pretending to turn over, had he not left me in the cell. I couldn't sleep that night. I stood there, in agony, for *hours*. My mind had run wild, going over every possible scenario and playing the whole scene over in my head. This isn't the man I love. More than that, this isn't a man who loves me. Not like I thought that he did.

I let him do it.

I let him spoil me. I let him hurt me. I wear the bruises like reminders, the welts that ache every time I move. The same marks that had made Horus do a *triple* take when he saw me at lunch the day after. The bruises that only seem to be getting worse.

I can't do this.

This isn't the woman that I am.

But I smiled, and I endured. I let the monster touch me, hold me and fuck me every day on every surface that he wanted because he was acting like it was the early days of our marriage, where I just couldn't keep my hands off him. I wanted him. Craved him. I needed him inside me every minute of the day like a drug addict.

How could I have been so foolish? So blind as to think that a man like this could ever change. It was temporary. I bet Helena once thought the same thing, and Lilian before that. I'm just the next girl on his hit list, aren't I?

Unless I agree to be his little doll. But even then, he might only play with me until he breaks me completely. Then on to the next. Isn't that what Alek was saying to me? Twice makes a pattern. What does three make? Habit? Does Nikolai actually respect women at all?

Three days is all my husband's affection lasts before he packs up and ships off to Fort Worth. Back to his damned little war. Back to make a sacrifice out of Helena. I hope it is a trap. I hope that it snaps on him and eats him alive.

Leaving me in that cell for hours in the worst pain that I've ever felt might just be the very best thing that he's ever done for me.

I remember who I am now.

Horus stays behind to watch me, and he can watch as I get the fuck out of here. He won't stop me. I won't let him.

Nikolai has only been gone for a handful of hours before I'm back in the cells again.

I can't even look at the one he dragged me out of. I know what I will see there. Blood, semen and sweat pooling the floor under where I hung. Where I cried for hours begging Nikolai to come back, to free me. Sobbing until I couldn't breathe as my limbs went numb. Where I had been forced to soil myself from pain. Never again. He will never touch me again.

Nikolai thinks that he broke me.

I will let him think whatever he wants.

I open Alek's cell and enter silently.

"No," he says immediately, his voice strained. He is weak. No doubt Nikolai hasn't fed him in three days. I brought a water bottle and I put it to his lips, but he spits it out. "Get out of here. I won't do this, I won't let him hurt you because of me again."

"Shut up." I say softly and bring the water bottle to his lips again.

If he doesn't drink it, I'm going to shove it down his throat.

"Get out." He says as water dribbles out of the corners of his mouth.

I stop long enough to look him directly in the eyes. "That's what I'm doing."

"No, you have to run. You have to get out of here."

“That’s what I’m doing.” I repeat just as firmly, hoping that he will understand. “You’re coming with me.”

“He will kill you.”

I don’t answer him as I start trying to figure out a way to get him loose from his chains. I manage to free the shackles on his wrists, but the one around his neck, rooting him to the far wall doesn’t budge. I’ve never seen a keyhole like it before. I swear softly under my breath.

Well. Where there’s a lock there has to be a key. I just have to find it.

I leave the door wide open as I leave, searching for some sort of tool that I can use to break the chain somehow, or something that I can use to try to break the lock. Either way, we have to get out of here before Nikolai comes back. He will kill us both for this, and I just can’t let that happen. There’s no way of knowing how long he will be gone for.

I run into the kitchen, scrambling through drawers, looking for something, *anything*, that might help me even just a little bit. I find nothing. Knives would be fine for protecting myself but they won’t do anything against that thick iron chain.

“Mrs. Volkovich, what are you doing?” Horus’s voice cuts from the doorway.

I freeze.

Horus is my friend. At least, I think that we have become something like to friends in the years that he’s served my husband... but his loyalty is to Nikolai. Not me.

I spin slowly, looking him right in his dark eyes. He stands in a dark purple suit that makes his dark skin look flawless. He’s always so expertly tailored. His face belies no emotion whatsoever. I have no idea what he must be thinking. What is he going to do? His hands are clasped gently behind his back, but I know just how damn lethal he can be when he wants to be. I’ve never seen anybody move as swiftly or strike as fast as Horus can. Everything is going to be ruined before it even has a chance to start. If Horus stops me... it’s over. I’ll be stuck

here forever. A deep feeling of hopelessness settles painfully in my gut.

Tears trickle out of the corners of my eyes.

I watch as his dark eyes slide over me, fear building in my gut as he seems to count each bruise that's presently visible. He looks at the deep lines on my wrists and lingers on my breasts and thighs. Not in admiration, but examination. Nothing but cruel scrutiny in his gaze as if he is attempting to count the number of marks that Nikolai must have left on my skin. The physical wounds are only the beginning of the damage that Nikolai did three nights ago.

"I can't..." I whisper in Arabic, begging him. For what, I don't know. "Help me..."

Horus swallows thickly. "Mr. Volkovich left very specific instructions on how you were to be handled, Mrs. Anya. He said what I was to do if you attempted to move against his wishes."

That dark feeling inside of me grows until I think that it might swallow me whole. "No..." I plead. I don't even care that I'm begging. Not to him.

To Horus' credit, he doesn't look like he wants to stop me any more than I want to stay here.

"Don't do it, he doesn't have to know..." But even as the words leave my lips, I know that if Horus doesn't tell on me, and the people monitoring the many, many security cameras too, that it's Horus's life on the line. I can't ask him to die for me. That's something that Nikolai and I have never had in common. Even as my chin wobbles and my eyes beg him to reconsider, I know what's coming before it happens.

Horus moves like the shadow of death himself.

One moment he's standing in front of me, and then next thing I know he's behind me and then everything goes black.



I awaken in chains.

I can feel them banded around my ankles. The thick, cold metal is already irritating my skin as I slowly push myself up into a sitting position. My head is throbbing worse than any hangover I've ever had in my life. For a short, delusional moment I think that Nikolai simply forgot that we were playing and did not uncuff me, although he never used metal in the bedroom.

Oh yeah.

It all comes rushing back to me and panic builds. Higher and higher it goes until I feel like I'm hyperventilating. My hands do a quick examination of my body - nothing broken or bruised. Horus was not cruel when he locked me down here. I am certain that he likely laid me out on the ground carefully before chaining me up, praying the whole time for forgiveness for what he had no choice but to do.

I get it. It doesn't make me hate it any less.

I swallow hard against the darkness. It feels like the walls are closing in on me. My mind rushes to Alek. He's had to endure this cold, damp, darkness for *weeks* now. He hasn't broken. I won't either. Even if my heart feels like it's about to beat clear out of my chest, I can do this. I tell myself that over and over again. I can do this. An opportunity will come. I just have to wait. I have to stay calm. I need to *think*.

This is the third time that Nikolai has imprisoned me against his will.

I can't believe that I allowed myself to be so damned stupid.

I blink back tears of frustration, rage, and terror as I start to crawl toward the door - or as close to the door as I can reach before the chain around my ankle stops me from going any further. I pull and pull, until it feels like my foot is going to be severed from my body, but it doesn't do any good.

I scream for help until my throat burns and I can taste iron in the back of it.

He can't keep me down here forever.

Can he? This can't be my life. What sort of marriage will this be for me? To be nothing more than an object to fuck and play

with when he's bored? Not a human and certainly not a woman... To be locked away like some animal whenever he feels like it?! Absolutely not.

But I can still feel part of my spirit breaking as I sink to the cold ground. I let the raw concrete leech the warmth from my body as I lay prone and hot, salty tears of bitterness flow from my face. I'm not Alek. I can't do this for weeks. I need sunlight. I've been going so stir crazy locked away in this house as it is. I can't stay here in this tiny room.

I won't make it.

Just then the screen that I hadn't noticed above the door to my cell flickers to life. It takes a moment before I realize what I'm looking at - it's Alek's cell. Alek, who is standing and straining at his chains while screaming something at me that I can't hear. His desperation is clear on his face as he stares up at the screen above his own door. I don't know if I want to know what he's looking at... but it's enough to have me slowly push up again. It's enough of a distraction to *try* again.

Then the audio connects our two rooms, and his frantic shouting fills the small space so loudly that I flinch from it, and Alek stops.

"Fuck! Sorry!" He apologizes. Clearly, he didn't know that they were going to change the audio. It's crazy to me that we share a wall, and I hadn't heard a single sound from him until the audio connected. I don't know what purpose allowing us to see and hear one another serves... unless Horus is still looking out for me as much as he can.

"Can you hear me?" Alek asks, his voice rough from shouting.

I nod. I don't trust my own voice right now.

"I'm here, it's going to be okay. I'm with you Anya," Alek says in a soothing voice, never once looking away from the monitor.

I bring my knees up to my chest and hug them. I nod once that I heard him, his comforting words that I'm not alone in this, but I can't stop crying.



“We will get out of this, together, Anya, I promise.” Alek swears in the same kind voice.

I nod once more, but hope is fading fast.



There’s no way of knowing how many hours pass before the door to the cell opens again.

I must have passed out from the cold at some point because I don’t realize that I’m no longer alone until I can smell Horus’ oaky cologne. A thick, warm blanket is draped over my shoulders and another one is placed, folded, within my reach. His eyes are a silent apology as he places down a plastic plate with my dinner on it. Certainly, a lot better than what they are throwing in there for Alek, I’m sure.

I’m tempted to say so.

But I’m too angry. I’m too pissed off that this is all that our friendship means. Warm food and a blanket?

“Let me go.” I say flatly, holding his gaze as his lips pull into a thin line.

He says nothing as he leaves.



The days pass like that.

At least, I think it’s days. I *think* that Horus is coming down here at regular intervals to bring me food, but there’s no way to know that for sure. I stop even rolling over to glare at him as he comes into the room. Nikolai is winning. He’s breaking me. How much longer can I stay down here before I’m willing to give everything, *anything* to get out of here? How much more of this can I take? Everything seems to blend together. Days and night pass without end. At least that’s what it feels like. When the screens are allowed to be on, Alek and I pass the time talking about our lives, our childhoods - nothing that could condemn us if tortured out of it. I have no way of knowing what Nikolai is going to do to me when he returns home... much less Alek. We talk through the hours as if Nikolai doesn’t exist.

I wish he didn't.

I wish that I had never met Nikolai. Never touched him. Never gotten involved.

Alek is now the only good thing that has ever come from my knowing Nikolai.

Wouldn't it just fill my husband with rage if he were to know that little fact?

Every day, Horus comes, and I beg him to let us out. My temper is fragile and volatile as I shout at him for being a coward and a failure.

I wish I could say that I am wearing him down, but I doubt it.

Then, one day, the plate of food is different. A large piece of bread covering up a burner cell phone. Given the security, how can he have given me a burner phone without thinking that one of the men would see me using it? I look around the cell, hunger forgotten, and search for anywhere that the camera can't see me. I look up at Alek's screen to see for dead space...but they will still hear me.

I scoot against the back corner of the wall, hunched over and cover the glow of the flip phone with my body. I power it on and there's a message on the home screen.

*You have one hour - use it wisely.*

I open the contacts and there's only one number...

One hour. Clearly this number is somebody that Horus believes will help me the most... somebody that can get us out of here maybe? A place that we can go? I look up at the screen and wave the phone at Alek.

"What is that?!"

"What's it look like?" I answer with a smile. "Tables are turning, my friend."

Friend doesn't feel like the right term for how I feel about him.

"You're getting out!!" Alek exclaims, genuinely happy for me. I can see it on his face. He doesn't even presume that I'm taking him with me?

*“We are getting out, Alek. I’m not leaving without you.”*

Alek doesn’t answer.

*“Do you know this number?”* It’s a shot in the dark as I read the number out to him, but he shakes his head no.

*“Call it anyway?”* Alek suggests.

Like we have a choice.

The only other numbers that I have memorized won’t do me any good. My father’s old lawyers and bail bondsmen certainly won’t help. They have long since moved on since my father’s death.

*“I don’t know why I feel so nervous…”* I confess as I start to dial.

*“You’re braver than you know.”* Alek says, something in his voice that I can’t quite place. I almost want to bite my nails, a nasty habit that I kicked when I was a kid.

The other end of the line picks up, but nobody answers.

*“Hello?”* I ask, hoping against hope.

*“Who is this, and how did you get this number?”*

Shit. I didn’t think of what to say next. I can’t use my married name, everybody knows my husband. My maiden name will get me nowhere. *“…Anya.”*

I close my eyes, embarrassed and frustrated because that means nothing.

*“Anya?”* The man repeats in a deep, calm voice. *“Ah yes, I remember you.”*

*“You do?!”* The voice doesn’t sound at all familiar to me.

*“Tell Volkovich that he’s reached a new low if his wife is doing his dirty work.”*

And the call ends.

I call back frantically, my hands shaking so hard it’s almost impossible to dial. Straight to voicemail.

“Shit, shit, shit!” I mutter, fear gripping my gut as I dial a third and fourth time.

On the fourth time he answers.

“This is a new fucking low! Even for you, Nikolai!” The man shouts on the other end of the line, but Alek interrupts.

“Daniel!” Alek shouts through the video screen.

Daniel? The man with Helena? The pieces start to fall into place.

“Daniel, it’s me! It’s Alek! Don’t hang up! Please, just a few minutes of your time!”

The other end of the phone is silent. So silent that for a minute I think that he’s dropped the phone or walked away entirely.

Alek wastes no more time. “Anya is not with Nikolai, she’s here, locked up with me. Nikolai is making moves, big fucking moves and he’s doing it fast. You’re walking into a trap. You cannot let Helena use herself as bait. He knows everything. *Everything.*”

I feel the need to defend Alek, just in case Daniel thinks that Alek ratted him out when he did no such thing.

“Leave me here if you need to, tell Helena it’s what I want, but I need you to keep her safe. Tell her anything to make her stop, tell her that I’m already dead. Anything to keep her out of that monster’s hands.”

“It’s too late for that, Alek.” Daniel says softly.

The sounds of an argument sound in the background of the phone call. A struggle for who is going to speak next.

“Alek?!! Alek?!!”

That must be Helena.

Alek’s face breaks with pain and relief. I wish I could hug him or hold his hand as he hears his sister’s voice for the first time in who knows how long. He’s endured so much for her. I can’t even imagine somebody loving me that much.

Despite the bad timing, the very thought strikes me as strange.

Doesn't Nikolai love me that much? He's always saying that everything that he does is for me, for my safety. He's always telling me that he will end the whole world just to ensure my happiness, but now I'm locked in his dungeon.

I can't imagine him believing in me enough to let me use myself as bait or allowing himself to be tortured just to keep me safe.

Helena has both. I don't want to be jealous of her. I truly don't. I know she's endured enough.

“Alek! I could *kill you with my bare hands* for what you've put me through! Do you have any idea how worried I've been?! How terrified!?” Helena shouts, her voice frantic. “How dare you tell me not to do this when you've been sacrificing everything for me! I am going to get back at you, do you hear me?!”

I'm not sure which man she's speaking to, or if it applies to both at the same time.

“I'm going to get you out of there, and nothing you say or do is going to stop me.” Helena resolves.

I can see the agony on Alek's face. “Helena please...”

“No matter the cost.” She insists resolutely.

“He has us chained and locked in the basement.” I whisper, struggling to find my voice. I can only imagine what Helena must think of me. “I don't know where you and Nikolai stand, but I know that he believes that anything that he touches belongs to him.” My emotions threaten to silence me. “I know now that Nikolai doesn't like to share and he will always think that you belong to him whether he actually wants you or not.”

I can feel Alek's eyes on me, but I don't dare look at him. Not right now.

“Can you... can you tell me about Lilian?” I ask her gently.

Another shuffle, and Daniel takes the phone again.

“Any, if what you say is true and you are really on Alek's side, then you are one of us.” Daniel begins in his sturdy voice. “Lilian was murdered after the breakup with Nikolai.

Her death was ruled a suicide, but I know otherwise. It was an execution placed on Nikolai's behalf. I will tell you everything once you've been liberated, I promise that much. After Lilian had the baby against Nikolai's wishes, he could not allow her to live. He had told her to abort it. Just like you said, Nikolai doesn't like sharing and he dislikes being disobeyed even more. So he had her killed the same night she gave birth."

Somehow the cell feels colder now.

"But," Daniel adds. "Her son, Henry, survived."

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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### ALEK

*H*<sup>enry</sup>.

The name echoes over and over inside my mind. Lilian's son has survived, and he's named Henry. I don't even need to know the boy to know that it suits him. What's he like? What's his favorite color? Does he have hobbies? I try to struggle to think of when his birthday might be or what sort of person he has become. He's older now, though my mind is far too busy to attempt to pin down his exact age. Probably at least ten. I can't fathom it.

The chains that hold me bite angrily into my skin as I struggle to put all the pieces together. I sag lower, processing. I know that our time is bound to be almost up, and that Anya is going to have to hide that phone soon. I still have no idea how we are going to get out of these chains without help. I also know that breaking into Nikolai's house, practically a fortress, is a suicide mission. Even for somebody with Daniel's expertise.

"Henry," I whisper to myself, testing out how the name feels on my tongue.

Did Lilian get to name him? I can't for the life of me remember the names that she had suggested back when she was pregnant. Through the screen I can hear Daniel telling

Anya what happened, what they have learned so far and that their main priority is protecting Henry.

I can't blame them; I would do the same.

Just knowing that he's alive means that my own priorities shift.

In another life, Lilian would still be alive, and Henry would be my son. I would have been the one to raise him. It's hard to even picture as I kneel here in a dank cell, rotting away.

Fate can be cruel.

I hope Henry is happy, that's all that truly matters.

Did Daniel get him right away? There's so much of all their lives that I've missed, that I've been excluded from. The stakes of this war that Nikolai and Daniel are fighting are instantly more real for me. I never would have thought that children would be involved. It was bad enough to know that my sister's pregnant. But this? This is something else entirely. I'm glad that I never gave that bastard anything. I would gladly endure the torture again and again so long as it means that they are safe.

"Alek?" Helena's voice comes from the other end of the phone, and I look up at the screen overhead. "Hang on."

I hear the shuffle, doors opening and then the soft sounds of jazz music.

"Aha!" Helena says in a softer voice than I've ever heard her use before. I can *hear* her smile through the phone. "I knew it!"

"Aw man!" A young boy's voice registers and I think that my heart stops dead in my chest. I strain harder, as if being closer to the screen might somehow bring me closer to Henry.

"You know that you are supposed to be asleep, mister." Helena chastises without any venom. "Lights out."

"Pleeeaaasseeeee," Henry pleads through the phone. "Just one more chapter! I'm at the good part! Pleeasseeeee."

Real. He's real. He's a real person and he likes to read.



Helena laughs. “Fine, but that’s it! You have your recital tomorrow!”

Music too? Cultured? Of course he would be with Daniel Colombo as his father. He would have no choice but to have attended all of the finest private schools with all the best tutors.

“I practiced!” Henry adds. “This is the last chapter! I promise!”

I hear the door to Henry’s room shut and then the shuffling of Helena’s feet going down the stairs once more.

I can’t speak. I can hardly even breathe.

“You’re welcome.” Helena says in a familiar snippy tone. “Now, come here.”

She shoves the phone at Daniel, and he speaks next. “How can I help you?”

He’s speaking to Anya now, not me. She gives me a sympathetic look through the screen and turns the phone off speaker to give Daniel as much information as she can. I can distantly hear her going over floor plans and layouts of the mansion. She talks to Daniel about Nikolai and the few things she does know, including a little about the security system as well.

Daniel is going to be the absolute best chance that we have of getting out of here, I know that. He’s the *only* shot that we have. Helena knew that by showing me that Henry is alive and well, I would need to get out. I can’t let myself rot away when he’s out there. Nikolai must not know that he’s alive This means everything to me now. A whole new sense of purpose and focus.

As much as I want to tell them to get Anya, that she’s the one that needs freedom and not myself, I know that they won’t listen to me.

“Henry has to be the focus now.” I speak calmly as possible and as clearly as possible. “He’s the only thing that matters. If coming to save me jeopardizes him...” I trail off, knowing that Daniel will understand my meaning.

“Shut up.” Anya says and turns back to the phone call. “I don’t care what you have to do, or what you have to pay to make this happen, Daniel, I’m placing all of my trust in you here. I don’t care what Alek says, he won’t last much longer in here.”

I want to argue but I know she’s right.

My strength is fading daily. The food that they have me on isn’t enough to sustain me. Never mind the conditions that I am enduring. It’s not going to end well for me. I don’t even know if, once the chains and shackles are removed, I will have the capability of fighting my own way out. How long have I even been down here? I stopped trying to count. I only started living for Anya’s visits.

Bleak, I know that.

But without her? I didn’t really care if I lived or died as long as Helena’s secrets died with me. It didn’t matter what Nikolai did to my body. I learned how to mentally distance myself from what’s happening to me physically a long time ago.

Until Anya.

Now, until Henry.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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**ANYA**

*The Next Day*

“Thank you,” I mutter in Arabic for the first time since Horus trapped me down here. The burner cell phone that he had snuck in for me is safely tucked away under the same scraps of bread that he had covered it with.

I can see pure relief on Horus’ face, the knot knitting his brows together seeming to loosen. It’s not forgiveness, not really. He is the one who put me down here in the first place but it’s something close to it. It’s gratitude, at the very least, for willing to put his own life on the line to get me the phone.

Horus pauses, squatting down next to me where I’m huddled up in the blankets that he has brought for me. It would have been kind to have at least given *one* of them to Alek.

“I knew Ms. Lilian,” he admits in Arabic softly.

Whatever I was expecting him to say, it wasn’t that.

“When I was only a soldier, I knew her. She was the first woman that I ever saw with Mr. Volkovich, even before his father passed. I have seen Mr. Volkovich in both ways. You and I know that he has done much for my family, and I will not undermine that as truth, but it is also truth that when she left, he could not allow it. I was not present when Ms. Helena fell from that balcony in Moscow, I know that she was pulled

to safety by men who did not vilify her despite what she had done. Mr. Volkovich's temper is legendary. It makes him very good at what he does, but there are always consequences. Every coin has two sides, Ms. Anya."

Horus is speaking quickly and in Arabic. I don't know if that's just because he doesn't want Alek to hear him, or whoever is watching the camera. I don't say a word, he can't have long to be in here.

"You are kind, Ms. Anya, and you understand. I do not wish to have you end up like Ms. Lillian or Ms. Helena. There are patterns that cannot be repeated. A healing needs to take place, and it cannot happen while you are trapped down here." Horus stops speaking. There's a sadness in his eyes that I've never seen before as he picks up my plate and slowly starts to exit the cell.

"Wait!" I say just before he closes the door. He's given me so much to think about that I almost forgot the most important part. "I need you to render Alek unconscious, please. The pills that Nikolai gives me to make me sleep..."

Horus flinches. I guess he didn't think that I knew about those, too.

"Put some in his food. Please." I add just as quickly in Arabic. "Something warm, for a change?"

That's probably pushing things too far, but I have to try.

Horus doesn't say another word, but he dips his head in what I hope is understanding and agreement before the door closes and the screen above the door flickers back to life once more. I don't know how he's even managed to keep the screen on, but I'm grateful for it.

I know that when Daniel makes his move things are going to have to move very quickly. There's not going to be time to gather my things or clothes. Everything that is in this house will have to be left behind. I'm okay with it given that everything I now own has been purchased by Nikolai.

I glance down at the ring on my finger. Horus didn't take it from me when he imprisoned me here. I slip it from my finger

silently, turning the large stone and band over and over in my hand. I feel nothing. I used to look at this ring and think about how much Nikolai loved me to know exactly the sort of ring that I would have chosen for myself and how proud I was to have something that marked me as his.

I set it on the concrete in front of me. Even in the dim lighting it seems to sparkle and shine impossibly.

I don't think I'm going to have any regrets about leaving this behind, nor anything else in this house. I can feel it in my bones. The only thing in this house that I cannot fathom leaving behind is Alek.

I don't like the idea of going behind his back and I know what it is like being drugged against one's will but he's made it perfectly clear that he doesn't truly want to be saved. And I need him.

I need to feel the sunlight on my face soon, or I think that I'm going to go insane.

It can't be much longer now. At least, that's what I'm choosing to tell myself as I hug my blanket around myself as tightly as I possibly can. The plans that I made with Daniel have to happen soon. Nikolai has already been gone long enough. He's unpredictable enough that I know for a fact if he hasn't already guessed things are going wrong at home, he will come to check on me soon.

I glance up at the screen where Alek looks worse than ever. He hasn't been able to talk to me as much in the last few hours. I want to check on him. I want to attend to his wounds and make sure that he's alright...but he's sleeping as best as he can. My heart breaks for his suffering.

Not much longer. I think I might have even whispered the words out loud, but he doesn't seem to hear them.

I curl into a ball on the floor after eating my meal and do the only thing that is truly left to do - I wait.



I awaken to the slamming of my cell door.

Terror lances through my chest as I instantly imagine the very worst possible scenarios.

Nikolai is back. He must be. He is here to punish me again. The bruises on my legs and breasts have turned a disgusting shade of yellow but they are almost healed - and now they are going to appear all over again. I just know that he's going to be furious. He's going to whip me until I bleed. My mind flashes in panic to how strong I know that he is truly capable of being.

I nearly wet myself in fear before I see that the shape standing in the doorway isn't Nikolai, or Horus. It's not anybody that I know on sight. I blink blearily at the shape, not knowing if I should be scared or not as he swears in what I guess to be Italian under his breath. He approaches me like I'm a cornered, wounded animal.

Instinctively, I scoot away from the extended hand until he's close enough to recognize.

"Daniel?" my voice is groggy from disuse.

"Yes." He answers as I place my hand in his. I hate how weak my legs feel. If I feel this terrible after having been down here for only a week, how is Alek going to walk himself out of here? I can't even fathom the atrophy. I have to be strong enough to help him at the very least. I have to be strong enough to try. I *will* walk out of this hell hole.

I groan in discomfort as Daniel pulls me up to my feet. I wobble slightly as he bends down on one knee to loosen the shackles around my ankles. Horus must have given him the key.

"Is there anything that you cannot leave behind?" Daniel asks me bluntly as the metal falls away from my ankles. I could almost cry in relief for being able to properly move my legs again. I just shake my head in answer as I leave behind the blankets that Horus brought for me, as well as my wedding ring. I won't need it anymore.

"Then we have to move as quickly as we can." Daniel says as he meets my gaze. "Do you understand that by walking out of

this house, you will officially be considered a kidnapped prisoner of war? Even if you are coming of your own free will? That you will be used against Nikolai?"

My throat is suddenly dry, but I nod.

"I am a prisoner either way. At least this I get to choose."

Daniel says nothing for a heartbeat, measuring the strength of my will before he smiles softly, just the hint of an upturn at the corner of his mouth and he nods. "Very good."

I lean on the walls for support as we head next door. But the moment the door beeps open I suddenly find my strength as I nearly run across the room faster than Daniel can even step in. I slide to my knees in front of Alek, lifting his face in my hands. I don't care how dirty it makes my pants or how I've likely just skinned my knees. It doesn't matter. His lips are cracked and peeling, clearly dehydrated.

Daniel is frozen in the door, horrified at what he sees. I hear him swear softly before rushing into the room after me and unlocking the chains and shackles as fast as he can.

Alek's bulk nearly knocks me over the moment that he's released. He sags forward and I wrap my arms around him but he's cold. So cold.

Daniel disappears for a moment and then returns with the blanket that I left behind, wrapping it around Alek who doesn't seem able to wake properly.

"Take his arm." Daniel commands as he slips under Alek's other arm. It's hard and my legs shake. He's so much larger than me. Even more obvious as we step into the light of the hallway. I won't drop him. Not on my life.

In the light of the hallway, I can see how pale he is. The marks and bruises and cuts that have been left on him by my husband, the tattoos and the scars that they cover. I can only imagine how handsome he would look properly fed and cleaned up. When was the last time that he had felt clean, truly clean? He needs a doctor, badly.

Soon, I mentally promise the both of us. Soon we will both be fed and warm and clean.

Better things are on the horizon. I swear it to us. We just have to get out of here.

Fast.

Even as we practically drag Alek up the stairs and into the main house, I have this paranoid fear that Nikolai is going to show up at any moment. That we will go to leave and he's just going to be standing outside waiting for us. He would shoot them both point blank and ask no questions. I would not have the same fortune. No, Nikolai will destroy me for this. I know that he will. Inside and out, he will rip me apart. He will leave me in that basement as his sex toy forever. I can see it. Each thunderous heartbeat and every traitorous step that Daniel and I haul Alek to freedom only increases the fear.

If I stay they might get a head start.

I'm just not selfless enough for that.

I can't stay here. I have to get out.

Horus made this happen. I'm certain of it. I wish I could thank him before I leave but there's just no time. I have to go now. Daniel's car is in the garage - another thing I don't want to ask about. One of his men is standing, armed and ready as we turn into view. He pulls open the back seat and I climb in, pulling Alek in after me. His half unconscious form slumps over against my chest and I wrap my arms around him, smoothing his dirty hair down around his scalp and refusing to look at why I feel so deeply protective over him as the door shuts. Daniel hops into the passenger seat, leaving me and Alek in the back.

Horus is likely frantically deleting security footage right now.

For his sake, I hope that's what he's doing.

Daniel's car's tires squeal angrily against the garage floor as we tear out of there, leaving a dented and ruined gate behind us. It will look like an organized war attack. I'm certain of it. I can't even feel bad about the damage as I look out the back window for a final time.

The mansion that Nikolai claimed was for me fades into the distance.



I turn, allowing that chapter in my life to close, for better or for worse.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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**ALEK**

*One Day Later*

I will never get used to waking up in strange rooms.

The weight around my limbs and neck is missing. That's the first thing that I notice. The second thing that I notice before I open my eyes is that the bone seeping dampness is gone. I'm not frozen. I can actually feel my fingers and toes even if being aware of them hurts. Knowing that they are there and not in danger of rotting off my body is something else entirely.

The third is that the room doesn't smell like waste. No more sick or bile, and my skin doesn't feel like it's covered in the same layer of grit and grime that it has been for the last month or so. Somebody has cleaned me, or I'm dead. The latter seems far more likely. It wouldn't be the first time that I've thought myself to be dead. I'm almost scared to open my eyes.

The pain is the only indicator that I'm alive. Breathing is a wheeze in my chest and I can feel soft bedding underneath me. My fingers stretch and bend, more bandages there against my ravaged skin. I can hear the beeping of some sort of monitor beside me as my eyes slowly open. I wince from the brightness, even though my brain knows that the lights are dimmed. My eyes roll to the source of the beeping, an IV pump. It looks like fluids are being pumped into my arm, for the dehydration no doubt. A medical facility? How is that

possible? No way. Nikolai would not let me within ten feet of a doctor and since I can feel my tongue heavy in my mouth, I know that I still have it. So not Nikolai.

It can't be a hospital either. The room is far too comfortable for that. None of the normal equipment besides the IV line is there. The ceiling has squares molded into it decoratively. The crown molding on the edges and the fancy crystal light in the center of the room means I'm somewhere fancy. A home of some sort. Not unheard of for people in my line of work to have private doctors that work out of their houses. But who did it? Where am I? It's a bedroom in somebody's house. I would be willing to bet that, if I could magically summon the strength to cross the room and look out of one of the windows, I would see somebody's backyard. Or at least the rolling expanse of somebody's grounds. What happened to me? The last thing that I remember is soup, warm soup being brought into the room for me. My stomach had been in such knots over the smell of it that I hadn't thought twice about guzzling the whole bowl in practically one gulp.

And now? Now I'm somewhere else.

It's hard to feel grateful to be out of that cell when I don't know yet whether I've jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire.

I try to sit, and my ribs bark in protest. If I got out, where's Anya? She better be here somewhere or I'm going to riot. I push myself up, my limbs shaking in protest. I have always been an athletic guy, very fit, but I don't feel it right now. I feel weak.

There she is! Anya, in all her stunning beauty, curled in the chair across the room from me. She's asleep. Her arm bent awkwardly to serve as a pillow in the chair that is obviously too small for her. She's wearing a long sleeved sweatshirt and soft looking shorts. Her legs are bandaged around the bottom of her foot and up to her shins where she was likely restrained, as I had been. I can feel the same sorts of bandages on my own legs. Legs that I can move as I choose to. It doesn't really matter how badly they hurt, and they do, but I can move them. I have to presume that we are somewhere safe if she's

comfortable sleeping. She promised that we would get out, and we have.

I push up into a sitting position and start to swing my impossibly-heavy-feeling legs off the bed, holding my ribs with one arm, when the beeping of my monitors wakes Anya up. Her eyes fly open wildly, and a knife appears out of nowhere at all. She brandishes it wildly and unskillfully around her in sweeping arcs before she, too, remembers where she is and what she's doing.

It's strange that I feel so damned proud of her for something so small as remembering to have a knife on her person for self-defense purposes.

The moment she sees me sitting up, the knife falls out of her hand and clatters loudly to the floor. She throws herself out of the chair and crosses the room to me - practically climbing up my injured torso as she throws her arms around my neck tightly. Too tightly.

I tap her ribs softly. "Can't breathe." I wheeze.

Anya backs up instantly. "Oh my god, I'm so fucking sorry!"

"Such language." I tease as I gingerly probe at my bandaged throat. My head feels oddly light now that the thick metal is no longer collaring me in place. It's easier for her to think that touching me is painful, better than the truth. I smile weakly at her. I don't even know where to begin on expressing my gratitude for getting me out of there. For saving us. For leaving her husband. For keeping me sane. I don't have words.

"This is Daniel's place." She explains, gesturing around her. "He has had a doctor in here every few hours to check on us both. You have two broken ribs, a lot of fractures, more bruises and cuts than I can count. Only three needed stitches. The IV has fluids and antibiotics for all the rest. Some vitamins and stuff too if I heard right..."

My smile widens. "Thank you."

It doesn't encompass nearly what I want it to, but it's a start.

"You don't have anything to thank me for. I promise." Anya lifts a gentle hand and brushes a stray bit of hair off my

forehead.

“Once I can get off this drip, the hair will have to go.” My smile turns bashful as I rub my hand over the beard that’s grown in on my face and then pushes up into the far too long hair on my head.

“How do you normally wear it?” Anya asks, watching my every movement.

“Short.” I answer. “Second nature, I guess.” I fist my hair in my hand and pull, demonstrating why I never chose to keep it long. My scalp is still tender and no doubt bruised from Nikolai doing the exact same motion that I just demonstrated. I’m not going to tell her that though.

“I think I’ll like it short.” Anya agrees, her hand lifting to touch my hair and I have to catch her by the wrist. She startles.

“Sorry.” She mumbles.

I shake my head. Where to begin?

“It’s not you.” If she were to touch my hair I would forget where I was. I would feel the pain of having my hair ripped in chunks from Nikolai’s hands. It’s always been that way. I’m a man with terrible luck. Physical touch has always been hard because most of the hands that have touched me in my life have done so with the intention of hurting.

Even with Lilian the sex tended to be painful, bordering on violent.

That was how she liked it - she always picked a fight to initiate sex. I have grooved scars down my back from that very same act. After Nikolai she had had a hard time getting off without pain.

I came to enjoy it. I had no choice. I found ways to make it better, to control it. Careful rules, controlled environment where nothing was left to chance, where I could trust the outcomes because I was the one who created them situations.

“If it’s not me, then what is it?” Anya asked softly.

“The last thing that I want to do is hurt you, Anya.” I bring her captured wrist closer to my face, kissing the inside of her arm

softly before loosening my hold on her. “It’s... too soon... I...”

I didn’t know how to explain.

If it’s controlled... if I can be the one touching, then it’s my choice. But her unpredictable movements? Being touched? It triggered the fight instincts in me. But Anya was so kind, so gentle. Even after seeing what Nikolai did to her body. I can still see the bruises on her inner thighs and the backs of her legs...

“Fuck... I didn’t think... I didn’t... oh, I’m so sorry...” Anya starts to pull away from me, leaving the space that she had entered between my knees and I had to catch her wrist tighter again to keep her from pulling away.

“It’s not that I don’t want to...” My dark gaze turns to her mouth, her shoulders, the swell of cleavage under her sweatshirt. “The thought of you... of touching you again... it’s been the only thing keeping me going for *days*, Anya.”

Her breath catches in her throat.

My thumb brushes over the skin of her wrist and I shake my head. “I warned you that I... I’m broken, Anya. I don’t know how to do this like normal people. I’m so happy that you got us out of there, that we are here with another chance and whatever else comes next. Believe me, all I want is to pin you to the bed and kiss you.”

She steps closer, the fronts of her thighs pressing into the side of the bed where she stood. Even sitting like this, she’s only eye to eye with me. So impossibly small. I might fucking break her if I tried to have my kind of sex with her... No, I bet she’s stronger than that. Stronger than I give her credit for.

She looks up at me through thick black lashes with her perfect brown eyes. “So, what’s stopping you?”

I open my mouth to explain, but logic is failing me when she looks at me like that. “We just got out...what you just went through...”

“Alek... if this is about Nikolai...”

“It’s not.” I cut her off. I don’t even want to think about that bastard. His time will come. He has no place in this room, that’s for sure.

“Then tell me, because I’ve been so worried about you. You’re all that I’ve been able to think about. I... I meant that kiss, Alek. More than you know. All I want is to feel alive, to celebrate our freedom. I want your hands on me, to erase every touch of his until my skin knows you, and only you...”

Fuck if her words, that damned sultry voice of hers, doesn’t go straight to my dick.

The corner of my mouth tilts upward. “Such a mouth on you.”

“So shut me up then.” She says in challenge, her fiery spirit unbroken.

I want to be the same. For her, I want to be the man that I was before Nikolai’s dungeon of terrors. I want to be the man that deserves a woman like her.

“It would be my honor.” I groan as the warmth of her draws nearer. The apricot and floral shampoo that she used is intoxicating. I want to run my tongue over every inch of her skin until neither one of us can feel anything but pleasure... and yet... a shudder runs down my spine. “I can’t...”

Anya deflates before my eyes. She tries to pull her arm back, and I stop her.

“I can’t... you can’t touch me, Anya... I can’t...”

Something on my face must convey my meaning better than my words because she stops. “Not just me... but anyone?”

I nod once.

“Because of the bruises?”

I shake my head.

“Because...” she looks me over, noting the scars on my bare torso where the bandages don’t cover them. The tattoos and the cigar burn marks on my arms and neck - she looks at everything and takes her time in noting each and every one.

“Because... it *hurts*?”

My eyes close as I wait for her rejection, but I nod all the same.

“To... I would have to tie you up Anya and given what we have just been through I don’t expect you to be okay with that. I can’t have you touch me. The unexpected... even just in passing...I don’t know my reactions... I can’t...” emotion clogs my throat as hot embarrassment replaces every one of my nerve endings. I hate that it’s not something that I have mastered, this vulnerability.

When I open my eyes again, she’s looking down at her own hands and then back to me.

“I don’t think I could trust myself, that I could keep my hands to myself without being tied.” Anya speaks as if it’s a puzzle that she’s trying to figure out...debating how to make it work.

“You’re not...” I ask, hesitant to press the gift that dangles between us.

“Until you are comfortable Alek, it’s the least that I can do.” She smiles up at me and my heart damn near skips a beat.

She holds her hands in front of me, wrists crossed, and I lift a hand to encircle them in my much larger hand, locking them into the space between them. Her breath hitches, and I pull her closer. Her eyes widen in anticipation, something deep and hungry reflected there before she closes her eyes and lifts her chin to me, vulnerable and soft.

“I’ve thought of these lips for *days*, Anya.” I whisper before I kiss her. Not like the first time where we both feared that Nikolai might walk in. Not a kiss born of the desperation of a dying man. Something slow and passionate. I want her to feel my kiss through every part of her. It should consume her.

I shift her wrists so that they are behind her, pressing her perfect chest out toward me as I pull her closer, still not touching anywhere but her wrists and my lips against hers. She moans softly into the contact and opens for me, allowing me to consume her until neither one of us can breathe.

I don’t need oxygen, I only need her.



In a movement more fluid than I actually feel, I manage to lift up onto my feet and shift us so that she's the one on the bed. I press against her until her hands are up over her head on the bed and I press them into the bed firmly as if to say that she should leave them there.

"You're overestimating my self control." Anya warns me in a breathless voice.

I smirk. I'm only just beginning. I turn from her only long enough to pull the IV line from my arm. I have to make do with what I have. The machine beeps but I turn it off quickly before shifting my focus once more to her. I wrap a bandage around my arm where the port was. Repurposing the tube is my only option. Pulling the soft plastic free, I loop it around her wrists and then together so that it forms makeshift cuffs that she cannot easily free herself from.

I watch with growing delight as she tries, and fails, to free herself. I hook a piece of tubing through the slats at the top of the bed to keep her hands exactly where I want them - keeping her wholly and utterly trapped in place. Anya's thighs press together as she bites her bottom lip. I pull a pair of gauze scissors from the table beside my bed and slowly start to cut her sweatshirt away, revealing every inch of skin to my hungry gaze. I stop halfway, just before her breasts. I toss the tools away and climb up onto the bed with her, pushing her knees apart with my own to make space to kneel between her thighs.

"I won't lie, there were many nights that I imagined this same scenario in that basement, to be used for other purposes. But we would've needed much better lighting, of course." I wink at her and she grins.

"You're a tease is what you—"

Her words are cut off as I rip the sweatshirt she is wearing off her, baring her perfect breasts for my admiration. She said that she wanted my hands to replace the memory of any other hands on her body, and that's exactly what I intend to do.

My hands slide up the curve of her waist to her breasts, pushing them together - learning the curves of her body and committing them to memory as I savor the feel of her. Like a

feast to a starving man, I cannot imagine anything more stunning than this pure-hearted woman so pliant underneath me... a body built for sin and a heart of gold.

I lean forward to kiss her. Her legs start to lift around my body and she catches them - no touches apart from the ones that I initiate. She listened. If I hadn't already been hard as granite a moment ago, I certainly am now. She moans into my mouth as I roll her peaked nipple between my finger and thumb, pulling softly. Her body arches in response to my touch. Fuck, she's so fucking perfect. I couldn't build a woman in any dreamscape like it.

My mouth moves down the point of her chin, under her jaw and down the column of her neck, licking and biting, savoring each and every moan that comes from her lips like the gift that it is. I don't remember the pain in my body, the memories of the nights before this one and all of the cold, bleak misery all start to fade until there's nothing but my lips on her skin and the perfect sounds that she makes.

I kiss between her breasts, savoring the weight of them in my palms before I move lower. Past the planes of her navel toward her sex, stopped only by the waistband of her shorts.

My fingers curl into the fabric, running along the seam of them, slowly teasing before my lips run horizontal to my fingers. Only then do I start to lower them. Anya tries to lift her lips to help me bare her, ready to rush her nudity so that she can try to get what she wants. Another time I will go over how she ought to be patient, I will reprimand her for such an action... but now I'm just as eager for her. Even the sweatpants I am wearing feel too tight against my cock.

"Please," Anya breathes.

I smile into her skin as I pull her shorts lower. I don't know how patient I can be. I want to have her shatter and scream my name until she can't see straight. I should pace myself, but she's so sweet.

I pull her shorts off and throw them aside, not caring where they go or who might walk in on us in such a state. There's no knowing for sure that we will ever have another moment like

this to share and I'm not going to let this opportunity go to waste.

I lower myself between her thighs, groaning in delight at how wet she already is for me.

My fingers dip lower, gathering her wetness between my fingers and lifting my fingers for her to see. "Look at that, princess." I praise, "So ready for me and we're just getting started."

Anya holds my gaze. "So what are you waiting for?"

"Careful what you wish for princess," I warn her just before my hands slip under the backs of her thighs and lift. I pin her knees to the bed, laying her bare and exposed. Anya gasps, struggling in my hold but I won't be denied. I lick her bottom to top, pausing to savor the collection of wetness gathered. Her head turns and her eyes shut as she moans. I take my time in devouring her, learning quickly what seems to make her the loudest. I want her wild for me when I claim her, when I replace those memories once and for all. When I make her mine, and only mine.

I bring her close to the edge until her legs are trembling and she tries time and time again to ride my face, but each time her hips lift, I back away. My own sadistic little dance. Always bringing her close - but never too close. Never quite over the edge. Not yet. When she goes, I want to go with her.

"Alek, please... please... *please!*" She begs, her throat raw.

I think the sound of my name on her lips might be my favorite thing.

"What do you want, princess?" I ask her, speaking into her skin before my tongue delves deep into her.

"Please! More... Alek... I need you."

"What was that?" I suck her clit into my mouth, pulling on the swollen flesh for just a moment. "I couldn't hear you."

"Alek! Please!" She begs, and I decide to have mercy on her.

"Since you asked so sweetly." I push two fingers inside of her, pumping slowly, stretching her with one hand while the other

pushes my sweats low enough to free my hard cock for her. “Is this what you want?”

Anya’s head lifts, her eyes widening in disbelief.

“Think you can take it?” I ask, wrapping my fist around my cock and aligning it with her center. She almost looks like she’s going to shake her head. “What am I saying, of course you can.”

Anya can’t take her eyes away from it as I slowly start to ease inside of her, replacing my fingers - pushing despite how tight a fit it is. She’s so wet I almost feel like I’m losing my damn mind. My head falls back as I bury myself, inch by inch inside of her.

“Fuck, you take me so good, princess.” I growl, my hands falling back to her thighs, holding her open for me. “Ready?”

I can barely get the word out, but she nods enthusiastically despite the slight hesitation in her eyes.

I start to move, fucking her slowly at first and her head falls back, then turns to the side and bites the skin of her own inner arm to keep from screaming as I fuck her. making her *feel* it. Making sure she won’t forget the feeling of me filling her for a long fucking time.

“Such a good girl, fuck you feel so good Anya.” I groan, my hand drops between us, rubbing her clit until her walls tighten impossibly around my girth. I might have died and gone straight to heaven. It was like she was built for me and only me. “That’s it...”

“Alek, I’m so close... I’m going to—” Anya’s breath hitches and then catches in her chest. Her body seizes and I feel it the moment that her orgasm throws her over the edge, squeezing me so tightly that I’m tumbling right into the blissful abyss with her. Every wave I feel crash through her body, takes me with it. I can’t stop as she milks each and every drop from me.

Absolutely and utterly perfect.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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### ANYA

In the dungeons I couldn't sleep.

Not really.

It was too quiet, too still and dark. It was cold, the sort of cold that settles into your very soul and makes camp there. I couldn't get comfortable on that floor, even with the blankets. I couldn't stop thinking about how Alek was doing, I worried constantly whether he was still breathing and what would happen when Nikolai returned home. What the future might hold for us.

But here, in the room that Daniel showed us to after awkwardly walking in on us in a rather compromising position, I can't say that I've ever slept better in my life. Alek had softly and loosely bound my hands in a bit of gauze to keep from touching him in his sleep, but he had pulled me against his warm body, spooning me against his chest before falling asleep like that. Having to be careful of when and where I touch him seems like such a small exchange to make when the prize that I gain is him wrapped around me like this.

Nikolai is one of the strongest, most physically dangerous and lethal people that I've ever met. Yet, he had claimed that *Alek* was even more brutal than him.

One thing I know to be true is that in Alek's arms, I've never felt safer. He holds me delicately, like if he touches too hard I might break. Like I'm something precious and delicate that he can't even believe that he is holding in the first place. It's strange how natural it feels. Even in my dreams, I am carried back to memories of the first, second, and third time he claimed me in that bed.

The first times of many, I hope.

It's well into the morning when I finally wake up. The sun is high in the sky and bright lights filter in through the sheer lavender curtains, filling the room that has been given to us with a bright warm light. Alek barely even stirs as I turn to look at him. It's so tempting to kiss him - it's almost painful to keep from doing so. Maybe in time he will learn to be more comfortable with my touching him, but I can wait. I can't even imagine the amount of pain that he's been through in his life.

I slowly slide out of his grasp and unloop the gauze from my hands before sliding from the bed entirely. The room is warm as the air kisses my naked body. I smirk at the carafe of water on the nightstand with the bottle of painkillers. There's a delightful soreness between my legs that I don't want to fade any time soon. I stretch, easing some of the knots from my back, popping audibly as I move toward the bathroom - relishing the fact that there is actually a bathroom for me to use and the fact that I have the freedom to walk where I want, when I want.

I bet if I go downstairs and try the front door that it will be unlocked for me too.

I will never be a prisoner ever again.

I don't even know if I'm ever going to be okay with locked doors, not for a very long time at least. The bathroom is stocked with everything that either one of us could need. I brush my hair and teeth quickly before debating a shower, but I don't want to wash him off me. Not yet. I glance at my reflection, the bruises that Nikolai left and then the comparison to the love bites that Alek left on my neck as well.

I like that Alek's are darker. They replace everything, just like I asked.

I let my hands roam over my skin, retracing the places that I can still feel the ghost of Alek's hands on before I wrap them around myself. I don't know what the day has in store for us, but so long as we face it together, that's all that matters.

I leave my hair in loose auburn waves and rub a bit more of the cream that Daniel's doctor left for me on the raw spots of skin around my ankles before re-wrapping them. I move silently to the dresser in the room for us, pleasantly pleased at how domestic everything feels. I needed this small sense of normalcy the room provides more than I even knew. The fact that the drawers contain clothes in our sizes. I pull out underthings and a black loose t-shirt made of the softest material I've ever felt. I pair them with leggings and large comfortable socks that won't restrict my bandages or chafe the injured skin. I start pulling things on before I notice that Alek is sitting up in the bed, watching me.

"It certainly would be a shame if somebody ripped those right back off of you, wouldn't it?" Alek asks, his voice still rough with sleep.

Just thinking about it sends ripples of excited anticipation down my spine.

"I think our hosts have far too much planned for us to have that sort of free time this morning." Alek just grins, watching as I adjust the fit of my clothes. I pull out boxer briefs, another black t-shirt in his size, and black sweatpants for him as well. Loose and comfortable for all the bandages. I wonder for a moment if it will be considered crossing the line to help him change or check on the stitches. I know for sure at least one of them ripped with our antics last night. Not that he let me do anything about it.

"I can see you worrying," Alek remarks with a knowing smile. "I can handle it, don't worry."

I sit on the side of the bed and hold out the bundle of clothing for him, an offering. He closes his hand over mine as he accepts them.

“No regrets?” He asks, that same vulnerability that I saw yesterday shows itself once more.

I shake my head. “None at all.”

Alek leans forward and kisses my cheek. “I’ll just be a minute.”

“I left the ointment on the counter. I can help if you can’t reach something.”

“You just want to see me naked for longer,” Alek winks and walks somewhat awkwardly into the bathroom, holding the side of his ribs. He’s not wrong. Even though I can tell that he’s far thinner than his body normally is, he’s still got a damned impressive body.

I flop back onto the bed, sprawling out on the plush sheets, savoring the lingering scent of him on the pillows. I don’t know if I fall right back asleep or just drift into daydreams but the next thing I know, Alek is resurfacing from the bathroom with a cloud of steam in his wake. Clean shaven and his hair shorn close to his scalp just like he said he would do, he looks like a whole other person in the best possible ways, not that I hadn’t loved the feeling of that thick, full beard between my thighs. He looks leaner, dangerous. I can see the rest of the tattoos on his neck without the hair obscuring them.

What I wouldn’t give to trace them all with my tongue.

Someday.

“Keep looking at me like that, princess, and we aren’t going to leave this room.”

“I like the hair.” I say, my voice is far off and appreciative.

“I like you.” Alek drops his wet towel on the floor and leans over me, kissing me sweetly before taking my hand in his.

My heart flutters in my chest as I allow him to lead me out of the room. The house is bright and airy, no closed off dark spaces that Nikolai always seemed to gravitate too. Not my personal style but I can’t express how happy I am to feel like the walls aren’t closing in on me anymore. I keep as close to



Alek as I dare as we move toward the dining room, following the scent of fresh baked bread and our feeling of hunger.

I didn't get to properly meet Helena last night. I only got glimpses of her as she had brought things in for the doctor. The slight swell to her stomach looked adorable on her. Her hand rests on the bump of her child as she watches us approach the table. Daniel, however, stands to greet us, extending a hand for Alek to shake. Which he does.

Helena merely stands, her eyes shining as she beholds her brother on his feet once more. Alek leaves my side to wrap her up into a hug that must be healing to them both. I don't even want to ask how long it's been since they last saw each other. Alek will tell me when he's ready. There's still so much that we haven't even started to cover and I know that sooner or later, we're going to have to.

But for now, lunch.

He kisses Helena on the cheek and whispers something in her ear before pulling away and squeezing her shoulders affectionately. Then he pulls my chair out for me to sit, and takes the one beside me. He sits sideways in the chair, one thigh angled behind me and the other toward my knees as he rests a possessive arm around the back of my chair. It doesn't feel smothering, but protective. It feels like if anything tries to come for me, he will swoop me up into his arms and keep me safe.

I kind of like it.

"I hope that the two of you slept well?" Daniel asks politely.

"I don't think they did much sleeping." Helena smiles kindly.

I return the smile with a sheepish one of my own. It's strange to know that she was once engaged to my husband. Should I even still call him that? If I've left him and returned the ring, are we still technically married? Does the paperwork even matter? My husband, or whatever he is to me now, tried to kill her and here she is offering me hospitality and pushing warm scones in my direction. I take the plate happily. "I can't tell you how grateful I am for what you did." I say to Daniel.

He shrugs a shoulder. "It's good politics."

"He's being modest." Helena says and shakes her head.

"Speaking of," Alek interjects around a mouth full of food that he swallows too hastily, "it goes without saying that I want to help the efforts in any way that I can. It's the least that I can do."

Daniel nods. "Happy to hear it. It will take a few days for you to get back to fight-ready. In the meantime, the best thing that you can do is eat and recover to the best of your ability."

"Henry will be happy to see you both progressing. You should have heard him this morning, prattling on and on about guests and how he never gets to meet new people outside of school," Helena grins.

Alek freezes. He must have forgotten. I decide the risk is worth it, and place my hand on top of his own. He turns his eyes to me, panic reflected there, then squeezes my hand right back. A touch too tightly but I don't wince.

"He'll be home later." Helena continues. "But I understand if you need some more time to get ready before you me--"

"No. I'm ready," Alek interjects.

I don't think that he is, but that's not something that more time is going to make easier. Better to do it and get it over with. I can see it written on his face.

Daniel, thankfully, changes the subject. "Now that we have made a personal attack against Volkovich, you know that he will stop at nothing to retaliate. I have already moved my men into position and secreted away all my shipments to where he cannot get to them. Everything that could be moved has been, but we need to establish our next move. He's going to come for you, Anya, even more fiercely than he's going to keep coming for Helena. He is going to try to wipe us off the map."

"I can help," Alek says, stuffing his face. It occurs to me that this is the first hot meal that he's eaten, except for the soup, in at least a month. I'm surprised he can speak at all. "He let things slip during our time together, small comments that

could be made into weaknesses if used right. I can write them all down for you when we're done here."

"That would be good, we should do that."

Alek nods and moves from one plate of food to another. I don't even have the heart to tell him to slow down. If he gets sick, then so be it.

We become so absorbed in the conversation that none of us even hears the front door open until Henry's voice comes echoing off the walls.

"Mom!!! I'm hooooommeee!"

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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### ALEK

Anya's grip on my hand might be the only thing keeping me tethered to the ground at all.

She's the only thing that stops me from floating away or my heart from bursting the moment that I hear his voice. I thought that there was going to be more time. I thought we would have... well, it doesn't matter now what I thought, because the moment is here. Henry's here and he's calling my sister Mom.

It shouldn't strike me as strange. She's been the one raising him. Even with their own child, my nephew, growing in there. But that's Lilian's child sprinting down the hall toward the dining room. I can hear him dropping things as he goes, a stack of books and a backpack, kicking off shoes and then there he is, grabbing hold of the door frame and spinning himself into the dining room looking slightly winded but happy.

He looks so much like Lilian, it blows my mind. Like she's standing there reincarnated as another gender.

Henry takes a moment to look around the room, taking all of us in with a bright, happy smile that dims only a little due to childish bashfulness or shyness. Henry waves awkwardly at us, and Anya waves easily back, but I'm having trouble breathing.

Henry rushes to Helena's side and wraps his arms around her. She places a motherly protective arm around his shoulder, and it might be the sweetest thing that I've ever seen. All that I ever wanted from life was for Helena to be happy. Our mother certainly had never been kind to her. While she had had a more or less good example of a father, the mother's role had always been absent for her. No, our mother had always liked me better, despite my never being able to stand her. Oddly enough, it had been something for Helena and I to bond over as children, our mutual dislike of our mother. Before everything went to shit.

It's hard to see my sister's rounded belly and the boy standing next to her and wonder if in another life, that might have been Lilian. Would she have had any other children? Would one have been enough for her? What would she have thought of Henry? Hers had not been an easy pregnancy. She had barely been able to keep food down for the first trimester and had lost dangerous amounts of weight to begin with. Part of me thinks that had always had something to do with the stress that Nikolai had put on her at the end of their relationship, the fear that she lived in, always looking over her shoulder.

I knew what Nikolai would have done if he had gotten his hands on her.

He would have forced that baby from her body no matter what it took, no matter how far along she was. It was for the best that monsters like him didn't have family. Yet, the longer Lilian had been away from him, all through her second trimester, she had been hell bent on giving him a chance. The comments that Lilian made about how I just didn't understand Nikolai and that he wasn't always terrible. She didn't say it until right at the end, but she never truly got over him. In the end, it was always him that she had wanted to be with.

I think I'd been too afraid to admit it even to myself, but a part of me always hated her for that.

Now she's dead, and I'm looking at her child.

Anya tries to pull her hand from mine if only to greet Henry, to speak to him. I can't move. Still and uncomfortable as a

statue, despite Anya's warm and inviting smile.

"Hi, you must be Henry." Anya starts. "Thank you for having us here. I'm Anya."

"Hi Anya." Henry whispers, half hiding behind Helena as he speaks.

Helena leans over and whispers something in Henry's ear, but he shakes his head.

"This is Alek. I know that he looks mean and scary but he's just so excited to meet you and so he doesn't know what to say." Anya's smile widened and she brushed her hair back over her ear. "I think he's kind of awkward around new people. Does that ever happen to you?"

Henry smiles gently and nods once.

My heart might break right inside of my chest. My eyes slide to her, grateful for taking the reins. I didn't think it was going to be this hard. I didn't think that he was going to look so much like his mother, but with hints of his father as well. I wonder if Anya has noticed.

"Helena tells me that you like to read! I've never been much of a reader myself." Anya admits as Henry finally takes a seat at our table and points to the bread for permission. Helena nods. So polite. Even the way he holds himself shows how well he's been raised.

"I do!" Henry answers. "I think English is my best subject, but music is my favorite."

"Is it? Do you play an instrument?"

"I play many now, but dad started me on the piano. Then mom taught me to play the cello, like her." Henry answers happily before dissolving into a long-winded speech about his favorite composers and the orchestra concerts that he's been to see and the colleges that he hopes to get into someday.

I could listen to him talk forever.

For somebody in Daniel's line of work, he has managed to keep that life from Henry entirely. At Henry's age, I was a soldier. I had been a trained fighter since I could walk. Boxing

and mixed martial arts, stealth and political theories. I was honed to be a spy and an assassin. There had never been another life plan for me. Everybody else I've come across in the underbelly of the world has a similar story. Born into it. Part of their blood. Yet... Daniel is breaking the mold.

It gives me more hope for the future than I had ever thought possible.

If he managed it, if he can grow into this life without being corrupted - maybe there is hope for the rest of us too. Was it really something that we could do? Raise children and families without fear for every move they make? If this war with Nikolai is won, could it truly be a new beginning?

It had to be.

Even just the possibility of it is worth fighting for.

"Are you two going to be staying with us long?" Henry asks both of us together.

I glance to Helena, and she nods.

"Hopefully, Henry. Though, it will be up to them in the long run. You see, Alek is my brother, and we have a great deal of catching up to do. But he and Dad also have business to attend to," Helena explains.

Henry's shoulders sag and he heaves a long-suffering sigh. "He *always* has business to attend to."

"He has a very important job."

"I don't think I want a job where I have to wear uncomfortable suits all of the time." Henry says rationally, explaining away the job that likely consumes a great deal of Daniel's time. I wonder how he balances it all.

"You know that musicians in an orchestra still have to wear suits," Helena says.

"Yes, but that's just sometimes... Daniel has to wear suits *every* day!" Henry just barely catches himself from rolling his eyes. The gesture is so *normal* that I almost laugh. "Oh! I can show you my favorite place to get milkshakes! Do you like milkshakes?."

Even if I hated them, I would still go with him. So small and he holds far more sway already than he knows.

“Oh! I love milkshakes! Anything with ice cream in it really,” Anya pipes up.

My thumb brushes over the back of her hand in silent approval.

I could listen to Henry all day. Even as he slathers his scone in jelly and takes small, polite bites while he continues his enthusiastic explanation. He’s so happy - so vibrant and full of life.

Yes, this is the future that is best for him.

With any modicum of luck, I will get to be a small part of that future. I’ll do absolutely anything to make it happen.

Anya scoots closer to me. Not touching, but making sure that I know she’s here, if I need her.

I’ll fight for her too.

This bond between us is new but forged in the same steel that once shackled us.

Slowly, I exhale, calm and steady. I feel like I’ve been holding my breath for a hundred years and finally, I can breathe again.



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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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### ANYA

Henry is the first child I have spent any length of time with. It's not that I don't like them, I've just never really had the chance. I grew up in the same world as everybody else at this table, even if I was kept a good distance from it. Alek truly isn't wrong when he calls me *princess*. I haven't yet had the chance to tell him that I like the nickname very much. He already treats me in a much sweeter way than Nikolai ever did.

There's still the strong, commanding presence that I crave sexually, but he's more about my pleasure. I don't hate it. That's for damn sure.

I knew that one day or another, before he passed, my father would have ended up marrying me off for whatever political agreement made him the most money. He wasn't a kind man. In that version of my life, I would have been expected to have children of my own. There wouldn't have been any choice about it. It would have just been a given, something that *had* to happen because that was the expectation. I would have gone from mafia princess to mafia queen in title but never in power.

Sitting here, it's hard to imagine that either Daniel or Helena would ever put Henry in a position to do a *damn* thing that he didn't want to do and it is also abundantly obvious how much

they both love him. I hope Henry feels it. He seems to be just as crazy about his parents as they are about him.

I'm more at ease around the three of them than I thought possible. I choose to take it as a good sign. A positive omen of all of the good things yet to come.

It might take a long time for Alek to be comfortable speaking to Henry, he looks overwhelmed. Such big changes in such a short time. He's still pale, and the heavy bags under his eyes and the number of abrasions and wounds on him might be too intimidating to the kid. But Henry is doing such a great job of being polite and overlooking it. Whatever he knows of Daniel's world, it doesn't faze him. He is safe, protected, just like a child should be.

How would any of us have turned out if we had been raised with the same sort of compassion?

"I'd like to hear you play," Alek finally manages to say.

Henry *lights up*.

"Really?!" He exclaims, practically bouncing in his seat from excitement.

Alek nods once.

It's all the invitation that Henry seems to need. He jumps up and reaches for Alek's hand. Alek flinches and catches himself. I can't even imagine how hard all of this must be for him. So much to process. I try to offer him any reassurance I possibly can. I don't know how well it works, but I'm here for him. We're a team now.

Slowly, he lets Henry take his hand, and I hope that in doing so, he will allow some of the healing to start.

Henry leads us to a lovely room with floor to ceiling windows and a large white piano as the focal point of the room. White couches with comfortable cream-colored blankets are placed around the room. The far wall is covered in built in bookshelves filled with books of every sort. Clearly, they are all avid readers.

The hours blend together like that. Surreal and comfortable, so much more than I ever thought possible. It felt like a family. Henry plays until he says that he is hungry again and Helena made snacks for everybody. Henry brings out the board games and we spend the entirety of the afternoon with him, doing whatever he wants and just learning about the sort of person that he is, his wants and his aspirations.

Alek starts to warm up to him after a while. I suspect that it will take him even longer before conversation flows naturally. I've only known these people a little longer than twenty-four hours and already I feel like I've known them my entire life.

Helena is kind, sweet - albeit damaged. There's a haunted look behind her eyes that I relate to. I know the things that we have in common, things that neither one of us will ever probably be brave enough to speak about in the light of day. Things that perhaps are best to leave behind so that we can move forward in the healing energy of this family.

Henry is impossibly kind. The minute he finds out that I am an archeologist by education, even if I never got a chance to work in the field, he immediately shows me all of the books that he has on dinosaurs and tells me what sorts of bones he finds the most fascinating.

I envy his energy.

Alek hovers near me, no matter what room I head into or what adventure Henry wants to take us on. It doesn't take long at all before he's planned out our entire week. Daniel has to gently, but firmly, reign him in. It's the only thing that makes this feel like less of a dream. It's obvious to see how deeply Daniel loves his little family - but he's what keeps us all rooted in reality.

As fun as all of this is, as *easy*, we are still at war.

Soon, we will have to fight. We are in danger.

Nikolai has to know that I'm missing by now, he may already be on his way here to Fort Worth. He's actually likely to already be here, making moves that I don't even want to know about. My eyes glaze over as they lose focus, dissociating

from the room that I'm standing in. I barely notice as Henry pulls out something else to show me, as Helena brings a scented candle into the room. I barely feel the touch of Alek's fingers against the back of my arm as he softly asks me what's wrong.

For a moment, I'm back there with Nikolai and all of this is just a dream.

The thought of him brings bile to my throat. My stomach flops bitterly at the memory of the last time that he put his hands on me, and I feel like I'm going to be sick.

Oh no, I actually am going to be sick.

"Excuse me..." I mutter to nobody in particular before I turn and race up the stairs as quickly as my tired legs will take me. I hurtle into the room that Alek and I share, not stopping until I hit the bathroom. I sink to my knees so fast and hard that I think the marble flooring bruises my skin and I lose the contents of my stomach to the porcelain in front of me.

Over and over, until there's absolutely nothing left.

It doesn't stop there.

I don't know if it's the trauma of thinking of Nikolai, of his hands on me, hurting me, or if I had too much to eat for lunch or maybe it's just the richness of the food itself.

I cradle my stomach in my hand, still feeling wobbly from the puking. I flush the toilet and sink back against the wall.

"Everything okay?" Alek asks from the doorway to the bathroom. I appreciate that he's giving me space.

"Yeah, I'm good." I answer automatically. A perfunctory response that I would give no matter how I'm actually feeling. As it is, my mind is reeling.

I replay the events of the day while attempting to take an internal measure of how I'm feeling and what the hell must have just happened. Then it hits me. The candle.

Helena brought in the candle – scented like lavender or something... that is when the dizzy, overwhelming feeling had

overtaken me. Since when do smells make me feel sick? That's never happened. I love aromatherapy.

"You need some time?" Alek asks gently from the door to the bedroom.

I nod, but he can't see me. With shaking arms, I push myself from the floor and move to rinse my mouth out with mouthwash and brush my teeth. "Yeah, I think I just..." I sigh and lean a hip against the tall countertops. "I think I just overdid it... I need to lie down."

"I'll stay with you." Alek says. Not an offer, but a statement.

I like that it's just so automatic.

"No, no," I protest and turn my head. "Stay with your sister and Henry, I want you to... please."

"I don't want to leave you," Alek admits.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'll be here when you come up later." I assure him.

Alek nods. "Alright, come down if you feel better... or call for me or something."

"I promise."

I slowly walk into the bedroom, my mind spinning. I don't know what to think. I don't know what to say.

A soft knock at the door interrupts my thoughts. I don't expect Helena to be the one peeking her head into the room. "Sorry, I just wanted to make sure that you're okay... it took me a long time to adjust to things after..."

After Nikolai.

It seems that she doesn't like saying his name any more than I do. Like saying his name will somehow suddenly make him appear out of thin air, like he's the damned boogeyman that can be summoned like a curse. Still, it's kind for her to check in on me.

"It's not that." I start. "Well, it's not *just* that... I hate to even ask you for a single thing when you've done so much for me already."

Helena shakes her head. “We have to face this mess together. I think that we owe it to ourselves. And even if we didn’t have that one thing in common, you saved Alek for me. You kept him sane. You made sure that I got my brother back in one piece and, dare I say, even looking happy. We will have the time to heal and years to get to know one another again. For that alone I would be happy to do any number of favors for you.”

“Careful with offers like that, or I’ll start to get an ego. I warned your brother.” I grin.

Helena laughs. “I mean it though.”

I know she does. Still, I bite my lip. Maybe I’m making a big deal out of nothing. I could be jumping the gun entirely or just being a damned fool, but I want to know. No, I *need* to know.

“You can tell me anything.” Helena repeats. She’s not pushing, she just wants me to know that I can.

I close my eyes and gather what is left of my strength before answering. “I need a pregnancy test. As soon as possible.”

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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### ALEK

Being alone with Daniel wasn't something that I really had given any thought to. Of course, I offered him my support in whatever capacity that he can use it. Yet, the very first moment of us collaborating feels awkward and uncomfortable. Henry skips off in the direction of his bedroom, mumbling something about his homework and that he couldn't wait to see us all tomorrow.

Already the weight of what our loss might do to him churns in my mind.

How many people has he lost? How sheltered is he? Is that a question that I'm allowed to ask?

Daniel sits across from me. His posture is relaxed, comfortable. Funny how both of us are such established, lethal killers and yet we both sit with such a good display of casual ease near one another.

"I don't hear any screaming, I guess they are getting along." I mutter, hoping to break the tension. Though, to look at him, I'm the only one that feels at all uncomfortable.

"I would think they had quite a few things in common." Daniel answers as he unbuttons his cuffs and starts to roll up his sleeves. "Helena is happy to have you here, I hope that you

feel comfortable staying here as long as you like. My home is open to you both, no matter how all of this goes. You're family after all."

"I wish I could have been at the wedding..." I trail off. A vision of walking Helena down an aisle to a man that would treat her right flashes in front of my mind. "I guess I missed a lot of important events..."

It shouldn't keep surprising me, I've missed so many things under the guise of business being the priority. Our father had always insisted on it and work was the most important thing to me until Lilian... and then Helena came crashing back into my life when it wasn't safe. Then father had gone and thrown her to the wolves anyway.

I'm proud of her for coming back and leading the pack. I can't fathom how hard it must have been for her to pick herself up and become the woman she is right now, the one who welcomed an estranged brother and the wife of her husband's enemy – her own biggest enemy, into her home. Nikolai did unspeakable things to all three these important women in my life, if the way he treated Anya is any indicator.

"Once the war is over, you two can make up for lost time. I believe that is what she wants," Daniel offers.

I nod once. Of course that's what I want, but there are bridges that I don't know how to cross. There are so many years that are unaccounted for between Helena and I.

"But there is nothing wrong with you taking the time that you need, either," he continues.

"Thank you for letting me meet Henry," I answer. It's the only thing that I know to answer at this point. The only thing that I'm absolutely sure of.

Daniel contemplates for a moment, seeming to weigh his next words on his tongue. "He's not yours, is he?"

There's no judgment, no accusation in the words. He seems to be testing the grounds, seeing how I react maybe? I don't know if I'm ready to answer that question out loud. I don't



know if I want to confirm or deny those suspicions until I talk to Anya about it at the very least.

“I think I’m going to go check on the girls, if it’s all the same to you.” It’s a cop out, we both know it. At least he’s enough of a gentleman to not call me out on it right away. He nods, heading up in the direction that Henry just left.

I assume that, since Helena didn’t come back down, Anya’s still awake. I don’t know why she rushed off, if she’s just not feeling well or if it is something else. Either way, I want to check on her. I knock on the door softly and Helena opens it. She smiles at me awkwardly with too many teeth showing before ducking under my arm and quickly disappearing down the hallway.

“Have a good night!” She calls over her shoulder ominously.

I almost question it, but go inside the room instead. “Hey—” I start but trail off as I notice that Anya is curled up in the bed. Her arms wrapped around her legs in the fetal position as she stares off at the blank wall ahead of her. Worry floods me. Not that she doesn’t have every right to be upset about anything that she chooses, she absolutely does. But that doesn’t mean that I want her suffering all by herself. We’ve been through far too much to cope alone now. Did Helena say something to upset her? Had I read the situation all wrong?

“Hey, is everything ok?” I move around to the side of the bed where she’s staring off into the distance. A soft shrug of her shoulder is the only answer that I get. “Uh-uh, princess, that’s not how any of this is going to work. You might have gotten away with keeping shit all bottled up before, but you’re not going to get away with it now.” I reach up and brush her bangs out of her face. “Did something happen?”

She closes her eyes, but it looks like she’s blinking back tears and I don’t like it. I don’t want her to have to deal with this alone.

“I’m fine.” She manages a weak smile.

“You’re not convincing anyone at all,” I warn her, my voice dipping lower.

“Really, it’s not a big deal. I’m fine.”

“If it bothers you, then it bothers me.” I reassure her. “Can I help you feel better?”

She deliberates for just a moment, and then nods softly. She shifts, holding her wrists out in front of her. I see it for the offer that it is. A single tear rolls down her cheek. “Make me forget it... please.”

I don’t know what triggered her, or what might be happening in her head, but I’m happy to do this for her. I lean forward, and kiss her forehead softly. “Okay princess. On your knees.”

Slowly, sluggishly, she shuffles upward, harder to do since she doesn’t move her hands from where they are offered to me. She closes her eyes and tears roll down her cheeks. I pull her shirt over her head and off of her arms before moving. It doesn’t take long to find makeshift restraints in the room. Ties of the lush robes left in here for us, a belt... certainly not my personal preference but they will do. I loop the belt to make a form of cuffs, careful not to tighten them around her wrists themselves but right above them until she can’t move her hands. The softer rope that I found I used to loop around her waist and between her perfect breasts until I can lift her hands up and behind her head, securing her cuffed wrists so the back of the crisscrossed soft restraint I have her in, angling her breasts up for me. I quickly remove her pants and throw them aside, bared for me as she ought to always be.

A possibility to look forward to after the war is over, maybe.

I lift Anya with a hand on either side of her ribs and move her to the center of the bed, facing the headboard. I walk a half circle around the bed, appreciating the curve of her hips and how they taper to her full thighs. Her knees parted just enough that I can see the growing moisture between her thighs as she watches me, wondering what I’m going to do. If I had any of the tools that I had accumulated in my last apartment, we could make a whole afternoon out of her pleasure. But, for now, she just needs to take the edge off to sleep.

Carefully, gingerly, I pull the black t-shirt over my head and wad it up into a ball, tossing it aside. I walk on my knees up

onto the bed until I'm in front of her.

"Comfortable, princess?" I ask, a hint of authority in the tone.

She nods.

"Out loud, princess," I instruct, curling a finger under her chin to lift her face to me.

"Yes, sir."

My smile turns wicked the moment that she gives me a title.

"Such a good girl, so obedient." Absently, I wonder if she's bent this easy to men before me. Some foolish male part of me hopes that she made them work a lot harder for it. I wonder if anybody has ever looked at her as the gift that she truly is. Her submission, her willingness to trust me while helpless like this, it's not to be taken lightly. I can do anything that I want to her right now, it's a heady feeling.

My fingers pinch her nipple, and she gasps as I use it to pull her closer to me. She nearly knocks off balance and crashes into my chest. It takes effort for her to keep from touching me without permission and I admire her like hell for it.

"Pain or pleasure?" I ask, letting her choose the direction this goes.

From the look on her face, I can tell she's used to being ordered about without a say. I wish I could say I was surprised. Nikolai isn't the kind of man to give a single shit about what the women he fucks wants. He likely considers their pleasure an afterthought or a happy accident.

I shove comparisons out of my head.

"...both?" She asks timidly.

"Which do you need right now, pain or pleasure?" Which heightens her senses more? Which makes her toes curl? What will keep her mind the most occupied.

"Pain..." Anya whispers so softly that I almost don't hear her. I smile encouragingly.

"Good girl," and I mean it.

I pinch her nipple again, harder this time, rolling the skin between my fingers so that the bite of pain registers just a moment before I slap her breast, marveling at the way it moves. Her perfect bronzed skin turns a delightful shade of red from the impact and from the similar flush over her cheeks and chest – she gets off on the pain.

I can't beat her like Nikolai does, I could never do that, but oh, we can play.

I rake my fingers over the bare skin of her stomach, curving lower until I can cup her sex in my hand. "You want to be used, princess?" I ask darkly, a finger parting her folds, teasing the sensitive skin there. "Would you like to be an object for my pleasure, or does a pretty girl like you crave being worshiped?"

"Use me," she breathes as I rub my middle finger in slow circles around her clit. "Make me yours, sir."

"You've more than earned it, haven't you?" My fingers dip lower, fitting two, then three inside of her. I work her clit with my thumb as her breathing turns shallow. "Took such great care of me, nursed me back to health..." I praise her, watching as her head starts to fall back into the cradle of her arms. I lean in close to her, my voice a whisper against her lips. "All so you can be fucked like my pretty little slut, isn't it, princess?"

She nods, her eyes drifting shut before I claim her lips, my tongue running the seam of her until she opens for me, parting her lips so I can devour her, taste her as she struggles to stay upright. I smirk into the kiss and slap her breast sharply again.

She trembles against me, careful not to lean too far forward. Oh, if only I could blindfold her, then it would truly heighten the experience for her.

"Sir, please."

My hand lifts, slipping around her neck and holding her in place tightly as I work my fingers into her. On reflex, her knees part as I pick up the pace, twisting and pumping my fingers against that spot that makes her go breathless each and

every time. Closer, closer, but she will not fall over that edge until I tell her too. The moment that she starts to grip me back, I tighten my hold around her throat, cutting off her supply of oxygen just enough to heighten the sensation, to build that fear-based adrenaline.

I flip her when she's close, off balance her face crashes into the mattress as I lift her hips back up into the air, prone and helpless as I spank her until her lovely skin turns the same shade of red, until her moans cannot be stifled by her biting the bedding that she's laying on. I don't care who hears us, she needs to feel me, to feel alive and I'm going to give her that.

I rake my fingers up the reddened skin, watching the way it changes colors and fades back to red before I free myself from the confines of my pants. She gets no warning as I enter her, fucking her exactly as she asked to. Hard, relentless and brutal. I hold onto her hips as leverage, the sound of skin on skin a drum beat as she comes undone. Something loosens within her. I can practically see the tension melting out of her shoulders.

Using the arm restraint, I lift her until her back is almost touching my front so that I can wrap my hand around her slender neck once more. Higher and higher, I feel her climbing as I play with her ability to breathe. Her moans punctuated with every brutal thrust of my hips into her, filling her and then some. My free hand roams her body, slapping her breasts or pulling her hard nipples. My mouth finds the curve of her neck and bites, a claiming mark that she can wear. A bruise to cover those left before me and something that she can see. No matter how things go in the next phase, this she can carry. I will fill her with me, leave my handprints like war paint on her skin.

Mine for as long as she will have me.

“Alek! I'm- *fuck* please!”

“You want to cum for me?” I ask, my voice husky in her ear.

“Please! Please let me cum!”

“Cum for me princess, be a good girl.” I rake my hand down the flat plane of her belly and find her clit and I pinch *hard*. The blend of sensations throws her over the edge, higher as I sever the supply of air to her lungs, making her dizzy with sensation. Her core clenches and her muscles tense as her orgasm crests and when I pull my hand from her throat she nearly collapses forward.

“I’m not finished with you yet.”

She looks back at me with her beautiful brown eyes with something akin to worry and I resume my pace. I drop her, pushing her face into the mattress once more.

“Inside, please.” I hear her beg, an edge of desperation to her words that I can’t deny.

“Beg for it,” I order, not that I had any other plans anyway. I want to see me sliding down her thighs.

“Please, Alek, cum inside me, fill me... own me. Please. Only you.”

Her words rip me over the edge, throwing me through my own orgasm. I swear that I’ve never cum so hard in my life, my cum spilling around my cock and down her legs.

“Thank you.” She sobs into the mattress. “Thank you, sir.”

Softly, I pull her into my arms, she doesn’t even try to free her hands as I tuck her into my chest, where I hold her until she’s fast asleep.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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**ANYA**

*The Next Day*

I'm trying to remember the last time that I've smiled this much. Every single part of my body hurts, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I can't even begin to describe how happy Alek made me last night. My orgasm made me see *stars*. Better than anything else, the only hands that I can feel on me are his, his calloused grip, his possessive touch. If Helena does manage to get me the pregnancy test, I think it's all going to be okay because I can tell myself that it's Alek's and nobody else's. He's replaced all those memories, only he remains.

He made love to me in the shower this morning. Softly kissing each and every mark and bruise that he left on my skin. I tried telling him that it didn't hurt, but I don't know if he believed me or not. I asked for every bit that I was given and there is a sense of normalcy around it. It was a craving that needed satisfying and he did that abundantly.

Sooner or later, we're going to have to talk about Nikolai... but not today.

The clothes provided for us today are very similar to the uniform of yesterday. Same sweats and black shirt, but I'm thankful for it. There can only be so many days left before he and Daniel are called off and we need all of them. Not just to

learn more about one another, but also so Alek has time to heal.

Already the color is coming back to his face.

One day of eating good solid food seems to have made a world of difference to his body. He's already looking less gaunt somehow. I can't wait to see what he looks like all filled out and healthy again. Hell, to see him move freely without having to worry about torn stitches or any other internal injuries will be a miracle.

It's only been a few days, but the memories of what Nikolai did to us already feel further away.

Helena stops us on the way down to breakfast. She links her arm into mine like we've been the very best of friends for our whole lives. Alek raises a brow in silent question, but she merely answers, "girl time!"

"Two days and you're thick as thieves?" Alek says playfully.

Strange how quickly these bonds have formed. So intensely. Faster than anything other in my life.

"That's right." Helena says to her brother and sticks her tongue out at him. "So go on to breakfast and let us be."

Even at the command, the supposedly terrifying murderer turns to me for permission to go. He *checks* with me to make sure that I'm all right before going. It shouldn't turn me on as much as it does. I nod nonetheless. Though it's sorely tempting to see what he might do if I'm the one giving orders for a change.

Helena waits until Alek is down the stairs before turning to me and pulling a bundle out of her sleeve. "I got what you asked for."

Her grin hardly fits on her face, it's so big. She reels us both toward the bedroom that I just left, my heart thundering in my chest. The tests. The moment that I take them it all becomes real. I can pretend that it doesn't matter either way, or that it won't change anything no matter what the result is. It very well could. Has Alek known me long enough to step in for



another man's child? Most wouldn't do that, no matter how long that they've known one another.

If I'm pregnant, will my new friends turn on me? Nikolai's child could be a very powerful weapon in their hands. Enough that it could turn the tide of this whole war. I don't want to think that any of them would be capable of such a thing, but I've been wrong about people before. Clearly.

"Now, I've gotten you quite a few different kinds." Helena whispers as she leads me into the bathroom. "Just in case it makes a difference somehow or just gives you peace of mind, I guess."

Helena lingers in the doorway as I awkwardly turn the package of pregnancy tests over in my hands.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Helena offers.

I debate the options for a moment. Having somebody here would be nice, but no matter what the results say, it's a choice that I'm going to have to make for myself. I have to do this alone. I smile politely, nerves fluttering in my gut. "No, but thank you."

"Okay. I'll be downstairs if you need me – keeping the boys nice and far away," Helena laughs.

She hugs me before she leaves. It's strange. She means it, I can feel it. The last time that I had female friends of any kind was in college. Even then, it was the shallow sort., we could go clubbing together, but nothing deeper. I wouldn't have asked any of them to get me a pregnancy test. The whole campus would have found immediately. I have never allowed myself to have such casual trust in another person.

Or rather, I had with Nikolai, and look how that turned out.

I take a deep breath and start to tear open packages before I can think better of it. I dump the only cup in the bathroom free of the decorative objects in it and head to pee. It's only a moment before I have all seven of the pregnancy tests dunked in it, feeling a little grossed out but still so anxious that my stomach is in knots.

The time ticks by slowly.

If I'm pregnant, it's Nikolai's. There's no other option. Alek came too late. Everything with him came too late. He will take the news any way that he chooses.

If I'm not, then there's nothing to worry about. No harm, no foul. Right?

What am I going to do with a baby?

Visions of Alek with a small child in his arms swim to the forefront of my mind and I give myself the rest of the minutes to consider it. Pushing the child on the swing, rocking it to sleep, kissing its forehead. Is he truly this kind and gentle towards everybody but his targets? I couldn't have picked a better partner... unless he doesn't want another man's child.

It's hard to see him like that.

Time's up.

One by one I turn them over on the counter, the same answer across the board. I look at the little windows as a ball of nerves builds in my stomach as I press my hands to my lower stomach.

Positive. All of them.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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### NIKOLAI

I don't like it when other people play with my toys.

Call it only-child syndrome, call it entitled, call it whatever you want. I believe in taking what I'm owed. It's what makes me so very, very good at what I do. There's nobody like me in this industry for a reason. Other men don't have the stomach for it. They're too *weak*.

Not me.

When one has as rigid a control as I have, it can be rather intimidating to some people. It took me far, far too long to find a woman who was able to look at all my dark places without fear. Anya is a blessing. She's the only one who has seen me in my violence and not shied away. Something about the beast inside of her plays well with the one inside of me.

And now she's missing.

Kidnapped. Stolen from me by a damned thief in the night. It means I have a rat in my ranks. There's no fucking way that somebody could break into my home without having inside knowledge, that much I'm *absolutely* certain of. That slippery bastard managed to get free and took my wife with him. I can only imagine what he's done to her already. It was personal

before, but now all bets are off. He's got nobody to blame but himself for what I have to do to get her back.

Even if that means getting personal.

My men spotted Daniel leaving Houston about the same time the breakout happened. Horus should have done better. As my right-hand man, I expect a hell of a lot more out of him. He underperformed and I'm going to make sure that he pays *dearly* for allowing harm to come to my wife.

But I guess it wasn't a total waste of the day.

I did find out some *very* useful information.

Not only did Daniel and Helena get married in secret, but Daniel has a ward, a young boy named Henry. Been raising him for most of his life. It means that they are close. It will be a deep blow should young Henry go missing. I don't relish the prospect. Not at all. But he should have known better than to get families involved. This is his own fault. Helena was bad enough, then his involvement in Lilian's demise, and now this? Anya belongs to me and me alone.

I will go to the ends of the earth to find her and bring her back.

She had *better* be in one piece when I find her.

I chose to drive to Fort Worth. Easier to hide my movements that way. Even if the long drive there gave me nothing but more time to stew on this whole ordeal. Over and over again, I plotted just what I'm going to do to Alek when I have my hands on him again. The torture that he endured by my hand is going to seem like *nothing*. I guarantee that.

I timed everything perfectly.

They should have known better than to allow their child to attend public school. Their security is and always has been a joke. A quaint little place in a small outskirt of the town. Too many regular kids. If Daniel was smart, he would have a full-time security team on young Henry, especially given the war that we're in. Really, he should have locked the kid up at home.

It was far too easy to get the kid into my car.

I had the same make and model as the one that usually picks him up. Done intentionally to confuse him. But, still reckless. He didn't think twice about hopping into the wrong car. He lacks training., he ought to have known better. My father would have had me whipped for making such a stupid mistake. Didn't think anything of the partition still being raised as he prattled on and on and on about his day while texting whoever it was on his phone. I let him do it, let him talk. No need for him to think that anything was wrong until the last possible moment.

I wonder where his mother is.

It burns me up that he and Helena were sitting around playing house. After what she did to me, to my family, she doesn't get to have a happy ending. Why should she be allowed to have a family when she destroyed mine?

The child in the back doesn't seem to notice that anything's wrong until we've been driving for about thirty minutes. It's about that time that I send the pulse through the back of the car to knock out his phone. I can't have anybody tracking us or Henry doing something stupid like calling the cops.

"Sir?" Henry knocks softly on the partition.

I don't answer him. I don't need him back there freaking out and annoying me.

"Sir, do you know if it is going to be much longer?" Henry asks in his upper New York accent. I guess the move down here to Texas hasn't quite knocked that out of him yet. "We've been driving for a long time..."

I glance back where his brow is knit as he tries and tries to make one phone call after another. I see the panic start to flicker over his face as he tries to roll down a tinted window to see out better and he can't. It's about then that he starts to realize that something is very, very wrong.

Slowly, silently, I trigger the gas to fill the back part of the car to lull the kid into a soft sleep. We have quite a long drive ahead of us. It's best this way. I didn't want kids before, and I certainly don't want them now, but it's not like he chose his

father. Don't need to scare him more than he needs to be... I'm not a monster.



Daniel answers on the first ring.

He doesn't say a damned word. Good. At least he knows what's happened and that he's not stupid enough to take this lightly.

"No pleasantries? I'm hurt, Colombo." I sneer through the phone as I ease back into my office chair.

I've had to totally replace my security because of him. The least that he could do is muster up some small talk. He's lucky that I haven't hurt the boy if I'm being perfectly honest. Nothing makes a kid grow up faster than a healthy dose of fear. Why, my father wouldn't have sugarcoated anything for me either. So I told the kid what happened. He had the nerve to cry. *Cry*. My father would have... well, it doesn't matter.

My father fed me to the wolves. Unwanted and a thorn in his side until I proved myself. This kid has been raised soft. It tells me everything that I really need to know about Daniel Colombo.

"Nothing still? That's rude, Colombo, has nobody ever told you that?" I say again, taunting him. I can hear him breathing on the other end of the phone and that's enough. "Here's how this is going to go. We will make an exchange. The boy for my wife. A life for a life. No gimmicks, no games. I'll send you the location."

"I want proof of life." Daniel answers finally, his voice tight like he's talking through clenched teeth.

"Such little faith."

"I know you well enough to know better." Daniel spits.

I smile to myself. "Then you should have known better than to take my wife."

Silence meets me on the other end of the line.

“I’ve told you time and time again, Colombo, you’re out of your depth, and I’m done fucking around.”

I hang up and wave my hand for Horus to send the location.

This war ends now, and I’m going to be the victor.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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### ALEK

“... *I* will go.” Anya whispers.

It’s just about the only thing that she could have possibly said to silence the whole room.

The snuffled sounds of Helena’s crying, the way Daniel’s teeth were grinding together and my constant footsteps all stopped at exactly same time.

Three sets of eyes all turn to Anya in perfect synchronization.

“Absolutely fucking not,” I answer for the group at large.

“We have to get Henry back,” Anya reasons. She’s trying to use logic but I can see the utter terror in her eyes. As easy as it would be to sit here and play the blame game for how we managed to get into this position in the first place, we can’t. Henry needs us, all of us. I know that he’s only been in my life for a very short while, but I don’t care. It’s just not an option.

“Surrendering to him is not only going to send the wrong message to that prick, but it’s not going to end in our favor either. It’s a lose-lose,” I say with as much calmness as I can possibly muster.

“We can’t leave Henry there, I can’t trust Nikolai not to do something terrible. The man that I once thought he was, he’s



not that person. I don't know what he's truly capable of." A tear rolls down Anya's cheek as she speaks. I know how hard this is for her. Really, I do. We're all terrified for Henry.

"We all want the same thing, Anya. Henry's safety and well-being are our top priority but trading one life for another isn't going to solve anything. Then we are going to be right back here wondering how to get you out all over again." I answer.

Anya doesn't seem to like that answer at all.

She and Helena exchange a knowing look. Helena's hands curl protectively around her belly. Before I have a chance to ask what that's all about, Daniel interrupts.

"We just have to find a way to make him think you're returning home. At least it's a blessing that he doesn't know that you left of your own free will. It's not much, but it's a start. We have something to work with. Worst case scenario—" Daniel holds up a hand to keep me from interrupting again. "Worst case scenario, you will have eyes inside of his complex and we can dismantle everything together."

"Fuck that!" Daniel is being infuriatingly reasonable, but I interject anyway.

Daniel cuts me a look. "I will sacrifice her to get my son back, Alek, and don't think that I won't."

If there was a way that I could offer myself as said sacrifice, then I would do it. I know that Anya and Helena feel the same way about themselves. Anything for Henry.

I sink heavily onto the white leather couch and put my head in my hands. Anya is less than a foot away but I feel like she's already slipping out of my hands. I've only just gotten her and yet, square one is looming right ahead of us.

"Splitting up never works." My voice is slightly muffled as I speak through my hands. "The best thing to do is to stick together."

I let my look say the words that my mouth can't. It took *years* for me to find Helena, and even then I couldn't access her because of Lilian. Yet, she's come here and found me again. She has a family that likely was very hard won. Everybody in

this room has been the victim of Nikolai at one point or another.

We have only just started to get to know one another. I haven't even had time to really talk to my sister about what has happened in her life since I last saw her. I don't want to lose Anya. This thing between us is strong and came on fast. But if I lose her? If she goes? The person we would go rescue might not be the woman sitting beside me right now.

The thought of Nikolai laying a single finger on her, it makes me sick. I just keep playing the image of her chained to the ceiling while he beats her over and over in my head. If he finds out that she *chose* to leave? It will only make things much worse for her.

"I'm going. That's final. It's not even a question," Anya says firmly and pushes up off of the couch. She storms toward the stairs and takes them three at a time.

I glare at Daniel. I don't know who else to aim my anger at and he's the only one that can shoulder it. He gives me a flash of empathy. I can't ask him to not get Henry back. I would never.

I just wish that it was me.

It would be infinitely easier to swallow if I could be the one doing it. Then Anya and Helena would be free. Nikolai could torture me to his black heart's content so long as they got to live their lives to the fullest.

I scrub my hands down my face for a heartbeat. I push up off the couch to follow her, but Helena speaks.

"She will never forgive herself if she doesn't go, if something happens to Henry..."

I know that, I know she has to go. I'm protesting because I don't like it. I want to find another way, but I know Nikolai well enough to know that he's likely got plenty of traps waiting for us the moment we try to circumvent him in the slightest.

"We will do everything in our power to keep her safe while she's there. We can make this work." Daniel offers in his calm

voice.

I know that too, but I dip my head in a clipped nod anyway.

Then I head back upstairs where Anya is sitting on the corner of our bed.

Our bed.

What a strange concept. Just a handful of days ago I was half dead and now I have the most beautiful woman in the world sitting on a bed that I can call *ours*. For today at least, before she slips right through my fingers.

I move toward her, kneeling down onto the plush carpeting and ignoring the way my body seems to groan and ache in protest from the constant movements.

My hands lift, hovering over her thighs as I look to her in silent question, waiting for acceptance that she gives me wordlessly. Rough palms find her bare thighs, running up the slim muscle until I can find the curve of her hips and pull her toward me slowly. Her knees part, resting just outside of my own.

“It’s not like I want to go.” Anya whispers, her voice shaky. “I’m...I don’t want to go back...”

I nod, my thumbs sweeping under the hem of her silk shorts and staying there to massage soft circles into her skin. I don’t know if the gesture is meant to comfort me or her at this point.

“I just keep thinking about how scared he must be. How terrified that he doesn’t know where he is or who is holding him. I don’t know if Nikolai put him in that fucking basement or a bedroom. Is he feeding him? Is he warm? I can’t stop thinking about all of the possible things that could be happening to him. And Henry is so sweet, he’s such a sweet kid and now... now it could be ruined forever,” Anya whispers as tears roll down her cheeks.

She moves to touch me, to pull me closer, and dammit, I flinch.

I don’t mean to.

Anya wraps her arms around herself inside, hugging herself tightly like she's trying to force the pieces of her body together.

"We are going to find a way," I promise her. "We are going to find a way to get him back and keep you safe too. I'm not going to let anything happen to either of you."

"We don't have much time... Nikolai is expecting an answer and I'm going to have to go... I have to go back there... to him..." Anya hiccups with the force of keeping back her tears.

I shake my head and cup her face in my hands gently. "Shh, it's going to be okay. I promise. I'm going to make it okay."

I don't know how, but I know it in my bones that I'm going to do whatever I need to in order to make my words true.

"I don't want to think about it... I just... I want to forget." Anya's red-rimmed eyes lift to mine with such open pleading that I don't think I can deny her anything that she might ask. "Make me forget... please... just for a little bit longer? I don't want to think about him, or the fear, or anything else that's going to come with it."

I nod in understanding. I know perfectly well what it's like when the voices in my head start to get too loud or when it speaks words that I don't want to hear and I would do anything, absolutely *anything* to make my head go quiet again.

I brush my thumb across her bottom lip, giving her one more chance to talk it out before I act... but she stays silent.

I steel my expression into a cold mask of indifference. I roll back through my heels into a standing position and adopt the dominance that I need to be intimate with a woman on this level.

"On your knees."

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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### ANYA

“*O*n your knees.”

The authority in his voice makes it impossible for me to ignore the command. Not that I would want to. I want this, I want *him*. Maybe that is part of the whole problem, I started to allow myself to think about a future with him. Possibilities. Maybe it was too early to consider any of this a *family* but it would be working toward that...the four of us and Henry? It could work. We could heal together. I've never had a family that was that close, or friends for that matter. I don't want to let them go. But I can't hurt them just because I want to be selfish either.

The carpet is a pleasant cushion under my knees as I slide forward, off the bed, and center my weight. It's a position that I've been in many times. Though, almost never by choice, now that I think about it. It's wrong to compare the two men in my life... but I can't help myself.

Images of Nikolai's hand in my hair while he forced me to my knees and placed himself in my mouth flash through my mind. I like rough sex. I always got off on the way that Nikolai liked to pick me up and manhandle me. But maybe that was just because I didn't know any better... didn't know that there was

another way. I thought there was soft and vanilla like most of my sexual encounters, and then there was the thrill of what Nikolai did to me. I didn't know I could have a true choice. Not like this. Submitting because I want to? I want to touch him, but this is still good.

“Hands behind your back, princess.”

Something warm and pretty in my chest blossoms every time that he calls me princess.

My spine straightens as I twist my arms up behind my back, the soft pull of those makeshift ropes to secure my hands in place is the least that I can do to make him comfortable. Someday I'm going to work up the courage to ask him what his tattoos mean, where he got the many scars that litter his body and how many of them came from my husband, my estranged husband. A chain that I shall never free myself from.

I close my eyes, shutting out the thoughts.

“If you say stop, we stop princess. Nod that you understand me.”

I do so readily. I can't imagine that Alek would ask me to do something that I'm not comfortable with... but having the option is nice as well.

“Pain or pleasure?” Alek asks me. Just like last time, pain is the only thing that I know shuts out the static roaring inside of my head. I need the voices to stop, the constant worry. I need him to help me clear my head so that I can get over the leg numbing fear that's threatening to consume me whole. Then I will be able to slip into the bravery that I'm not sure I even possess. I must be able to do what I need to do tomorrow.

A sharp pinch at my peaked nipple bites through the fabric of my shirt and I hiss an intake of breath. My eyes snap upward to the serious expression on Alek's face. Desire pools in my core, heat flushing between my legs.

“I asked you a question, princess.” His tone is pure authority and control over himself.

This could be our last time together. We've only just now begun and it's over already.

Once I walk back into Nikolai's home... I might not ever walk out again. We both know it.

"...pleasure." I whisper, not breaking eye contact with him. Besides, I have another obstacle to consider now. One that I certainly can't tell them about. If Alek knew that I was pregnant... he would never let me go. I know that in my bones.

Nikolai won't hurt me while I'm pregnant. I'm his wife. As far as he knows, I've been kidnapped. I can use that to my advantage. I'm not going to have a choice if I'm going to survive this with the child in my womb. I have to be a dutiful wife. I can do this.

But tonight? Tonight is about this. About what I want, for however long I have it.

"Good girl, princess," Alek hums softly and I watch with hunger as he pulls his shirt over his head slowly. I drink in the sight of each and every muscle on his body as his skin stretches. Every bruise and cut that's still healing on his body is another reason for me to go back, to end this. If I can just talk him down, convince him that this is all pointless. If that doesn't work, then maybe when he's sleeping...

I shut those thoughts down too.

Alek slides his pants down, proud and at attention before me and damn if my mouth doesn't water at the length of him. He cups the back of my head softly, smoothing down my hair as my gaze flicks back up to him.

"Earn your pleasure, princess." He commands softly.

Happily. My eyes stay on him as I lean forward, only to find that the restraints on my arms are tethered to the footboard of the bed. I have to strain to reach far enough to taste him. My tongue flicks over the tip, a soft mewl of frustration leaves me as he smirks confidently.

"You can do better than that. Don't you want your reward, princess?" he goads me. I can hear the hint of teasing laughter behind his words and push harder until I can take the tip into my mouth. It is only when his head tips back, a low moan of

pleasure fills the space between us that I realize he is allowing me to touch him. That this is something that he is giving me. Baby steps toward the promise of something bigger perhaps. More than just my body being manipulated by him. This is for me. I can feel it.

It only makes me want to work harder.

There is a burn in my shoulders as I strain against the holds, working to take more of him into my mouth. Every sound that I earn from his lips only turns me on more. I can feel the dampness between my legs growing as quickly as the need for friction between them.

“Deeper,” Alek growls, his voice husky with need as he struggles to keep his hands off me. If I weren’t otherwise occupied, I would have insisted on his hands in my hair. I swirl my tongue around him, savoring the taste and feel of him. I just want to make him feel as good as he makes me feel. Inch by inch I take him until I gag.

The sound seems to unleash something within him. Something darkens in his gaze as he reaches down to cup my chin, his fingers curling possessively over the bone and urging me forward again. He watches with rapt attention as every bit of him that can fit disappears between my lips. I gag again, the burn of it registering in a frustrating way. I want more. I want all of him. Saliva strings out in ropes as he eases himself from my lips. He bends at the waist and kisses me, wiping away the spit as he removes his hand from my chin.

He looks at me with such pride, such praise before dipping his chin. “Good job, princess.”

I can’t stop the smile that splits from ear to ear. Bittersweet but bright as emotions threaten to overwhelm me totally.

Alek bends, scooping me up by the elbows and bending me over the footboard. He slides my shorts down my leg, kissing the curve of my hip, the back of my thigh and calf before bending one leg at the knee to hook over the end of the bed. I teeter for a moment, then catch my balance. I can’t see him, even if I try to turn to look at what he’s about to do. Alek



seems to sink to a knee behind me and then I feel his tongue returning the favor.

Bliss steals my vision. I go warm and boneless all at the same time before sinking further into the bedding. My moans of pleasure are swallowed by the soft surface as I buck and writhe against his face. It's like he can read what my body wants before I even have a chance to think it. His tongue delves inside of me, curling to a place that makes me see stars before moving back to the sensitive bundle of nerves and lavishing his attention there.

It's not enough. I don't think it's ever going to be enough. Not from him.

Desire curls and twists my insides as my pleasure rockets higher and higher. Close, so close. My eyes shut in surrender to the sensations roaring through me. Just a little bit more...

Then it's gone. Just like that. Alek pulls his talented tongue away from the apex of my thighs. I feel the loss of him keenly and I make a noise to express it but Alek's hands find my hips a moment later. I barely have time to breathe in properly before he lines himself up with me, pushing inside of me with one quick thrust. I try to push back into him, my hips finding a rhythm with his but each time that my climax comes closer he changes pace.

It doesn't take long for me to realize that he's doing this on purpose.

Each time I reach the peak, it feels higher. I've never felt like this before. It's starting to hurt. Every brush of fabric or fingers against my clit its exquisite agony of a whole new level. He fucks me through each and every one until I forget my own damned name, the need for release is so strong. I think I might be screaming. I can't even tell. I could be begging, offering him all sorts of obscene things and I can't seem to stop. I need to cum more than I've ever needed anything in my life.

Alek slides from me and I might cry. He picks me up and flips me onto the bed, climbing up after me. I'm helpless to move,

helpless to reach down between my legs and give relief to my aching, throbbing clit.

When he enters me again, I *know* I scream out in pleasure and I can't stop. Only then does he give me mercy. When I'm practically sobbing for release and I can't think of anything but him and the pleasure that he's bringing to my body. Only then does he allow me to *finally* cum.

I cease to exist. Every muscle in my body seems to shudder as the force of my orgasm silences me. I can't even remember to breathe as I feel him bellow and I silently scream my pleasure, clamping tightly around him. The feeling of him filling me only takes me higher and higher. Nothing else exists in the world but the pair of us, and this moment.

I think I pass out for a moment. Wholly and utterly overwhelmed because one moment Alek is inside me, the next he's lying beside me and kissing the top of my shoulder. He wraps a sheet around me to keep my trembling frame warm and he pulls me back into his chest and drapes a heavy arm over me.

I couldn't have asked for a better last time.



I awake some hours later. The sky is still black with cloud coverage so thick that I can't see the moon or stars through the open curtains.

Alek's steady breathing is a constant gust of warm air against my neck.

Try as I might, I can't get back to sleep.

I lie there, memorizing the feel of him beside me for what feels like hours, days even. I stare at his face. The bruising there is faded to mostly nothing in the dim lighting. The lines of stress that normally linger on his handsome features are absent. He almost looks unbothered by the world. As unbothered as somebody in his line of work will ever be able to be, anyway.

I know what I have to do.

It's better this way.

I have to leave now, before they can do anything to stop it or do something foolish like try to find a loophole to work around Nikolai's very explicit orders.

I rise from bed silently and get dressed in another one of the black t-shirts and sweatpants that have been left in the room for me. My body still aches from my time with Alek. I hope it lasts. I want to keep the lingering soreness of being with him for as long as I possibly can. It might be all that remains of the... whatever this was between us... for some time to come.

I linger in the doorway for a long moment, my heart heavy in my chest as I blow a kiss into the room where Alek slumbers and then I'm off. I can't waste any more time. I have to go. My bravery isn't going to last me nearly as long as I want it to. I can already tell.

I steal the first pair of keys that I find from the peg board in the garage and locate the car that's going to take me back to Nikolai. I can't even say that I'm going home. That cold mansion that he claimed to have bought for me will never be home. I know that. Even Daniel's house feels more comfortable than that tomb.

I turn the car on and move slowly through Daniel's complex. I don't even dare to turn on the headlights of the car until I'm on the open road back to Houston. The highway out here feels like a desolate ghost, a bad omen. My mind gutters and I white knuckle my grip on the steering wheel. What if he puts me back in that basement? What if he locks me up again and I don't have a way out? Is he going to beat me again? Can he smell Alek on me? The brute of a man is practically a bloodhound.

Two hours into the drive I can't do it anymore. I have no choice but to stop at the first seedy little motel that I come across. My limbs are heavy and the panic is overwhelming. I have to pull myself together.

"This is for Henry, you're doing this for Henry," I remind myself, giving myself the courage that I desperately need. "You can do this."

I reach for the phone and dial Nikolai's number.

He answers on the first ring.

“*Da?*”

“Nikolai?”

The shake in my voice is real. Not from fear of my alleged captors, but of him.

“Anya?!” Nikolai's voice breaks. “Where are you? Are you hurt? What happened? Tell me.”

I swallow against thick emotion. “I'm... I don't know where I am... they are going to make the trade.”

“Where are you? I will find you.”

“But the drop point...” I argue.

“No, fuck that. We aren't going to play into their hands for any longer baby. It's you and me, remember?”

“But... but Henry...” I insist. If he changes up the rules now, I'm going to be in even deeper over my head than I originally anticipated.

“Such a soft touch.” Nikolai chuckles. “Don't worry about the kid, Anya, you can keep him if you want, but first I need you to do something for me.”

My heart soars, it means that Henry is okay. He has to be.

“Do not get back in that car with them. No matter what, you have to fight them with everything in your cute little body, okay?” Nikolai's tone shifts into something dark and serious.

“...what?” I stammer.

“You can do this. You need to stay put. Do *not* get back into that car with them, baby. Just remember... everything that I do is because I love you.”

*Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of.*

The line goes dead.

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## A STEAMY SURPRISE...

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**Wow, that was HOT!**

But that's not all...

If you're curious to delve deeper into the heart and mind of **Alex** during **he helps Anya forget**... here's your exclusive VIP pass to read the scene from his perspective and have a peek at all his emotions!

This chapter is completely **optional** and not necessary for the continuation of the story. However, for those who want a fuller experience and wish to indulge in every nuance of our characters' journey, it's a pathway I lovingly recommend! ☐☐☐

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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### ALEK

*The floor is cold where I lie.*

*The ache in my ribs hasn't stopped since that prick left hours ago. The wheeze to my breathing is concerning, but nothing I'm going to unhealthily ignore it with terrible coping mechanisms. As I lay here gasping for air like a landlocked fish, I try and fail to come up with something witty and scathing to say. The pain might actually be too much for me to think straight. Yet still too much to keep me from sleeping. I just want to pass out, I want to sleep. I want to sleep and never wake up... just make the pain stop.*

I wake up in a cold sweat.

My hands fling out, I'm confused about where I am. While the vestiges of sleep still cling strongly to me, I try to remember how I fell asleep or why I'm on an actual bed. I was back there. In my mind, I was back there, in that cell.

My hands check my wrists and my neck to ensure that the collar and chains aren't back on me.

The dimness of the bedroom slowly makes me register that I'm in Daniel's house, in the bed that I share with Anya. But where is she? My hands splay over the fabric just to be sure

that she's not actually there. I don't hear her in the connected bathroom either. It's too early for her to have gone to breakfast. I crawl out of bed to look for her.

I pull on the same clothes I had on yesterday, with some difficulty. I need to change the bandages on my chest and ribs, but that will have to wait. I don't have the luxury of time until I find Anya. A sense of dread starts growing like a lead ball in my gut as I pad out of the room and down the hall in bare feet.

Silence in every direction.

I pause in front of the bedroom door where Helena and Daniel are sleeping. That makes me feel better. If something was amiss, they would be awake too, wouldn't they?

I head to the kitchen next, the sense of dread growing with every step. The lead turns into molten fear the moment I find the kitchen barren and the door to the garage open.

Déjà-vu grips me hard. It's happening again. History is repeating itself. The wheel of terror just keeps on fucking spinning. First Lilian, now Anya. I know that she doesn't want to be back in his arms. She doesn't want him. Yet, the doubts creep up fast. With Lilian, there was and always will be a part of me that thinks that she was only using me, that I was only a distraction for her in the moments when she needed to hide from Nikolai. That in the end, Lilian was always going to go back to him, no matter what.

I refuse to think that way about Anya.

I know why she ran. I know where she's going and why. Of course, she wasn't going to wait for us to come up with a plan to keep them both safe because she wanted to be the only one at risk. Foolish girl to think that we wouldn't go right after her, that I would just stand here while she went off into the belly of the beast. Absolutely not.

Still, I don't want to be right. This is one of the very few instances where I would like absolutely nothing more than to be totally and utterly wrong.

I know how things ended up with Lilian when she could no longer hold Nikolai's interest. When Lilian started using the

brain in her head for her own purposes, that was when Nikolai flipped on her and she ended up dead. He might not have been the one to do it - but he bought and paid for that execution order. He's the reason that she's dead.

I run into the garage, finding a car missing and set of keys. No time to wait. I was too slow to save Lilian. I wasn't able to get there in time to stop her. I couldn't talk sense into her and by the time I caught up with her, she was dead. I'm not going to allow that to happen to Anya. This horrible pattern needs to stop here and now.

I grab the next set of keys off the peg board and find the car, something sleek and fast. Pure luck. Something else that I'm not used to having. But, if the tides of fate are finally turning in my favor, I'm not going to turn them down. Growing up, the only luck I ever had was what I made for myself. My father used to say that luck always favored the overprepared. He had the sort of cunning mind that could see the game three chess moves ahead and act accordingly. It didn't ever come as naturally to me, but I made up for that deficit with pure, unrelenting dedication.

I couldn't make a difference with Lilian, but I can with Anya. I have to. I press the buttons on the screen in the car to pull up the GPS tracker up that Daniel has in all his cars. Anya likely was too panicked to even think about something like that. Again, fortune is on my side. She's not in Houston yet. It seems that she's stopped moving at least. Too much of a head start for my liking but I press down the accelerator and see how fast this car can really move.



The motel that I stop at is exactly the sort of seedy place that makes you wonder what sort of diseases you might catch by walking barefoot on the carpet. I can practically smell the musty pillows and comforters from the street. Anya's stolen car is the only one parked at the back of the building. The engine is off but still slightly warm to the touch. She's been here for a while. I just have to hope that she's still safe and sound inside of a room.



I reach into the glove compartment of Daniel's car and find a gun, just like I was hoping. I should have taken the time to raid his stash before I left so that I would not walk in under armed, but there was no time. Already my heart is an erratic drum beating in my chest as I throw the car into park and ease out of the driver's seat.

Training takes over, soothing my mind into a lethal sort of calm. My muscles move on memory. They forget the aching soreness they've suffered in the past weeks and all that remains is my focus on the target ahead. Nothing but my need to get Anya and kill Nikolai once and for all.

I've been trained as a marksman since birth. One of the best assassins in the world. Unlisted by any government. In private it might not seem that way, so I have to hope that seeing the business side of me isn't going to scare Anya away. I wanted to keep this from her. She's still healing. We both are, but I have no choice.

I slip a master key from a maid's cart and start clearing rooms one by one with lethal efficiency. It doesn't take me long to find an occupied room. I hear the voices from just outside of the door speaking harshly to one another. They are in there. I don't know how many people might be in there or if Nikolai was arrogant enough to not have brought anybody else with him. Seems a bit optimistic to think that way, but the cocky bastard never disappoints.

The door beeps as I open it, sliding in with my gun drawn and ready — but I'm not the only one with an aimed weapon. My blood runs cold at the sight before me. Anya, pinned to the bed with a knee by Nikolai as he grasps her chin in his face. I can't hear what he's whispering but I can see the tears rolling down her face plainly enough. He's hurting her. Hurting. Her.

Horus stands just behind the bed toward the bathroom area with Henry held by the bicep. The child has tears rolling freely down his face as he claws and claws at the hand holding him without any result.

The gun Horus is holding in his hand is what does it for me - it's what makes something inside of me snap. The tether to my

kindness, my humanity, simply disappears and I become the monster that Nikolai knows very well that I am. What sort of man holds a gun to a child?

At least he has the decency to shift the gun in my direction when he realizes who has just interrupted their little party.

“No!” Anya yells from where she’s pinned to the bed. “Please, don’t!”

Her eyes are wild and crazed.

“Why do you care what happens to him?” Nikolai pushes her face down further and Anya grimaces. “Tell me that this is a product of your bleeding nurses’ heart and nothing else, Anya.”

Nikolai’s lip curls upward into a sneer. I cock the gun aimed at his head.

Horus does the same at the one pointed to mine. It’s just a matter of who shoots faster now.

“Because you need to convince me that you do not care if this man lives or dies, Anya, and you need to do it *right now*.” Nikolai seethes into the side of her face.

“Get off of her Nikolai, your fight is with me.”

“There will be plenty of time for you once my *wife* has learned her lesson.” Nikolai taunts before shoving back and away from her. “Unless she would rather see you die first? Perhaps, again, the lesson of who owns her hasn’t really set in yet.”

For a moment, it almost looks like Nikolai is going to go for his belt buckle, right here in front of all these people. Bile rises in my throat as I take a step closer. “Don’t even think about trying it, mother fucker.”

Nikolai’s brow lifts in amusement. “You think that you actually pose a threat to me?”

“I think I’m less afraid to die than you are.” I answer. My words are clipped and bitter as I spit them at the man across from me. Arrogant prick thinks that he’s got the only upper hand here. He’s wrong. It’s just a matter of time.

“Is that so? I think it’s less about fear, and more about the fact that you are little more than a roach, Alek, who is just too stubborn to know that he has been beat.” Nikolai stalks toward me, armed with only his fists. If that’s how he wants to play it, then I’m more than game. The only reason he ever got one in on me in the first place is because I had my hands tied.

All I need to do is buy time.

If I can get my gun to Anya, then she and Henry have a chance to get out of here. That’s all that matters to me now.

“Please, Nikolai, you can’t hurt him... let us go...” Anya begs.

“Why should I?” Nikolai laughs cruelly.

“At least let Henry go!” Anya yells, attempting to focus his attention back on her.

“I don’t think so, but thanks honey.” Nikolai says in a patronizing voice.

“He’s Lilian’s son!” Anya blurts.

Nikolai freezes. I freeze. Time itself seems to slow down and fracture as the lines of tension melt from Nikolai’s face. He looks at me, curious, and then realization seems to dawn on him at the same time as Anya.

Lilian’s son, yes.

But also Nikolai’s.

Time speeds back up, my blood a roaring stampede in my head. I can hardly think properly as everybody in the room realizes the weight of that comment. I would have been happy to let Henry grow up thinking that he was mine or even that his real father was dead. It would have been simpler. At least nobody would have said it out loud. I would have thought that with the level of fear on Henry’s face, he would have fainted.

“Wait...” Horus interrupts. “This is Ms. Lilian’s son?”

He looks down at the boy, horrified by what he was just doing and then releases him. Henry runs straight to the bed where Anya lies and she quickly scoops him up into her arms,

cradling the boy into her body as if the force of her love alone is enough to shield him from any further fear.

Henry glances up with tear-stained cheeks at the man who had been holding him, nodding once to confirm that while he had never met his mother, he did know her name well enough.

“And you?” Horus turns his focus to me. A muscle in my jaw feathers as I struggle to keep the rest of those words from his mouth. Some truths are better left forgotten. “You were *helping* her all of those years ago?”

“I never hurt Lilian. Ever. I loved her.” I confess. From the corner of my eye, I can see something soften in Anya’s expression as she watches the conversation unfold in front of her. “I only wanted to help get her away from you.” I angle the gun to nod in Nikolai’s direction as I speak. “She hated you.”

“She couldn’t stay away from me.”

On the bed, Anya covers Henry’s ears. I hope that it helps but I’m sure that the damage has already been done.

“If you weren’t behind her murder...” Horus trails off as he puts the pieces together. He and I both know that if he thought that I was the one behind Lilian’s death, he never would have allowed me out of that cell. He would have supported everything that Nikolai did to me.

I dip my chin in a nod, signaling to Horus that yes, his thoughts are correct. It was Nikolai all along. It has *always* been Nikolai.

Horus looks at his boss, something darker than rage painted on his features. Some emotion that I don’t dare to give a name to as Nikolai’s eyes widen fractionally. The gun in Horus’ hand shifts from where it’s pointed at my chest- to Nikolai’s.

He pulls the trigger.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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### ANYA

Henry's scream might break my heart into more pieces than I know how to put back together.

The moment the gun goes off, I shift my hands from his ears to his eyes in an attempt to spare him from having to see the gore and carnage that's going to spill in front of him.

My own eyes scrunch shut so tightly that my face actually *hurts* from the effort of keeping them closed. I think I'm screaming. The gunshot is so close that the sound rings and rings in my ears, a roaring loop without end.

Henry's seen enough. This is the sort of thing that changes a child, something that could alter the course of his life going forward and shift that bright, happy personality that he has into something different if I'm not very careful in these next moments. I have to be strong for him. If he truly is Nikolai's child, then I'm carrying his sibling in my womb. I owe it to both to do better, to *be* better.

Somehow, I muster the strength to pull the still-screaming Henry up and over the bed. I scramble us both over to where my purse had fallen from the table and my trembling hand finds the car keys. No matter what happens, I'm going to get the two of us out of here.

My heart breaks to think of leaving Alek in this mess but I don't have a choice. I know that he would want me to run.

When we get to the doorway, I kick it open, not caring who sees us or if they call the cops. My father had beaten it into me at a young age that the cops were never a good result. Given the lives we all lead, I'm sure that the men in this room feel the same way. They all have rap sheets as long as my arm. That's the danger of living outside of the law the way that we do. If it weren't for Henry, I would simply let them sort things out, but he has to be protected. He's the only priority here.

I pull him behind my body and block him like a human shield as I turn almost against my will to stare into the room behind me. Despite the pool of blood rapidly growing under Nikolai's feet, it seems that Horus didn't shoot to kill. He shot Nikolai in the hand to make sure that he couldn't fire his own gun. Nikolai charges at Alek, knocking *his* gun from his hand. The pair of them fall to the floor in a blood covered scuffle for power. Horus seems to be trying to get a clean shot on them in a way that won't kill Nikolai, but physically impair him.

Henry pulls away from me and my heart bottoms out of my ass.

“Henry no!”

My words are a desperate scream. He turns and runs for the nearest open door and I chase him. I can still hear the sounds of fighting from the other room. Henry's already on the phone in that room when I round the corner. I wait to hear if it's 911 or, no... Daniel. My shoulders sag in relief and I practically fall into the doorframe.

“You're on the way?” Henry snuffles. “Can you hurry... please... I'm scared...”

My heart breaks as I cross to him. I don't make any effort to pull the phone from his hands as I come up behind him and wrap my arms around him. The hug is as much for me as it is for him.

“S-she's okay...” Henry continues. I know that he's talking about me.

“Ask how far away they are,” I murmur when I find my voice again.

“How far are y-”

Henry’s question is cut off by the sound of sirens.

“Stay here!” I order to Henry where he’s sitting on the bed.  
“Stay on the phone with Daniel until he gets here, ok?”

Henry grasps the phone tightly as he nods. I can’t say that I blame him for wanting to use the phone as a lifeline.

Heavily armed cops offload their squad cars en masse and start charging toward the hotel room. I don’t care that they are telling me to stop or yelling at me to keep my distance as I swing back into the room just in time to see that Alek has Nikolai on the ground, his knee pressed into his back in a very similar way to how Nikolai had been holding me captive not too long ago.

The cops present a whole new issue for me.

I can’t let them get their hands on Alek. But they don’t seem interested in him.

Daniel must have paid them a good amount of money to get them here this fast and to not ask too many questions. I realize Daniel also knew where we were, which probably explains how Alek found me too. Trackers in the cars. Just how Nikolai already knew where I was when I called him... by tracking my phone.

Alek scoots off Nikolai, who starts to come off the ground with an animalistic roar of rage and instantly lunges back for him and Horus, only to get tased.

Nikolai’s large frame shudders under the force of the electricity as his many muscles shake and shudder and goes back down. Long enough for the cops to rush into the room and get him in handcuffs. It takes five of them to lift him up off of the ground and drag him to the back of a squad car. I can’t even imagine how hard it’s going to be to get him out of that same car when they get to whatever facility that they are going to.

To our benefit - none of them so much as pause to look at the rest of us in the room as they take their prize and leave as quickly as they came. Minutes after the last squad car pulls out of the mostly abandoned motel, another black SUV pulls up and Helena throws herself out of the car before it's even fully stopped moving.

Henry squeals from the other room and takes off at a sprint to get to in his chosen mother.

Alek pulls me into his arms. I still feel numb. Cold. I don't know how long it's going to take for all of this to wear off. Daniel stands by the car - more emotion on his face than I've seen on him so far as he watches the teary reunion. It's going to be very hard for him to allow either one of them out of his sight for the upcoming days, that much I'm absolutely certain about. Helena slides into the back seat with Henry and Daniel turns his focus to us.

Alek and Daniel exchange knowing looks and nods.

"If you want to go with him, then you should go." Alek says softly in my ear. His face is already swelling again.

"You're not coming?" I whip around in his arms to face him, shock written all over my features.

"I will... but there's some loose ends that I have to tie up first." Alek swipes his thumb over my cheek, wiping away tears.

"What sort of loose ends?"

Alek glances back over his shoulder to Horus and I start to understand. "The Bratva..."

Alek nods in confirmation. "Yes. With Nikolai gone, there's going to be something of a power vacuum there. All of the businesses and men under Nikolai's reign are going to fall into chaos if there isn't already a structure of power in place by the time that they learn of his arrest."

"You are going to take over everything?"

Alek nods once more. "It's not something that can wait. I have no choice but to step in." he smiles but it doesn't meet his



eyes. “Even though my father trained me my whole life for it, I never really wanted to be in a position of power like this. But I think that I owe it to Lilian’s memory to fix this whole thing once and for all.”

“I’ll come with you. I’m his wife... things are going to be expected of me as well.” I slip my hand into his and tuck myself back into his side.

Daniel gives us a look of understanding and tosses a cell phone over in our direction. Alek catches it easily in one hand. “Keep in touch, I’ll be here when you’re ready. Let’s go home and put this stupid war behind us.”

There’s not even a question as to whether or not the pair of them are going to be in an alliance. For Henry? I think that either one of them would do absolutely anything.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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### ALEK

“*I*t’s hard for me to picture, if I’m being perfectly honest,” Anya says over breakfast. It’s only been a few days since Nikolai has been arrested. The FBI is involved. They took his handling rather personally. But, from everything that Horus has told us about his time inside so far, Nikolai has been anything but a gracious guest. He’s been fighting the guards. Allegedly he bit one of their ears off. He’s not going to make things easy on himself. But I’m also equally certain that he’s got men on the inside. Old contacts of his father’s that he’s going to rally to his side as well.

While the war might be officially over, there’s still a very long way to go.

I know that these chapters between Nikolai and I are far from finished.

We arrived back at Daniel’s compound just last night. Henry is still asleep this morning and I can’t even say that I blame him. According to Helena, he’s been asking about us every day to make sure that we are okay. He and Anya have been facetimeing every night to listen to Helena read him his stories.

“What is hard about it?” I ask her as I pour myself a third cup of coffee. Handling all the businesses and things that I’ve

needed to do in order to take over as head of Nikolai's Bratva has not been easy on my sleep schedule.

"Picturing him in a jail cell. Wearing the uniform. Walking around like a caged zoo animal." Anya admits softly.

That's the only part that I've been struggling with recently. I know that he's *technically* still her husband for now, but it's hard to summon any amount of empathy for her when it comes to him. While Anya has never said that she expects anything of the sort from me either, he's been my enemy for far longer than I've even known him. The fact that she once loved him, enough to marry him? That's harder, for the simple fact that she's now got a tangled mess of emotions locked up in her chest that she's going to have to sort through.

"What's harder for me is having a whole bunch of people to look after now." I slide into the seat beside her, wincing slightly at the twinge in my still healing ribs as I steal a pastry off her plate. "I've always been a one man show. I did more than enough damage all by myself to not have to worry about the consequences of others... but now..."

"Now you have a Horus?" Anya teases.

"Yes. That."

Anya finishes her food and pushes the plate away from her so that she can rest her arms on the table as Daniel's bedroom door shuts over our heads. He and Helena will be joining us soon. Daniel and I have to discuss the change of many territory lines. We have businesses of Nikolai's to split. Not because of the assets, but because this is all still new to me and he's willing to help. Absorbing them into a conglomerate that the two of us ran together didn't make sense economically, so this works better.

All for the ultimate goal, Henry's future.

Neither one of us knows what Henry's going to grow up to be. If he wants to be involved in our world or if he wants to take on something wholly different. Hell, maybe the kid will be a musician like his parents. The most important thing for both of us is that he has the choice to choose what he wants to be.

Something that none of the rest of us ever had.

“And you sold the houses this morning?” Anya asks.

“Yes. Horus is on a flight to Moscow right now so that he can finalize all the paperwork. I can’t imagine that I will have any desire to return to that place any time soon. Furthermore, I certainly don’t want to ever set foot into the building that he nearly killed my sister in... that mansion has absolutely nothing to offer me but bad memories and pain.”

Anya places her hand over my free one with an understanding nod.

“I put the house in Houston up for sale too,” I say. I didn’t ask her about that one, I just did it. “Granted, it’s going to take some time because to convert the basement from that dungeon of horrors into something else functional... or just fill it up with concrete. I don’t really care either way, but I’m never going there again.”

My voice hedges on irritation, but Anya pushes her fingers through mine in understanding. “I always hated that house anyway. It was a prison for me just as it was for you, even if it was in a very different way.”

“Thank you.”

“There’s nothing to thank me for. I never wanted to move here in the first place.”

“Well,” I continue. “I was kind of hoping that you might be willing to make another move? Something final?”

Anya arches a pretty brow. “Oh? What were you thinking?”

“Here. There’s an empty plot of land in this complex that Daniel said we were welcome to have if we wanted. I thought that maybe since we’re starting over, we could build a brand new base of operations here in Fort Worth... something new for the both of us.”

Anya’s eyes light up. “You want me to help design it?”

“Design it, decorate it, make it your own. I think we both deserve a place that actually *feels* like home. I don’t want to lose my sister again and now that Henry’s in our life, I want to

do everything that we can to be there for him. No matter what that takes.”

Anya squeals in happiness and throws her arms around my neck, hugging me tightly. I stiffen on reflex, but swallow back my sense of discomfort at the unexpected touch.. It will take a long time before I get used to every accidental touch and gesture but for her I’m going to make the effort as much as I possibly can. She deserves nothing less. I hug her back, wrapping an arm around her.

“You’re going to make me drop my breakfast.”

“Fuck your breakfast!” Anya laughs, as she hugs me tighter.

“Such a mouth on you!” I laugh back.

She pulls away from me, looking dead in my eyes. “Did you just laugh?”

“That does happen from time to time, but don’t make a thing out of it.”

“No, I liked it, do it again.”

“What, on command? I’m not a dog, Anya.”

Something in her gaze darkens. “You wouldn’t crawl for me?”

I smirk. “I think that you are the one that will be doing the crawling, princess.”

Our conversation is interrupted by Helena in the door, throwing a slipper directly at my head. I barely have time to dodge it.

“Do you two have to do that in front of our food?!” Helena relents as she places a protective hand on her swollen belly.

“Somebody is grouchy this morning,” I tease.

“I didn’t get any sleep. Between the pair of you making wild animal noises and then the constant kicking of this little one.” Helena waggles her finger in Anya’s direction.

Anya blushes. “Sorry, Helena.”

“It’s gross enough that you’re fucking my brother, but to have to hear it? I now know things about him that I really did not

need to know.” Helena continues.

“Oh, come off it.” I answer and throw the slipper right back at her head, but much softer than she threw it at me.

Daniel snatches it out of the air before it can get anywhere near her and shakes his head at the both of us. “Children, play nice. We have a very busy day today.” He leans over to kiss Anya’s cheek in a good morning greeting.

“Well, I know what *I’m* going to be doing today,” Anya starts. “But what are you two men going to be doing?”

Daniel arches a brow. “What are you planning? Should we be worried?”

Anya grins. “I’m going to convince Helena to show me her favorite builders and interior designers so I can start planning my house!”

“Ah, you told her about it then?” Daniel grins.

Helena brightens. “So, you agreed?! You will stay?! Oh, I will be so happy to help you with anything that you need! I can’t wait! We are going to be neighbors?!”

“Well, whatever you two have planned - don’t forget that we are all expected to attend Henry’s recital tonight. He was brave enough to return to school yesterday and we will all be there to support him.”

I laugh at Daniel’s no nonsense fatherly attitude. “Relax, we *want* to be there for Henry.”

“He’s not too pleased that there are now guards at his school so just also be aware of that as well.” Daniel sighs and pours himself a cup of black coffee.

I sit back, finishing my pastry while the girls are starting to make invisible drawings on the top of the table, plotting out exactly how they are going to make the layout of our new home and the various places that they will need to go shopping once the floors are in and whatnot. I know that Daniel and I will both have to install security measures and all that, but everything feels like it’s moving in the right direction.

I never imagined that I would be this blessed.

Not one day in my life did I think that things would turn out this way. After Lilian, I certainly wasn't foolish enough to start picturing myself with a family. No, those sorts of dreams died with her. Yet now we are all sitting here, my own little found family working together for a better future for us and all of those who work for us. Better leadership and connection than we were born into, that much is for absolute certain.

I reach forward and place my hand on Anya's thigh. On reflex alone she places her hand on top of mine, lacing her fingers through mine without ever missing a beat in her conversation. Comfortable and normal in such a short time. Something in my chest warms at the very fact that she feels so close to me.

Who would have thought that somebody like me, a born and trained assassin, would be sitting around a breakfast table with one of the most influential mafiosos in the world while planning what to wear to a child's piano recital. I listen absently as Daniel reminds us that afterwards we have to take him for burgers and milkshakes. He suggests that the girls shouldn't eat anywhere heavy for lunch.

"If the baby wants to eat, Daniel, then I'm going to take the baby to eat!" Helena answers.

Daniel grins but doesn't comment any further.

The calm knowledge settles over me that there's nowhere else I would ever rather be.

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## EPILOGUE

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**ANYA**

*One Week Later*

“You’re really not going to tell me where we’re going?” I ask as I put the finishing touches on my makeup. I can’t deny how excited that I am to be going out tonight. It’s a break that both of us need. It seems like the last week has been nothing but meetings and planning and we haven’t spent that much time together. Which is certainly less than ideal. It’s weird to be caught in the honeymoon phase of a new relationship all the while having to be so very busy making plans and changes to our lives.

So when a dress box arrived for me this afternoon before Alek got home I was only too excited to jump at the prospect of a night out. The gown in the box that’s currently hanging on a velvet hanger from the open closet door is in rich buttery velvet. The shade of red shimmers a stunning shade of gold depending on which direction you look at it in the light. Paired with gold and diamond earrings sitting on the vanity beside me as I pin another curl up into the hair style that I chose for the night.

Alek comes to stand in the open bathroom doorway and takes my breath away.

He’s wearing all black, the three-piece suit that he’s chosen for the evening perfectly tailored to him. I know that he has



started feeling better but I didn't expect for him to look like *this*. I think that my jaw might have actually dropped for a moment. When I snap my mouth shut again, my teeth actually click.

"I told you, surprises can be fun sometimes. Consider this an act of faith."

"You know that I trust you." I say, my mouth suddenly dry as I try and fail to tear my eyes away from him.

"You like the suit I take it?"

I nod, mutely.

"If you don't stop looking at me like that, Anya, I don't think that we are even going to make it out of here. Control yourself or I'm not going to be responsible for my actions." Alek winks and slides off the doorframe. He heads back into the bedroom, but I can still hear him speaking clearly. "You know that Helena is going to throw another fit if she hears any more noise from this room today."

I blush in spite of myself. "It's not my fault that the builders can only move so fast on our own house."

Today they had asked me if I wanted to have a basement put in or an underground garage before they moved forward. I told them no to both. I don't think that Alek or I could ever set foot into another basement again. The whole theme of our new house is going to be open concept. From the mockups that I've seen thus far, everything is light and airy and I love it. I think that it's going to be the first house that will feel *right* to me in a very long time.

Not that we didn't also spend a fair amount of time selecting the proper sound proofing for our bedroom.

Some things are just mandatory.

"Just a tiny hint about the date?" I ask as I move to start putting on the dress that he chose for me. Feeling bold, I slip out of my underthings and leave them behind. The velvet is a whispered kiss against my bare skin. I can't wait for him to find out that I've chosen to wear nothing underneath it later. I

can only hope that he has wandering hands for my benefit as the night goes on.

“I told you before, I want to do this the old-fashioned way. Something about our relationship ought to be done in a traditional sense after all.”

“I don’t even want to pretend that I know what that means.” I put the earrings that he bought for me in and head into the bedroom. I do a small spin so that he can admire the dress he chose, that fits me perfectly. Now it’s his turn to gape and awe at me. I can’t seem to stop smiling. I don’t want to.

Tonight is going to be the night that I tell him the other truth that’s been keeping me so busy. The same reason that dresses like this aren’t going to look as cute on me in a few months as they do right now. But I wanted to wait for the right time to tell him. I have a feeling that this is going to be it.

Alek kisses my cheek and offers his arm like any other true gentleman would. He escorts me down to the waiting car and actually gets into the back with me instead of insisting on driving like he normally does. It takes a very concentrated effort to keep from climbing into his lap and having my way with him before we even make it to the restaurant. I don’t think that it’s ever going to get to a point where I don’t want him. Every day that passes I find myself falling more and more in love with him and his sense of humor.

We come to a stop in front of the nicest restaurant in town. A small but elegant place that has a family feel to it. The door is opened for us as we head into the Italian place, which I do find slightly amusing as I’m sure that Daniel was the one who suggested this place to Alek in the first place. The staff is polite as they show us to a table. I can’t say that I’m surprised that we’re the only ones here either.

That’s been the only pitfall. Security. Not just for Henry, but for all of us. I don’t think that the paranoia will wear off any time soon. But it’s nice to get to spend time alone just the two of us. There’s no denying that.

Course after delicious course, dinner passes uneventfully.

“Is it weird that doing something so normal feels strange?”  
Alek says as we finish dessert.

I blot my mouth with a napkin and grin. “I was actually just thinking the same thing! Something about moving slowly, just relaxing, it doesn’t feel natural anymore.”

Alek sighs. “But you do look beautiful. If living more slowly is a skill that has to be learned, I’m going to figure it out one way or another.”

“I know you will.”

“Being born into this, it’s just all I’ve ever known.”

“Me too, even if I was a lot less involved than you were, being a girl and all. My father tried his very best to keep me spoiled and out of trouble. But when you live like this, there’s no hiding it from your kids. Not really.” I hedge. “Do you want children?”

Alek rubs at the shorter hairs on the back of his head, thinking that my question is nothing more than hypothetical. He rolls a shoulder. “I don’t know. Honestly, I never gave it much thought, at least not before Lilian. I knew that Henry wasn’t mine from the beginning but I never wanted him any less because of it. Even before I knew that he was going to grow up to be Henry, I was willing to do that for her. I loved her enough that I was willing to do whatever I had to, to make sure that she and her child had the best possible life that they could. But, growing up, I honestly thought that as an assassin I wouldn’t be guaranteed to live long enough to think about stuff like that.”

It’s an honest answer. That’s all that I can hope for.

“You never thought about having children after that?”

Alek shrugs again. “I got caught up hunting down Nikolai. He was my whole focus for *years*. I lived to hurt him and nothing else. Every job that I took, everything that I did was to cause him strife and pain and now that it’s over, I suppose that I’m going to have to think about a lot of other things in the future as well. I’m not opposed to it. I like children. I don’t think I’m particularly *good* with them...,” Alek laughs nervously.

“I think Henry would disagree with you.”

“That’s because Henry is the kindest soul that I’ve ever met in my life. How he came from Nikolai’s loins, I’ll never know.” Alek laughs.

I wring my napkin between my hands under the table. I don’t like the direction that this conversation is going. I have to tell him. I have to tell him now, before I lose my nerve and wait too long.

“I’m pregnant.”

Alek’s face pales as he studies mine, making sure I’m not fucking with him.

“It’s...” My hands drop to my stomach. “It’s Nikolai’s... I...”

Alek’s swallow is so loud it’s the only thing that I can hear over the pounding of my own heart in my ears. The silence that fills the space between us is going to make me cry. Or kill me. Or both. Some combination of both as the seconds stretch into what feels like hours.

“Are you... sure?” Alek asks finally.

I nod. “I am. Helena took me with her to see her doctors. It’s confirmed but it’s too early to really see much of anything on the sonogram but—”

“We’re having a baby?” Alek asks, silver lines his eyes.

We?

“Anya?” Alek asks again.

Relief is a living thing in my chest. “You’re not, you’re not mad?”

“Mad?!” Alek pushes out of his chair and comes to kneel in front of me. “Why the hell would I be mad?”

“Because... because it’s...”

“I couldn’t care less whose baby that is biologically. I would take the family that we’ve made and found for ourselves over anything biological any day.” He answers.

“I’ll be sure to tell your sister that.”

“Please do.” Alek grins and places a hand over my belly as if he could magically feel our child growing in there. I had hoped that he wanted to be involved, but to instantly accept the child as his own? I don’t know how much more of that my heart can take. “This will be our child, no matter what.”



The house is quiet when we arrive.

Alek carries me up the stairs to our room as silently as he can. He clicks the door shut and locks it, hoping that some of the new sound proofing materials are actually going to do their job this evening.

“You have to be quiet tonight, princess, everybody is asleep. Can you do that?”

I grin wickedly. “Absolutely not.”

“Shameful.” Alek says with a sinful grin of his own as he sets me down on my feet and backs me into the wall right beside our bedroom door. “Perhaps I’ll just have to gag you then, princess. Would you like that?”

Before I can answer, he kisses me. A deep, claiming kiss that leaves me breathless and has my toes curling in my heels. I can’t stop myself from arching up into him. Everything about him sets my skin on fire. Desire courses through my body as he pushes open our bedroom door and breaks the kiss long enough to push me into the room.

The firm smack on my ass helps.

I haven’t stopped smiling since dinner. I walk backward, away from Alek, pulling down the straps of my dress as I head toward our bed. Ours. A future unfolding in front of us that belongs to us and only us. I’ve never felt more secure to be someone’s partner as I do with the man talking toward me. That controlled look on his face sends a particular sort of thrill straight between my legs, pulsating with need.

I slide one arm free, and then the other. Slowly, I tug the soft, stretchy velvet over my breasts and free them to the warm air in the bedroom. My confidence spikes as I see the raw hunger

on his face as he looms closer, but I keep backing away until the backs of my thighs hit the mattress. Only then do I finish sliding my dress down and over my hips, then to my sex, baring it to him and then sliding the dress down over my thighs.

Alek's breath catches in his chest. "Naughty girl," he clicks his tongue at me and shakes his head. "If I had known that, dinner would have been a hell of a lot more interesting."

"You wouldn't have been able to keep your hands off of me, would you?" I ask.

He shakes his head no. "Of course not."

"Then I guess you had better start to make up for lost time, don't you?" My voice is almost raspy but I need to feel his hands on me. I want him to touch me with a desperate ache. Automatically, I cross my hands behind my back as I sink onto the mattress and push myself back up onto it with my feet. I keep my legs parted, just so that he can see just how ready I am, how ready I've been for him for *hours*.

As much as I enjoyed spending a lovely dinner with him, our first real official date, this is where I wanted to be. Just he and I in our room without any clothes on or plans to be anywhere else.

Alek pulls his suit jacket off and drops it to the ground. He undoes his vest quickly and lets it drop somewhere else. Only moments later, he's undoing the buttons on his black shirt and inch by inch, revealing his marvelous chest to me. Bare skin, tattoos, muscles and scars, and most of all, mine. All mine.

His knee indents the bed between my legs as he moves closer, hovering over me.

My brow furrows for a moment. "No ropes tonight?"

He considers for a moment. "I trust you."

My heart flutters in my chest. "You do?"

He nods and dips his head to kiss the column of my throat. I sink further back into the bed, exposing my throat for him to kiss. Teeth follow, nipping and biting and sucking a trail down

my neck to my breasts. He lavishes both with attention, worshiping at the skin and pulling on my nipples with his teeth before heading lower.

Normally I would let him. I would be only too happy to let him feast again until he's had his fill, but I need to feel him. I need to be closer. I want to feel him inside of me. I want his skin on mine, keeping me warm until he fills me over and over again. I need more of him.

I twist my arms out from behind my back and bring them up over my head. "I want to touch you so bad." I breathe. I only mean it as an off handed comment, rather than an actual request. But he pauses anyway. His bright eyes flick up to mine in question.

I can almost see the wheels in his brilliant mind turning over and over as he moves up to me, the bulge of his erection pressing against my thigh where he's still confined within his pants.

"Go slow." He grits out, his eyes closed for a moment as he rises up on his knees in front of me.

He's giving me a gift and for a long moment I'm not sure what to do. There are so many options laid out in front of me that my hands don't know where to start. I've wanted nothing more than to be allowed to touch him freely since we met and now that it's happening, I know that I have to choose carefully.

I push myself upward, his eyes open and lock onto my hands as they hover over his bare chest. Slowly, tentatively, I let myself trace the hard lines of muscle of his abdomen. Alek is deathly still as I trace the lines of dark ink covering the larger scars there and then trail back down slowly. My fingers toy with the waistband of his pants before I glance up at him, silently asking for permission to go ahead, which is granted. I kiss the skin above his waistband softly and his breath hitches.

This isn't easy for him, I know that. I can't put into words how grateful I am that he's even willing to try. I can hardly breathe as I start to undo his pants, kissing the exposed skin as Alek struggles to maintain his breathing steady, even. I can see his

hands balled into tight fists at his sides, but he doesn't move to stop me as I open his pants and free him.

I wrap my hand around the base of him, stroking softly then tightening my grip.

"Anya..." he groans. It's both pained and pleased as I'm sure his self-restraint has got to be nearing its limit. I can't blame him as he places a hand on my shoulder and pushes me back on the bed, laying me flat and exposed to him as he finds his way between my thighs.

"More, please." I sigh as I feel him hovering so close to where I want him so desperately.

"Such a needy princess." He teases. Always making jokes.

I reach up, hesitantly cupping his face slowly before bringing him forward to kiss me. A soft, sweet connection that makes my heart break for how tender it feels - and then it's the exact opposite as he slides into me. Claiming me in a solid stroke that fills me, stretches me with the sweetest ache as my eyes roll back into my head.

I can't take it.

"More," I beg, my lips brushing against his even as I speak the word.

He doesn't need to be told twice as he thrusts into me. Harder and harder, like he's trying to imprint himself on my insides and I love it. I love each and every moment with which he claims me as I kiss him again, lips parting for him to take what he needs. I'm happy to give him all, surrender absolutely everything to him and then some. Our joining is fast, brutal and all-consuming. Just like every time with him is.

"I love you, princess." Alek breathes into me.

"I know," I tease, getting the last word for once.

He dips a hand between our bodies, finding my clit and rubs in circles that match the pace that he's set. Serves me right for being snarky I guess. My orgasm finds me fast and hard, hard enough that I'm left wholly and utterly breathless as I squeeze



around him, tightening and milking him for everything that he's worth as he finishes inside of me.

Just the first of many, many more to come.

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## EXTENDED EPILOGUE

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Eager to learn what the future holds for **Anya and Alek**?

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## AFTERWORD

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Thank you for reading my novel, **Hunter's Scars**. I really hope you enjoyed it! If you did, could you please be so kind to [write a review HERE?](#)

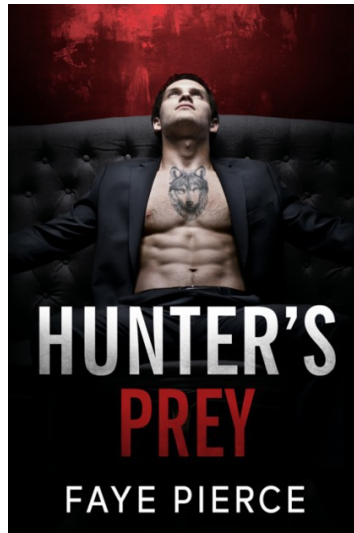
It is **very important for me to read your thoughts** about my book, in order to get better at writing.

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# BRUTAL HUNTERS

Book#1 - [Hunter's Prey](#)



Book#2 - [Hunter's Kill](#)



Book#3 (this book) - Hunter's Scars

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## DO YOU WANT MORE ROMANCE?

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Turn on the next page to read the first chapters of my latest best-selling novel: **His Cruel Victory**

Daddy dearest married me off again. Now a ruthless stranger slips a ring on my finger. I thought things couldn't get worse, until I met my future father-in-law—Emanuele Teso. His dark gaze tempts me with the promise of punishments. I am a bad girl, after all. But I can't risk ruining another engagement. Not to mention he is way too old for me. I'm supposed to marry his son, the deserved penance for my sins. But I just cannot seem to stop fantasizing about my fiancé's father.



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# HIS CRUEL VICTORY

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## CHAPTER ONE

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### *Emanuele*

“Eva, take those things out of my study,” my gaze shifts to the sea-blue eyes and the tresses of coal black.

That used to be the color of my hair before the gray showed through, now even more visible under the ring lights and reflector she has arranged in front of my desk.

Thanks to her, I know the names of this equipment, and while that might score me a best dad of the year title by actively participating in his daughter’s career, I would like to draw a line at how much harassment I can take. I’m having a cup of coffee, she is taking shots. I’m trying to read through the newspaper, she is taking shots. I am trying to bloody work right now, and she invading my space with equipment to take shots.

“Dad, just this time,” she drops her camera on the desk and hurries to connect the extension to a socket, “It will be quick and painless.”

“Eva, I’m not in the mood to have my pictures taken,” I look at the antique clock on the desk and see I might still have some time before Vittoria and her father arrive. “Go take a picture of nature or something else,” I pick up my cigar from the ashtray and puff, then tap the butt to let the ash fall.

“Dad, they love you,” she flips the switch, “my page does not have the same buzz as when I post your pictures,” she takes hoppy steps to me and hugs me from behind, then plants a kiss

on my cheek, “It turns out they love you more than they love nature.”

“Who is they?” I know who. She fills me in on everything, whether I care or not. And I care.

“My fans, who are sort of like your fans now because they are pining for more pictures of my hot dad,” she smiles sheepishly, saying the hot dad part through joined teeth.

“Are these the kind of people you surround yourself with?”

I know it’s not the point, and I’m not a saint myself, but I don’t joke with her. She is still my little Princess, no matter how grown she is. It will always be my duty to watch and protect her.

“Dad, they are online, so it’s not a physical thing,” she says, dragging her oversized denim pants up to her stomach, then hopping back to the ring lights to set them.

“But they’re in your circle, aren’t they?”

“Let’s look at the good side here,” she ties her oversized neon t-shirt into a knot around her waist. I’m a fan of her style. She dresses in oversized denim pants and t-shirts, and she sometimes wears glasses. When she isn’t being a prickly daughter, she spends most of her time editing on her laptop or taking pictures.

“What’s the good side?” I fold my hands across each other and rest them on the desk, making sure the cigar is visible between my fingers as I pose.

She knows how to get me. My little bubbly offspring of trouble. I always knew she would be this way, from the night I held her in the hospital room when she was born. With those eyes like her mother’s, there’s not much I can refuse her. There’s not much I have denied her. And Eva has never asked for anything I couldn’t do. I built a bubble around her, and I love how she has stayed in it, never wanting anything more.

“Be quick,” I snap my fingers at her, and she blows me a kiss.

“You are the best, Dad,” she flips the first ring light on and then hops over to turn the second one on. She picks up her



camera.

“I like how you’re sitting, now look at the camera, please,” she angles the camera to snap.

I do as the professional has asked. She is talented. Every year, she sells her pictures for charity, and it’s good for the family name, and people get their money’s worth.

The shutter clicks, and she smiles brightly.

I take it she is satisfied.

“To put it out there, you have female and male fans,” she takes another shot.

“You don’t have to put it out there,” I lift my eyes to look at her, and she takes another shot. I’m about to scold her when the noises from outside pique my interest.

She hears it, too.

“That’s quite some shouting,” she snorts, “Salvatore is finally losing it.”

None of my domestic staff would dare to ramble so loudly that I could hear it from my study. And not even Salvatore, or the women he changes more than his underwear, would violate the estate’s solemnity in such a way. I wouldn’t put it past him, except this time he is not around.

“Stay here,” I stand and walk to the door of my study. It’s a stringy lady’s voice and a harsh baritone belonging to a man, “Don’t come out.”

Eva nods, “I will start editing the pictures,” she is on her laptop as soon as she sits on the navy-blue sofa.

I open the door meticulously and step out. My study is on the second floor, and from here, I can see what is happening on the ground floor.

I drag my cigar and puff, seeing them through the fogginess of the smoke.

Looks like my guests are having a moment.

Vittoria and her father, Giuseppe Mancuso.

She has her back to me and intersects his line of sight because she is on six-inch heels. Her legs are covered in black stockings that disappear under the red coat she has on.

But I can see the top of his bald head and the lines on his forehead deepening from aggravation. Giuseppe is leaning on his walking stick and I have no doubt he has a pipe between his lips. He wears his darkness like a second skin.

“Give me a break,” Vittoria grits and balls her fists, as if she could punch him if he wasn’t her father. And I bet she can. I have heard enough about her to know she is as ferocious as they come.

“You will do as told and not cause me any more trouble than you already have,” he grunts, “This time, I won’t go easy on you if you make a mess and bring me shame,” he points at her with shaky fingers, “Once is a mistake, but twice,” he spits his last words out, not completing the sentence.

“Whose fault was it that Massimo said no to your proposal for a slave?” She throws one hand in the air in a poised way.

Her audacity. That thing about the offspring of a beast not seeing what everyone else sees when they look at their parents.

She is standing her ground, making her look like a strong, firm woman, but all I see is a brat that needs to be tamed. She has been given too much freedom, and it’s hard for her to know where the lines are drawn.

Giuseppe makes a guttural sound, “I’m happy I’m getting you out of my home.”

“That makes the both of us...”

Her words have no landing as the back of his callous hand swings into action and smacks her hard on the cheeks.

No, not that.

Not under my roof. I get that she is a spoiled brat but hitting her is going too far. There are many ways to clip her wings, and I will take pleasure in... *Salvatore* would take pleasure in taming her. I correct myself and clear my throat loud enough to get their attention.

I start climbing down the stairs to welcome them when she turns in my direction, and I almost stumble on myself.

Bloody Saints.

I grind my teeth.

To say she is easy on the eye is an understatement.

I am dazzled.

She exudes a pure magnetic charge and bloody hell, I feel like I'm being pulled in with each step I take down the stairs to them. To her.

I hold her gaze, her eyes like coal, only they smolder, and she has the defiance to hold my gaze as I walk down; standing straighter and lifting her chin like I didn't just see her being hit and humiliated. Like ink on her pale skin, her hair is wrapped up in a polished bun.

The closer I get, the straighter she stands. As if daring me. And that glare in her eyes, like she has already dragged me beneath her and placed herself above as the one with the power.

Oh, she is a fiery one. A wild cat that I want to curb. So many ways to tame her. So many ways to train her. So many bloody ways to put her and her smart mouth to good use.

I clear my throat again to sweep the contaminating thought out before it infects my mind any further. She is Salvatore's soon-to-be wife, and whatever needs to be done to her, for her or with her, is his sole responsibility. Not mine.

I close the distance, and if not for the fact that Giuseppe is in the room with his hovering sourness, which I need to remind myself about, I wouldn't have been able to tear my eyes away from her to look at his face, as unpleasant as that might be.

But his face is where my eyes should stay. They have no business sampling her any more than I have already. The legacy of my clan is hanging on her and Salvatore's marriage. I should never forget that this deal is one way to strengthen my clan and give me a partnership with La eMe.

Her engagement with Salvatore must go as planned. She holds the key to too much, despite Giuseppe showing he has no regard for her.

By the way she carries herself, she knows her place and what she can make me lose.

For some bloody reason, I find myself longing for hell.

And that fire in her eyes tells me she is not afraid to play.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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### *Vittoria*

The fall of Vittoria Mancuso.

A play proudly sponsored by Giuseppe Mancuso, my father. Even though he keeps showing how undeserving of that title he is with every single passing day. There's nothing that can be done to alter the script, not when the show has been set, and especially not when he is the one directing it.

Oh, to be a normal girl born in New York, allowed to choose her own career, have normal friends, go out on dates, fall in love, live her life with the people she loves and who love her. To be able to have a favorite TV show to watch, extended family holidays and to argue about which snacks are the best, the salty or sweet ones. To talk about fashion trends with your girlfriends or gossip about the neighbors with your mom.

Oh, what I would give to not have to exist in this world as a daughter to the man beside me.

But the show must go on.

The shit I will have to act through... I know as fucking hell I will have to give a grand performance to the very end. Till the curtains close, the hall is emptied, and I'm finally hollow.

For a moment there, I felt untouchable. Now, I wouldn't dare to think I'm valued any more than exchangeable stock.

I know a handful of people who are having a field day at the outcome of my life. The ones who think I probably deserve

this much and the ones who wish I would get more than I'm getting now.

Then there's the club of men like the one whose sad semen brought me to life, who are clinking their glasses in celebration of the benefits they will reap from the miserable outcome of my life.

My father doesn't care for anything other than expanding his wealth and affluence. Sometimes, it's like he doesn't even care about his own life.

That makes the both of us.

I sneer, the vexation burning and running through my veins, rushing straight to my brain. It's scorching every cell and licking up any functional nerves.

Forlorn. I should slap it on my forehead and ride through a cloud of thunder with that miserable word.

If I could sum up my shit life using one word, it would be pitiful. I deluded myself into believing that at the end of a rough life like the one I've had, I could find reprieve. I tricked myself into believing that somehow, something that feels like a miracle of some fucking sort could happen to me and get me as far away as possible from the only life I've known.

But delusion time is over.

Reality slaps harder than *papà* can ever hit me.

There's nothing I can do to change that or reverse the course of my life. It has set sail, and I am nowhere close to the helm of that ship. And it is pathetic to wish for a storm to steer it in another direction.

This is what my life has been reduced to.

Hate it as I may; I have no fucking choice but to live it.

Giuseppe takes his pipe from his mouth, daring me to say another word. I know he is capable of burning me with the thing. He has done it before. I have a body that feels like a display of his artwork from the ridges left by healed wounds. It's why I always cover myself up.

Someone harrumphs behind me, and I take my time as I circle from shooting fireballs at Giuseppe for his assault, although I'm used to it and I probably saw that one coming, to looking at who I'm expecting to be Salvatore. Another degenerate I'm here to see.

I don't mean to judge, but I never knew Giuseppe to do business with men of unlike minds. The closest he was to doing things differently was with Massimo, but my father's reputation preceded him, playing a huge part in ruining that for everyone.

The grimace on my face loses its hold and begs to deflate as my eyes drop on him. The cold from his stapling sooty eyes, almost like the dark strands mixed in the gray of his hair, sends shivers from where our eyes meet down my spine. Any funny move, and I will disintegrate.

He is entrancing, to say the fucking least. Old, no doubt. But age has only given him his attributes an acuteness that should be considered illegal, the same as his choice of business.

I swallow what feels like pricking pins, my throat tight. It both hurts and tingles.

I have a new theory for how the devil looks. Up until now, I could use *papà's* face as a pictorial reference, but seeing the darkness in the eyes of this man, sensing the air that surrounds him as he takes valiant steps down the white-marbled stairs with gold rails, I agree with everyone who has ever suggested that the devil looks nothing like we know.

My heart beats faster, in rhythm with my breathing, with each step closer he gets to us. To me.

Giuseppe had to choose his kind. He didn't even think of picking someone at least age-appropriate for me. I must have lost my market value to be given to this man. Or he offered something way above what Giuseppe would have expected in exchange for me.

Not that he is anything like Giuseppe in appearance. The irony is that his choice of color is black, and Giuseppe's is white. Black dress shirt for a buff body and muscles that radiate

authority. Black dress pants for firm legs with powerful strides as they close the distance. A hole in one of his coal-black bristled eyebrows to show he had a wild youth.

Most of his long, firm, thick fingers are covered in black ink and rings.

I lift my eyes back to hold his slithering gaze. It's like he can tear through my fort and see that I am cowering inside. Like he can see deep inside how much I'm shrinking and hurting from this arrangement.

My jaw ticks now, and my teeth grate against each other. The fire in my brain is shooting across like fireworks, and my sinuses are prickling with tears that will never make it to my eyes. It's been twenty years since I last cried. And no matter how vexed I am at this moment, it's not fucking enough to break the dam.

He is staring intently as he stands before me. Like I summoned him. Like he is some dark lord ready to fulfill some prophecy with me at its core.

His hooded eyes are dispatching encrypted messages to me, and my vexation-swaddled brain is trying to decrypt them. Whatever they are conveying seems important, and I want to know. But, as piercing as his eyes are, there's a shadow that does not allow looking past what he wants a person to see.

The hair at the nape of my neck spikes up.

It's a staring contest, I guess.

He is trying to gauge me. To weigh up his new toy. He can get in line. Giuseppe has tried even to break me my whole life and he yet has to get the desired gratification from his hard work. Whatever he thinks he can bend me with, I'm sure it's nothing compared to the hell my father put me through for *years*.

I take him up on his silent dare. Staring contest it is, then. A little annoying, but thrilling nonetheless. It's the most thrilling thing that has happened to me in a while, and I can make due with a little excitement in my progressively tedious life.

*Papà* is observing us, but he just insignificant right now. The man in front of me knows how to guzzle attention when he



walks into a place.

We are both determined to see this one to the end.

Then, he drops his eyes to the side of my face. The same side that was hit by Giuseppe minutes ago. Meaning, he saw me get hit. He saw my humiliation, how I wouldn't want the man I have been handed to as a trophy wife to see me in. And he is letting me know he saw it, to remind me of how little I mean even to my father and to let me know that he also knows how to keep me in place when I falter.

But I will not falter.

It's a promise.

A fucking oath, if I need to draw my blood and swear on it.

I won't let anyone make me feel so little. I am Vittoria Mancuso, and I don't care what anyone thinks about my predicament; I will keep my head high, my eyes ocean-still, my spine vertical, and my will to fight for myself and retain whatever self-worth is left in my life unshaken.

So, I boss up my chest. In my mind, I seize him up with a leash and strip him till he shrinks. I keep him where I keep them all—underneath me. I don't care about the power this one emanates. I don't care if he threatens to turn the wheel and use my leash against me.

I don't fucking care if Giuseppe dived into hell and brought the devil out with him to give his daughter to.

He is beneath me.

And beneath me is where he will be for the rest of this shitshow.

A glint of amusement flickers in his icy eyes, and I sup up. It's the first opening he is giving me. The first anything I get from him other than the dark threat in his eyes.

“Giuseppe,” his voice bellows with the thick, dry texture of a tree bark. “Welcome. How was the flight?” He turns his head in the direction of Giuseppe. No smile. Not even a subtle welcoming hint. It appears Giuseppe has found his twin.

“I beat death again,” Giuseppe grunts, moving closer with the aid of his walking stick. He once again makes it clear that I mean nothing by standing in front of me, giving me nothing but the back of his glossy bald head.

I know he can manage on his own, but he chooses to use the walking stick as a guise, so people think he is vulnerable, and they let their guard down around him.

“This must be her,” that stormy voice again, making me want to zero out every other voice in my head and narrow it down to only his.

“This is my daughter,” Giuseppe offers, stepping aside slightly. On the bright side, if there’s any to this arrangement, at least I won’t have to listen to his screeching voice any longer.

“I would say I that see, but...” he snorts quietly.

“She took after her mother,” Giuseppe chortles abrasively, “She is lucky. What good would she be if she had this face?”

I would carve the face out myself if that were the case. If life had dared to not only give me him as a father but also make me even a sliver of an image of him. It would feel like a punch in the gut every time I looked in the mirror.

“She has your tenaciousness.”

He doesn’t know me. I’m nothing like my father.

If anything, I’m worse.

“It has cost me,” Giuseppe replies, looking around, “I don’t see Salvatore.”

“He is around somewhere.”

“You are not Salvatore?” I don’t want to show the nip of disappointment in my maniacally twisting stomach.

“Would you want me to be?” He turns to me now, then shoves his firm hands into the pocket of his dress pants. His stare has the same effect as a thunderbolt. It strikes.

It’s my turn to harrumph, “I thought you were my fiancé.”

“Is that so?” He lifts both brows, eyes almost shimmering from the effect of the bright white light overhead.

Cheeky laughter breaks through the intensity in the air before the person laughing pokes her head from behind him. Everything in this estate appears to be on a different plane of beauty.

She practically bounces over to us with coal-black curls, vibrant blue eyes, pink flushed smiling cheeks, wearing an oversized neon shirt tied to the back, baggy denim pants, and holding a camera.

“That would be awkward now, wouldn’t it?” She sneaks her free hand under his arm and plasters herself to his side.

She looks too bright to be around someone with such a sullen aura. I flick my eyes between them, observing the stark contrast. Tight-pressed lips and lips curved in a smile. Darkness and light. Maybe a storm and rainbow.

“Salvatore is my brother,” she wraps her hand around his waist now. “Wouldn’t it be awkward if my father was your fiancé?” She cranes her neck to stare at him. “I know he is easy on the eyes,” she smiles, the kind of smile that says how much she cherishes him, “But nah...” She shakes her head, scrunching her nose.

Her father. That’s the piece to complete the puzzle. As a pair they are like a work of art I can’t figure out, no matter how much I stare at it or try to delve into the artist’s mind.

And as if it’s not enough, he smiles at her and wraps his strong, protective arms around her.

His daughter has so much life pulsing through her that it is impossible not to have some of it spill on you. A daughter who looks like she has been allowed a freedom I can never dare dream of. I observe how bold she is to not only approach her father but to fling herself on him, even with a guest like Giuseppe groaning disapprovingly alongside me.

This starts a spiral of longing inside of me.

Shame on you, *papà*.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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### *Emanuele*

She won.

She bloody won, and I let her.

The fight is not mine either way. She is not mine to teach or curb. She is for Salvatore, and I can only, for the bloody life of me, hope he has what it takes to clip and mellow her into a good wife.

Too much fucking fire in this one. She will consume him if he doesn't have what it takes.

A spit fucking fire.

I have to admit that, with the right man, she would do a worthy job of holding down an empire. As much as her father hated her, that was obvious to him as well. In our meeting with him in New York, he did point out that she had a head for business and that she worked with him.

I rip my eyes away from her face, her look making me think she would have preferred me to be the man she is here for.

For all her strong wit and wimp, I see through her. She is not an open book. My guts tell me she is letting me in, while pretending she isn't. Perhaps this is an exchange, maybe she thinks it will make me let my guard down.

Too bad for her.

That's never happening.

And now that I've found a way through, I'm not staying out.

"Meet my daughter," I squeeze Eva some more. "Eva," I tilt her towards Giuseppe, holding her to myself. It's not him, per se, that I am worried about. It's just how I am with the people I care about after the bloody accident.

Old habits die hard, and I've had ten years of practice.

"Your daughter?" Giuseppe grunts, not hiding his distaste for her being here.

I have spoiled Eva. But it's not like I don't like to see her cross those lines. She has always been the type to show up where she isn't supposed to be.

"Welcome to our estate," Eva giggles, overtly excited about what is happening. My guess is she is just excited to see Vittoria. There is nothing is exciting about Giuseppe's brooding face.

"Eva," Giuseppe recites her name like it's a broken bottle stuck in his throat. And I take note of how he has been acting since Eva joined us. I don't give a bloody fuck how things are done in his house, but this is mine. And in my house, my daughter is daddy's little princess. "At least I can say I see it," he lifts his eyes to me and gives a sneer, or maybe he is trying to smile.

"She takes after me," I don't care to smile in his direction, but I get the reference of his joke if we can call the drought statement a joke.

"You must be Vittoria," she spins her eyes to Vittoria.

"Yes," Vittoria croaks, then clears her throat loudly, a little too loud, an uncharacterized trait for her bottled-in personality.

"That's me," she lifts her high cheekbones and keeps her raspberry lips pressed together, giving a smile that stays on the lips, never reaching her sultry eyes.

"Isn't this great, Dad?" Eva wiggles in my arm, and I bob.

It is great.

"I suppose we can say that."

“If you are not Salvatore, why isn’t he here?” Vittoria folds her arms across her chest, assuming a defensive position for what may come. She’s not sure she will like what she’ll get.

I’m not sure why that makes me want to both puff up and shrink because I shouldn’t be feeling anything.

“Let me get him,” Eva offers, and before I can say anything, she scuttles out of the parlor.

Through the window, I see her take the garden that leads to Salvatore’s apartment. She can access it through the main building, but Salvatore never opens the door on this side, except if I’m the one on the other end.

The silence doesn’t last for long before Eva comes bursting in, a little breathless, but all bubbled up and genuinely happy to be a part of this. Normally, I would ask her to excuse us, and I will soon, but for now, she can stay.

“He is coming...” she hops to my side.

“Easy now,” I pat her back benignly, and she smiles at me.

The connecting door opens, and Salvatore slips out of his apartment.

All eyes turn to him but mine. I want to see what she sees. Or how she reacts to what she sees. If I had thought her jawline couldn’t get any sharper, I was wrong.

Salvatore straightens his maroon sweater, stamps his boots, and adjusts the fitting of his blue jeans. All that tardiness is on display for his fiancé and future father-in-law to see.

The more I wonder what I’ll do with him, the more it drives me crazy.

“Dad,” Salvatore takes long, careless strides from the connecting door to us. He looks disgruntled. As if he was in the middle of something and we were interrupting him. He was probably doing something disappointing.

“Salvatore,” Giuseppe has a lighter tone this time. Finally, a child of mine he likes. It might be because of what he is getting from turning him into his son-in-law or just simply because he sees his younger self reflected in him.

“Giuseppe,” Salvatore switches to my other side to extend a handshake, “How was your flight?”

“I didn’t die,” Giuseppe offers the same joke again, and Salvatore cackles.

Bloody Saints.

“*Grazie al cielo*, you are safe,” Salvatore retrieves his hand.

“Salvatore,” I step in, “this is Vittoria. Vittoria, this is my son, Salvatore.”

I have been trying to ignore the swirling disappointment in her eyes because the more I look, the more I feel like I will sink into a state of hypnosis. But now I can’t help it. It’s here for all to see. She does nothing to hide it.

“Salvatore,” she snorts dryly.

“Vittoria,” Salvatore snorts loudly.

It is safe to say they fit.

“Salvatore, she is so beautiful!” Eva titters, and Salvatore glares at her. “But she is,” she mumbles, “Dad, isn’t she?”

I won’t answer that. The word beautiful feels too casual to describe her.

“Thank you, Eva, you are beautiful too,” Vittoria smiles softly now. “Sometimes, men can’t see what’s in front of them,” she throws a subtle punch, and I don’t know who she is referring to. But judging by the men present, I would say all of us.

“Shall we?” I step aside and point to the stairs, indicating for us to take this meeting to the study, “Eva, get Fabio; he will know what to bring with him.” She is already on it.

“And also—”

She halts.

“Get Sabrina to make coffee,” I tilt my head this time to face Giuseppe, and he gets the gesture, nodding.

“Black,” he gruffs.

“Tea for me,” Vittoria clears her throat.

“You are not invited,” Salvatore cuts in.

“Invited or not, I will have tea,” she snaps.

“That’s enough,” Giuseppe smacks his tongue in a fit of irritation.

“Please,” that’s directed to me with a toned-down pitch. “After you, Emanuele.”

“She can be a part of it,” I offer, not knowing why but wanting to give her this little gift of feeling like a part of the decision that’s about to change her life.

“Thank you, but I will be...” she inhales shaky breaths, “I will be here.”

“If he says you can come, then come,” Giuseppe grunts.

The man has little patience. It’s good for business sometimes.

I lead the way, Salvatore by my side and Giuseppe behind. With no sound of heels clacking on the floor, it is clear that Vittoria is staying behind.

“You spoil her,” Salvatore says to Giuseppe.

“She is my only child; that is a given,” Giuseppe grunts, “She is also just plain stubborn, but I doubt that has anything to do with me.”

“That has everything to do with you,” Salvatore laughs softly.

The light comes on as we walk into the study.

“What are these?” Giuseppe points with his pipe at the equipment Eva arranged in my office, still the way they were when I left her.

“My sister’s,” Salvatore hurries to shove them to the side.

“Be careful with those, they’re sensitive,” I borrow Eva’s words.

I follow Giuseppe to the sofas arranged around a table at the center, a dim lamp hanging from the ceiling.

The two of us sit across from each other. He leans back, one elbow on the arm of the sofa, twiddling with his pipe and holding his walking stick between his legs in front of him. I



have one leg over the other, one arm resting on the top of the backrest, and my elbow on the armrest.

Salvatore sits adjacent to us as carelessly as he can. Both elbows on his knees, bouncing his feet impatiently.

Sabrina is the first to come in with our espressos. There are four cups on the tray, plus one for the fourth person who is joining in now.

Fabio. My *consigliere*.

Gentle to the eyes in a navy-blue suit, but prowler when needed. It's in his hooded forest-green eyes. I have never seen him wear anything but a suit when dealing with business in all the years I've known him. And everything to Fabio is business.

"Giuseppe," Fabio takes his seat beside me and hands the file he has with him to Giuseppe.

Giuseppe jumps into reading it, indifferent to the coffee set before him and eager to get this over with, as am I, because the alliance he promises is one I can't wait to join.

At least now, we can have a different line of exportation of drugs. With his help, we can now do business with La eMe. And the Bratva has no access to them. It offers us a significant advantage over them because they can provide the same quantity and quality at a lower cost.

The door of the study opens timidly, and Vittoria steps in. She stays by the door, watching with hooded eyes as her father reads through the document. She looks mysterious in the solemn light of the study.

Fabio brings out a pen from the inner pocket of his suit and hands it to Giuseppe. He grunts as he takes it, then scribbles quickly on the document. He hands it over to Fabio and it's my turn to do the same.

I do my part, sealing the fate of my clan and praying to the Saints that this alliance is the holy fucking grail it appears to be.

“We are in-laws now,” Giuseppe says, sipping his espresso, then setting the cup down too quickly. “Time is money.”

I nod at him and we all come to a stand, then take his hand in a firm handshake, ignoring the hawkish eyes peering by the door.

“I have a flight to catch,” he retrieves his hand, “I guess I will see you around,” he clears his throat, then looks at Salvatore, “I know she is a handful, but keep her in one piece.”

Which basically means break her but up to a point. If anyone were to touch my daughter, I would chop their hands off. How Giuseppe can say this only speaks more of his rottenness.

“I will walk you out,” Fabio offers.

Giuseppe nods, and they both leave. He doesn’t even care to stop and say goodbye to his daughter and she doesn’t seem to mind. She doesn’t look like she wants him to—instead, she keeps the door open for him.

“Well, I will get back to what I was doing,” Salvatore approaches the door. Vittoria rolls her eyes and smirks

He exhales and makes a clicking sound while shaking his head. He is holding back.

He walks out the door and Vittoria slams it shut.

I sit back, waiting for her to leave, but she just folds her arms across her chest. Her arrogance is replaced by something I’m having a hard time identifying.

“Join me,” I pat the space beside me.

“I don’t think I want to,” she ticks her jaw, keeping her eyes on the ring lights in the corner, “For Eva?”

“Yes.”

“She took these?” She looks around the study at the photographs on the walls.

“Yes.”

“She is talented.”

“She is.”

She puffs, “I didn’t get the tea,” she sweeps her tongue around in her mouth.

“Sit, I will have one made for you,” I pat the spot again, and this time, she sashays to me with that clipped waist and slender legs. She sits beside me.

She throws her head back to stare blankly at the ceiling.

“I will be right back,” I pluck myself out of the study, needing to get something that has been on my mind since I walked in on her and her father.

Sabrina is standing by the door as I step out.

“Get me ice with a washcloth, a pain killer, and a cup of tea,” I tell her, and she springs into action.

I don’t go back inside, needing to put some space between me and the whirlpool of sensuousness awaiting me.

A few minutes later, Sabrina is back with a tray containing everything I asked for, and a bottle of water.

“Just one pill is enough,” she hands the tray over and steps aside.

I nod and walk back into the study.

Vittoria has one leg crossed over the other and a cigarette between her lips, a gold case that also functions as a lighter in her hand.

I set the tray on the table, and she drops the cigarette back into the case.

“I smoke when I’m having a hard time,” she snorts, “Which is always around my father,” she gulps. She drops the case on the table.

“Here,” I serve her the cup of tea, and she takes it and drinks until she empties the cup.

Cute.

She bites her lower lip. “I was thirsty,” she states.

Those lips.

My eyes narrow on them, and my cock ticks in my pants.

Not that, please. She shouldn't saddle my attention on those lips and what I would like them to do at this point.

I pick up the ice wrapped in the cotton white washcloth and lift it to her face.

"I am fine," she tries to slide away, taking her hand to cover the spot.

"I take care of what is mine, Vittoria," I don't touch her, but she drops her hand, "I just got you; I'm not about to have you damaged due to poor maintenance."

"Right," she chuckles softly, "like some tool from a hardware store," she picks up her cigarette case and plucks a stick out. "I better restock my cigarettes then," she holds the lighter in the air, then lifts her long dark lashes to look at me with those pulpy eyes, then lights the cigarette up. "Horrible days ahead."

Up close, she looks even more enthralling than I had thought. Silk skin, elongated curly lashes, plush raspberry lips, button nose, slender neck, and that scent that's both savory and provocative.

I place the ice on the bruised spot, and her breath heaves, suspended.

I'd like to run my finger along her smooth skin. To trace lines down her neck and not stop until I find her...

I clear my throat.

Bloody Saints.

She is going to drive me crazy.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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### *Vittoria*

*H*is scent of earth and opulence is sweltering.

It's all I can do not to melt like steel thrown into an inferno.

I swallow grizzly air, shifting in my seat, but unable to move away because I have been commanded to stay put.

I hate it.

My body itches to disobey.

But I can't. People don't usually care so much for me. I could be back from an operation or bruised to the point of almost dying, and Giuseppe wouldn't bat an eyelash.

I exhale a shaky breath.

His quiet, strained breathing make me acutely aware of his presence.

I can't imagine ever forgetting his presence, even for a brief minute. His presence is big enough to swallow space in the same way that his gaze consumes me.

The ice he is pressing against my bruise gives me relief. It contrasts sharply with the person tending to it. It's nothing compared to the onyx eyes that I can't turn to look at. Something instinctive in me fears he will unearth me, as he has already started doing in the little time I've known him.

It's confusing. And upsetting.

When I saw him for the first time, I did not exactly like him, but I did find companionship in the mutual dislike.

It's like we can exist together in this room, disliking each other in a way that is comforting. But I don't like his tone. I don't like how comfortable he is in silence. At least a talking man slips up. But he says nothing.

His eyes, his mannerisms, nothing is being said aloud.

And yet, his demeanor tells me all I need to know.

The quietness is something to seep through and get seized in. It can be scary. And it's unusual for me, but it looks comforting to him. I wonder if it is him making me uncomfortable rather than the silence itself.

Maybe it's because of how I saw him care for Eva, or perhaps it's because the unimaginable is happening.

I miss New York. No, not just the big, loud city. I miss the heart of it. It's not something I can describe, but seeing my father walk out that door stings with the truth that New York is no longer home for me.

Nowhere has been home for me, but at least the city was the closest thing to it. At least, *papà* made sure I was taken care of because of what he hoped to get from me in return.

I keep my cigarette between my lips. Not smoking it, I don't have the energy to lift my hands and work that pattern.

I taste the tobacco and just savor the smell in the air. It's lewd—charged up with the grandeur that's seeping from the big man beside me.

He is a perfect blend of class and razz. Unlike his son. Nothing like his son.

This is not to say Salvatore is sour to the eyes, but he doesn't have the gentleness his father possesses. Salvatore is all over the place.

If Emanuele is a still ocean, Salvatore is an unsteady bucket of water. Messing the entire place up. No fucking coordination. A worse option for me compared to Massimo.

I didn't love him, but he had everything I wanted. He had the demeanor. He had the looks. He had the affluence. And he had the justness, something that placed him above us Mancusos.

Massimo would have given me a life away from the one I knew. He would never hit a woman, he would never stoop to the level of sex trafficking, and he would never soil his hands in a way that would hurt the innocent.

I wanted it to work so badly between us. I just wanted him to accept me and let us work together to build our empire. But he got himself a slave instead and pretended to love her to get out of the engagement with me. Then, as if to add salt to injury, he fell in love with her.

Every time I see her, I see the life I could have had. The escape. My escape. But she took that from me. She stripped me of that. And now this is what I have.

Salvatore.

I suppose I deserve this punishment given that I kidnapped his now wife Alejandra and tried to sell her back to the Camorra. I know it was wrong, but I lost control there for a minute. That is how badly I wanted that life. And that is what got me here.

All my years of falling in line and doing right by my father, only to be offered to a man with no backbone.

Classic.

Curly hair, dark eyes, barely a seven on a good day in terms of appearance, but with the right height and that god-awful smell like he just got baked in some nose-pickling spice. It took everything I had not to scrunch my nose at him. But I am sure I will shortly. If we are to be husband and wife, I will have to find a way to swap whatever bad perfume he wears for something decent.

The cigarette is burning. The heat calls me back to the study I'm in. And if it were a good day for me, I'd stop and appreciate the art.

On one side is a library so high I want to weep for the richness of knowledge available to me. Then, the black-and-white pictures of emotions my soul longs to explore.

Eva captured crinkles, the curviness of lips, mouths opening ajar in laughter, and the deepening of neckbones, to mention but a few. I can hear the sounds of their laughter and feel every nerve ending that contracted to give them the moment she so brilliantly captured. It all melds in a harmonious weave with the vibrant white on the walls of the room and the splashes of ritzy hue of furniture and accessories. I already know this room will be my favorite.

But I'm not sure why someone so gloomy would feel at ease in a space so dissimilar to his nature. Probably in the same manner he felt at ease with his daughter's enthusiastic spirit.

"It's safe to talk, you know," I clear my throat again. With him around, it's like I'm breeding spiders in my throat. "And I think I feel better," I chuckle softly.

I feel fucking numb on that cheek. I get it he wants to help, but the ice is freezing. As one would expect.

I try to tilt my head to look at him, but the firmness of his hand tells me he doesn't want me to look in his direction. I'm stubborn, though, so I'm still tilting, and he seems to keep up with pushing against me. No strain on his breathing as he does that, but I'm grinding my teeth already. He is unmoving, just breathing beside me, and looming.

"Emanuele... Really, thank you."

He retrieves his hand, and I flex the muscle there to be sure it's still functional.

"You feel better?"

"Yes, thanks," I bite my lower lip, not sure what to do.

I'm clueless about how to exist around him.

"Take the pain killer," he doesn't wait for me to reach for the little pill bottle. He reaches for it, opens it, drops one on his palm, picks up the bottle of water, and tilts his body to face me now.

I watch his every move because, somehow, it sends fire alarms off in my head, how deftly he does things.



It's in the way he speaks, which is toned down as if he has an infinite amount of time on his side. He does not rush his words. Every word is perfectly spoken, demonstrating the brilliance behind those obsidian eyes.

He walks so smoothly. So sure. So confident. Conceited.

The way he sits, as if this sofa is a throne rather than a regular piece of furniture. But you can see his roughness around the edges. Like the small scar that runs across his lower lip and under his ear.

I'm ogling.

"Vittoria."

I blink, shaking my head and nodding at the same time.

"Yes," I chuckle, now feeling all over the place like dear, sorry, Salvatore.

"It's the third time I called."

"Oh."

"Is that a medical thing?" He narrows his eyebrows.

"A what?" I clear my throat, "What is a medical thing?"

"Your zoning out, is it something I should be worried about?"

I want to snort, but he is dead serious. No teasing in his eyes like he genuinely wants to know.

"No," I shake my head.

"Then it's what I thought it was then?"

"Yes," I answer before my brain backtracks, "Sorry..." I stutter, "What were you thinking that was?"

"I guess we both know the answer," he opens the bottle of water.

A straight-to-the-point man. Admirable. No beating around the bush, just straight to leveling the trees.

"Here," he hands me the bottle of water, "Do you have any medical..."

“None,” I shake my head, then remember one. “Except Epistaxis,” I usually get that when something triggers me, “it means nose bleeding.”

“I know what it means.”

“Of course, because it’s an everyday word,” I snort.

“Open up,” he takes the pill between his index finger and thumb, then angles it at my lips.

I have no idea why I actually do as I am told. I open my mouth and take the drug, partly and unintentionally, taking his fingers with it.

It’s a mutual effect.

Unnamed, but a mutual reaction.

From the point where my tongue meets his fingers, a straight bolt shoots through unhindered till it causes a whirlpool in my stomach. No. A forge. I should take it back, but instead, I push it out a little, wanting to see what this effect means to him.

His lids clamp, and he groans as he inhales.

When his eyes open, they wear night better than night itself. Then, he does the most unexpected thing. He slips his fingers further in, pressing the tip of his thick thumb against my damp tongue.

“Giuseppe is on his way back to New York,” I hear the lush baritone of the strange man that just walked in on us as he makes me recoil, and Emanuele retrieves his fingers from my mouth.

Fabio.

That’s his name.

I stand now, grateful to Fabio for encroaching on whatever that was. With my cigarette case in hand, I sway out of the study, avoiding eye contact.

“Fabio,” I stutter after the door closes behind me, my voice matching my steps, that aren’t as smooth as they usually are.

Day one in this new luxurious cell, and I already feel smothered by the men. I take the stairs, jittery as I feel, and my body deflates when I see Eva struggling to fix something on her camera.

“Hey, you,” she angles her camera, and the shutter clicks immediately, taking a shot of me.

“That’s a violation of my privacy.” Not like I actually care.

“You sound like my father,” she snorts. “Please don’t act like him, too,” she stands.

“I don’t sound anything like your father.” I can’t even if I try.

“He gets a little snarky when I catch him off guard.”

“Anyone would.”

“So, what am I supposed to do when I have all these beautiful people around me?” She smiles.

I laugh softly, “We are honored to inspire you,” I walk closer to her. “Your works are amazing.” I sound like I have known her for long, and I’m honestly hungry for the extended arm of friendship I’m sensing she is giving me.

She laughs gently. “As my sister-in-law, I must take pictures of you, I wouldn’t be able to help myself anyway, you’re too beautiful not to capture.”

“And who takes pictures of you?”

“I don’t need my pictures to be taken,” she shrugs.

“Have you looked in the mirror?”

“I know I’m attractive. I just don’t think it’s...” she shakes her head, “I cringe in front of the camera.”

“Fair enough.”

She lifts the camera again. “One for the road?”

I don’t get a chance to answer before she takes a shot.

“Thank you for showing me right away what I will be in for.”

“You are like my Mona Lisa right now, let me,” she smiles, then drops her eyes to the screen on the camera, “Want to

see?”

I shake my head, “When you are done.”

It’s something to look forward to. I haven’t had that in years. Not pictures. Something to look forward to.

“I will work on them and make a print for you,” she throws the strap around her neck.

“Where is Salvatore?”

“There,” she uses her chin as a pointer to the door Salvatore came out from earlier.

“But you went another way.”

“Because he won’t let me hear the last of it if I use this one, and I didn’t want to make him look bad for his first impression,” she shrugs. “But now that you are in on this, I will resume my role as pestering little sister and he can’t do anything about it, or dad will kill him.” She bites her lower lips to hold in her smirk.

What world has Emanuele created around her? It’s so beautiful looking from the outside. I want what he is giving her so much. I want a part of it.

“Thank you,” I smile at her, nothing bold. A slight chin lift with no teeth happens to be my smile. But at least with her, I do it from a fuzzy place.

I strut to the door and hear Eva’s giddy hops as she takes the stairs and disappears.

I don’t use the doorbell, I just knock.

“I will kill you, Eva,” Salvatore growls from inside.

“It’s Vittoria.”

Silence.

Few curses under his breath, something muffled like a scream from tumbling, then the door flings open, and a shirtless Salvatore is standing there. I try not to take my eyes anywhere they shouldn’t go. He looks appealing to the eyes, with curls

on his head, furrowed brows, and his jeans slightly open, hanging low on his hip bones.

“Salvatore,” I squeeze out a smile.

“What do you want, Vittoria?”

That bad, huh?

“I thought you would want to talk.”

He exhales in a snort, “Why would I want to talk, and what about?”

“About us, the arrangement, you know...” I shrug.

“I don’t see anything to talk about,” he scoffs, “We are going to get married, but we both know it’s only on paper.”

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t hurt to talk about it.” I want to negotiate with him. Marriage between two mafia families is stronger than blood oaths. You can’t get out unless the other is dead. If I spend the rest of my life with him, we should at least be able to define a set of rules for our relationship.

“Listen,” he exhales, “I don’t want you.”

Ouch.

“You think I want you?”

“You don’t really have the luxury of choice, Vittoria.”

“Get off your high horse, Salvatore.”

No matter how much my father hates me, I’m an heiress. Was. Whatever.

“Your place is wherever I say it is, and right now, I’m saying that you take this...” he flickers his fingers at me, shushing me away, “...far away from me.”

“Prick,” I fold my arms on my chest, standing straighter.

“I’m with someone and you are cockblocking right now,” he dips his head inside his room, and a small smile curves on his face, but when he brings his face back, it’s only death stares. “Just do your thing, stay out of my face, grow old and be miserable, I don’t give a shit.”

“Got it,” I chuckle, “Father truly chose his kind.” I take a step back, place my index finger on my lip as if to process a thought. “At least I’m doing one for the world, getting the filth off the market,” I spin, and even though his face tells me I did him one, I am the one feeling like I am the bottom of the joke.

He doesn’t want me.

He looked me in the face and told me he doesn’t want me. All I wanted was to find a way to make this arrangement work for us. I just wanted to at least have an understanding with him. We may not be in love as normal couples, and even if he wanted to keep his lover, I would have just been okay with knowing we could exist in the same space—that I can maybe have a friend in him.

I snort.

A friend.

Pathetic.

He won’t ever be that. He can’t. I tried to see if he was what I sensed he was, and I confirmed my theory.

I’m facing the stairs now, but I don’t even know where to go. I don’t know what to do or how to be in this space. I flip my eyes around, hating the luxury everywhere.

I do not like what I have been reduced to. It’s infuriating. I start pacing.

I want to go back to the study and just hide in there. But I can’t, at least not until I’m sure no one else will be there.

The door of the study opens, and Emanuele steps out. His eyes land on me immediately, like I exude some magnetic force. He shoves his hands into his pockets, hooded eyes trying to understand what I’m doing.

I back down, not knowing where I’m going except that I must get away from his splintering, enthralling gaze.

I spin in the opposite direction.

To a door. One that takes me out of this house.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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### *Emanuele*

*I*m watching her.

Incapable of doing anything other than stand and watch as she takes swaying steps, hips sashaying from side to side, firm slender legs going in front of the other, arms swinging slightly beside her, out of the parlor.

The moment she is out, it's like a dent.

It's as if her blood-red coat was immediately lost in the surroundings of white, gold, and brown.

She walks, talks, and smiles like she's constantly being pulled by a string. It's captivating to watch.

I flick my lighter in one hand and twiddle my cigar in the other.

She is standing by the door now, and I can see her as clearly as when she was inside. The wall around the door is see-through. When we chose it, it was to know where the kids were when they played outside.

It's coming in handy again, after many years of being obsolete.

I'm letting my mind not think of the look I saw in those gauzy eyes. The fire she spits in each glare.

I am still watching her, my eyes never faltering, even as domestic staff scuttles past my line of sight or as one of my

soldiers walks towards his apartment opposite her, observes her, and goes inside.

Nothing seems to bother her. Now her fingers are twitching beside her, and I'm wondering what's going on in her head as she stands there, just staring at only the bloody Saints know what.

"Capo," Fabio calls behind me and then walks to stand beside me.

"Hmm," I take my cigar to my mouth, flick my lighter open, and light it up.

We just finished a meeting to discuss the parameters of the new contract with the Mancusos. The best way to exploit the current alliance so both parties get the best out of the deal. Giuseppe has his percentage for every drug sold from now on. It's part of the conditions of giving me his contact, which is better for me. Better for everyone. Including fucking Boris.

Bloody old bastard.

"I just got word," his voice is low now.

I don't have to ask him; instead, I draw and puff. My attention is on the lady in red in front of me. My mind is still swinging between what is appropriate to think about and what is not.

"Noel is dead."

I go still for a second. Then, I flip my lighter open and flick it close. Another loss. Another hole to fill. Another message from Boris, gauging me. But I am not one to be any man's puppet. I won't let him dictate what I do and, most importantly, when I do it.

"When and how?"

"Reported a few minutes ago, and it's suicide," he clears his throat, "That's what it looks like. He jumped down from his apartment building."

That's how you know Boris was involved. He knows how to stage a perfect death and make it appear like an accident. I know it is him. Boris had already made a few threats to my courier, but Noel was a devoted clan member.



I exhale gruffly, “We won’t have cases like this anymore, thanks to Massimo.”

“Hopefully.”

“Hopefully?”

“Definitely,” he corrects himself, but we both know that’s unlikely. It’s not just a drug cartel that Boris is after. He doesn’t just want to affect my sales; he wants to drive me out of business. I’m a threat to him. He wants LA for himself, and he can keep dreaming because he is never going to have it.

The deal with the Mancusos is the way out of this tussle that has been going on for years. I have been doing everything I can to keep the business afloat in a way that protects the people I love and care about.

I exhale, wishing things were how they were before I mellowed. I could strike home twice as hard.

Now that we have La eMe on our side, we no longer have to do business with suppliers from the Netherlands. Never liked them much. They were all wrapped around Boris’ fingers anyway. And their prices were skyrocketing. But with La eMe, I don’t have to worry about anything. Especially since my link is Mancuso. No one does the dark side of business like that man.

I drag, this time longer than is healthy, and it sends a sharp hollowing pain in my stomach, taking the cigar off my lips to hold the smoke in, biding my time before I puff it out.

“Let me through,” Eva squeaks behind us, bumping into me with a force that jerks the smoke out of me. Then she slides down the stairs, almost making my heart claw out of my chest for fear she might slip and hit her head.

Bloody Saints.

“Eva,” I scold her with my tone.

It’s one thing to be protecting her from external forces, but there’s only so much I can do if she hurts herself because of her recklessness.

She pouts, pushing her lower lip out and making puppy eyes at me.

“It’s fun,” she shrugs, “I do it all the time.”

“Don’t do it again,” I press my cigar against the body of my lighter to put it out.

“But Fabio saw me doing it the other day and didn’t say anything,” she points at him accusatively.

I understand that sometimes she tests things with him before bringing them to me. If he had seen her doing it, he should have scolded her. Because he knows I wouldn’t approve of it.

“Have you seen Vittoria?” she looks around, “She was here when I went inside to freshen up,” she looks at the door. “Is that her?” she looks back at me and Fabio, and I nod.

She is nearsighted, and it gets worse at night.

“Yes, that’s Vittoria.”

“Why is she out there?” Her curious eyes dart.

“I wouldn’t know.”

“She was supposed to be with Salvatore,” she chuckles, “she wanted to see him. Where is her room, by the way?”

“I asked Sabrina to take her things to Salvatore’s apartment,” Fabio offers.

“They will live together?” Eva flips to face us in shock, her nose scrunching and her forehead furrowing.

“They are getting married, Eva,” Fabio grunts beside me, “they will live together.”

Her face drops, “I thought she would live close to my room until the wedding,” she gives a Cheshire smile, “Dad?”

“Sweetheart, they need to get to know each other, and knowing you, you won’t give them a chance if she sleeps that close to you.” I flick my fingers to call her to me.

She stops one step below me, “then why is she outside and not with her ‘groom’?” She air-quotes the groom part.

“The estate is beautiful,” I simply shrug off her question.

“You think so too, Fabio?” She wraps her arms around my waist, “or is it something Salvatore might have done or said?”

“I will be inside making calls and trying to get more details on Noel,” Fabio clears his throat, getting away as quickly as possible.

“Goodnight, Fabio,” she waves at him. “Oh wait,” she follows him, “I need you to look at something for me.” She brushes past me as she walks to him, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek. “Night, *papà*.”

“Eva, your pictures are great, and your work is excellent, but I am busy right now,” Fabio says.

While she won’t stop snapping images of me, she won’t stop asking Fabio for his thoughts on the photos after they’ve been edited. His opinion seems to mean a lot to her, which I understand. He has watched her grow up, and she always followed him around as a child.

“I want you to see it,” I hear her grit under her breath, “I’ll wait for you to be done with what you need to do.”

“It will take all night.”

“I have all my life, Fabio,” she snorts.

“I think you need to make some friends.”

“Fabio,” I plug myself into their conversation, “Spare her a little time after you are done with what you are doing.”

“You are mine,” Eva squeaks, and Fabio grunts.

The door of the study opens and closes. Fabio likes the silence as much as I do, and my Eva is a lot of noise. Too much noise. From her colors to her talking. Now she has neon pajamas on. How she sleeps wearing such a bright color is beyond me.

Alone, I peel my eyes from burning holes on Vittoria’s back and look at the connecting door to Salvatore’s apartment, wondering what he might be doing inside while she is outside by herself.

It’s what Eva said.

I'm trying to figure out if the look I saw in her eyes was caused by the meeting with Salvatore or something else. He is certainly capable of saying something hurtful, but then again, Vittoria is bratty and might just be having a hard time adjusting.

I itch to go to her and get answers, even if I have to force them out of her. But it doesn't feel like my call to make. I shouldn't be near her, not after what happened in the study.

I grunt quietly, cursing under my breath at my cock for being so brazen and shameless.

It was a mistake, for fuck's sake.

I flip my lighter and flick it close.

But it was a deadly mistake. I grind my teeth, reliving how her tender, timid tongue and her warm mouth had felt against my fingers. She didn't stop me. She didn't suck either, but she didn't fucking stop me. And I know I didn't imagine the way her chest was lifting and her breath hiccupping.

Wild Cat.

Perfect little pussy.

No. I clamp my lips together and shake my head, wanting the virus that she is trying to infect me with to be gone before it spreads to the point of contamination. To the point where I won't be able to control myself place.

Apart from a cold shower, there is no other antidote to lust. And that only goes so far.

I chuckle. Unbelievable.

After just one day, she is already someone who might cause me trouble.

Fucking unbelievable.

It's not the power she possesses, it's how unabashedly she flaunts it. That daring look in her sultry eyes. The way she pinned me with them in the study, letting me know *she knows* she has the effect she thinks she has on me.

I flick my lighter and flip it close. Trying to get my mind back to where it should be.

She is not mine to tame or subdue.

If she is out there because she wants to be bratty, then it's not for me to swoop in. That's where my son comes in. My son. I remind myself. Because she is his to do as he pleases.

I take a step back, agreeing to retire to the study, but then she moves. She takes one step forward, and another, and another. She keeps going.

I know she can't get far or leave the estate. But it's night already, and I don't feel comfortable with her prancing around this late. With her, I don't know what to expect. After all, she is not a prisoner.

She veers to her right after walking to the end of the walkway. And my legs move before I have a chance to keep them from going after her. I drop my cigar on the center table, shove my lighter in my pocket, and take long strides after her.

The cool night air slaps my face, but not hard enough to stop me.

I'm walking behind her now, prowling. She seems oblivious. Or not. I don't know, but she keeps strutting carefreely.

She dips her hands into the pockets of her coat, making her arms bunch at the elbow as she struts. Head high like a queen. And she is, if I do say so myself.

The houses on the opposite side of the road belong to the soldiers from my clan. It looks like a peaceful neighborhood to the ordinary eyes, and it is. It's not like we go about shooting guns for fun. Bloody me, we do shoot, but it's never for fun. At the very least, it's as peaceful as it gets. Attached to the main building are Salvatore's apartment and Fabio's. Then, a little studio for Eva, that she rarely uses.

She takes a turn into a dusty-lit lane, one that leads to the car pack, and I go after her. But when I get there, she is nowhere to be seen.

I smile slightly. Clever girl. She knew someone was following her.

I chuckle softly as I sense someone behind me without needing to look. I sense the person is about to make a move.

It's intriguing.

This little game between us.

It's my descent to hell.

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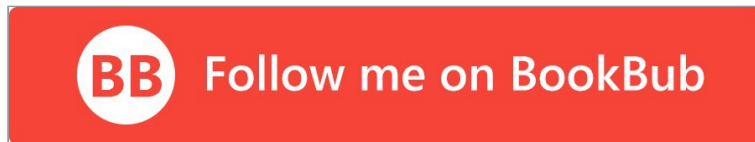
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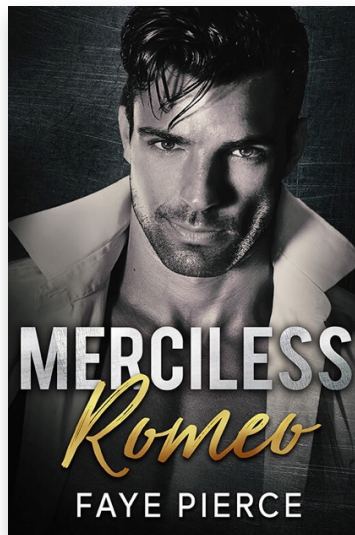
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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As a teenager, Faye used to read at night with a flashlight underneath her bed covers. She fantasized of bad boys who stopped at nothing to capture the hearts and bodies of their women, and of equally strong heroines. Make no mistake, there are no damsels in distress in her world.

Her addiction is the “enemies to lovers” trope, and maybe that’s why when she first met her husband, their chemistry was just as sizzling as their disapproval of each other. But as in her novels, passion won, and now they live through their happily ever after.

By day, she is taking care of her household. By night, her shadow self emerges to satisfy her undisclosed desires. Literary and not.



### *Note from Faye*

I’m always happy to communicate with my readers. So if you want to stay up to date with my newest releases and win little treats, please [subscribe to my newsletter](#), and you will always be the first to know about my newest Dark Mafia Romance novel.

Thank you.

Your friend,

Faye ☐



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